"Marginalized Voices in *Binti* and Beyond"

[Intro music]

Erika Gotfredson: Hi everyone, and welcome to our first episode in the 2021 Big Read podcast series. My name is Erika Gotfredson, and I'm the assistant director of the Big Read. Today, I'm joined by two guests, Juanita Crider and Malik Raymond, and we're going to be discussing topics of marginalization and representation within the *Binti* trilogy, written by Nnedi Okorafor. So what I'm going to do before we jump into our conversation is I'm going to ask my two guests to share a little bit about themselves, and then we will get into our discussion. So Juanita, would you like to start with your introduction?

Juanita Crider: Yes, I would. As Erika said, my name is Juanita Crider, and I like to say I wear two hats at the university. My primary hat is that I am Program Advisor at the Black Cultural Center. I've been doing that for 16 years. And I'm also a PhD candidate in American Studies. And right now I'm also teaching an intro to WGS (Women's and Gender Studies) class, so I'm very busy.

Erika: That sounds great. Thank you for joining us. How about you, Malik? You want to introduce yourself?

Malik Raymond: Yes, as Erika had mentioned, my name is Malik Raymond. I am a PhD candidate in American Studies along with Juanita, and my research delves into how Black people's experiences with the environment, outdoors, nature has been preserved primarily through Black women from the early 20th century to the present day. I focus mainly on the U.S., but to a lesser extent I focus on the African diaspora, so reading elements…I'm not going to use *Binti* for my project, but I've been wanting to read more Africanfuturism lately, and reading her stuff has like helped spark ideas for what I might write about, if not for my dissertation, in future writings.

Erika: That's awesome. It's a great book.

Juanita: Erika, I probably should…

Erika: Oh, go ahead!

Juanita: I'm sorry. I probably should have shared what my research is too.

Erika: Go for it!

Juanita: My research is primarily about how Black women theorize the different phases of menopause and how the phases of menopause is represented in literature, film, and new media like Twitter, Instagram and on podcasts.

Erika: Podcasts! That's great! That's great that we're doing one of these then. Awesome. Well, I'm excited to talk about the book with both of you. To our listeners, let me give you a little bit

of information, and then we'll jump right in. So, first is a spoiler alert that we will be talking about any parts of the trilogy that seem pertinent to the discussion, so if you haven't read in full, just know that we might ruin parts of the book as you continue listening. And then the three of us discussed before recording that we wanted to offer a collective apology in advance for any mispronunciation of names or terms from the book that we might do throughout this podcast. We are very much looking forward to having Nnedi Okorafor on campus in November to clarify some of the terms that we aren't too sure about.

[Transition sound]

Erika: Great. So let's move into some introductory material that I think will be kind of useful for laying the groundwork for our conversation. Our opening Big Read event was a lecture by Dr. Marlo David who talked on "Five things to know about Africanfuturism." And I think that the term Africanfuturism is a really good place to start this conversation on issues of marginalization and representation within the *Binti* trilogy. "Africanfuturism" is a term that Nnedi Okorafor coined herself to describe her writing. So I want to offer a quote, and then we'll transition into some questions. So Nnedi Okorafor defines Africanfuturism as "a subcategory of science fiction. It is rooted in African culture, history, mythology, and point of view as it then branches into the Black diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West. Africanfuturism is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (Black people), and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa. It's less concerned with what could have been and more concerned with what is and can or will be, and it acknowledges, grapples, and carries what has been." So, I wanted to start with this term because I think kind of implicit within this term is Nnedi Okorafor's realization that there wasn't a term to describe her writing.

Malik: Yeah.

Erika: And so we see issues of marginalization there: the idea that African cultures and nations have been marginalized or even erased from dominant or mainstream science fiction narratives. And then on the flip side of that, within this definition is the idea of representation and specifically why representation of these experiences that she's trying to shine a light on within her literature, why that's so important to her and so central within kind of her literary project. So I think issues of representation are super interesting within the book, not only what the book is doing by just being a book that we can read, but also representation within the book. But let's start first by thinking about marginalization and then we'll get into why the voices within the book matter. So, a key issue that presents itself within the *Binti* trilogy is these moments of misrepresentation or marginalization or stereotyping that can directly lead to marginalization amongst different individuals or groups. So just let's start the conversation broadly: Where do we see this happening in the book, maybe more specifically where does Binti experience marginalization or stereotyping or misrepresentation, and why do these instances happen?

Juanita: Before we go there, I just wanted to make a comment about Africanfuturism in your comments. I wanted to say that, and I also feel like when Okorafor is staking out this claim—because there's no word to describe—I also feel like she's excavating, whereas maybe people have borrowed from African symbolism, African religion, African culture in other forms of

literature, but not calling it and not giving it the credit that it's due. So I think she's doing two things: she's creating a label, a term for something that she writes that she doesn't feel fit, but I also have been thinking about her excavating and reclaiming something also.

Erika: Yeah, it's like the term, now that we have the term, can also maybe be applied retrospectively to things that have already existed, and she's creating a space, a phrase, a term that kind of gives us the space to have that conversation in ways that haven't been productive in the past. Yeah, thank you absolutely for bringing that up. So what do we think about stereotyping, misrepresentation—where do we see that in the book, specifically in Binti's experiences?

Malik: The first thing that pops up for me is the constant use of denoting not just Binti but Himba people as beggars, and using that kind of as a slur, especially with the rival, I guess, ethnic group, the Khoush. Is that the proper pronunciation?

Erika: Sounds good to me.

Juanita: Yep, we'll go with that.

Malik: And I think it's representative of a trying to…in her representation, of trying to denote Africanfuturism…she's trying to show that like relations between people in the African continent, it's not a monolith, and there could be like internal conflicts between particular groups based on particular biases that one may have on the other. And then there's like this also this weird dynamic of the Meduse coming in and both the Himba and the Khoush have an animosity towards them as well. I think there are like a few instances where I've noticed—I'm trying to look through the book right now—to where there's also like sexist ideas in which she's…where Himba also faces some marginal identity like because they said something about, "You Himba people behave in a certain way, especially you females." I'm trying to remember the exact page where that was mentioned, but that stood out to me as well. And there were several instances that stood out to me, especially when she got the okuoko in her hair, that there was this invasiveness of her, of people surrounding her peer group and so forth like touching her okuoko, and I was like, I've like marked like several instances where this kept happening for her, and I had just watched an interview from Nnedi Okorafor where she talked about, I think with the *LaGuardia* graphic novel that she has, she wrote about an actual incident where one of the first times that she was searched through her hair, like when she went to TSA, they searched through her hair, trying to find like weapons and stuff like that, but they ended up missing the mace that was in her pocketbook, like lipstick, and she talked about how she wants to invoke that into the story *LaGuardia*, and I wondered if she was trying to do that here as well, just talk about the different experiences that is tied directly to her identity that she might have to deal with. Because there's this hypervisibility that she has to deal with being in this new…being on this planet to try to obtain new knowledge while still retaining her identity as Himba, I guess.

Erika: Absolutely.

Juanita: Yes, and the whole identity…identity is a very, I would call it a controlling theme or controlling metaphor throughout the book because she wrestles with her identity as a Himba

woman, a Himba young girl going through a pilgrimage to womanhood. But yet, because of her experiences on the ship, the Third Fish, and because of the experiences at school and everything, she becomes part Meduse, and she becomes part another identity. So it's like, it's almost…it can be referred to, in some ways, as a coming-of-age story, I think, in the tradition of the Bildungsroman, and she's wrestling with carving out who Binti wants to be. She's got to decide who she wants to be. And that's one of the reasons why I'm teaching this book in my WGS course this semester.

Erika: Absolutely. Well, and a point that comes to my mind that I think might tie both of these ideas together, both kind of the explicit moments of racism that she experiences as she leaves her home culture and her home community, and then also this idea of belonging and trying to figure out kind of who she is within the different spaces—the first thing that comes to my mind, and this ties in, Malik, to your point, is the book opens with this moment that she's waiting in line to get on Third Ship, and she has women who pick up her hair, first off without asking, but then they are expecting it to—pardon my language—to smell like shit. And to me, that is such a, for lack of a better word, compelling moment for what's happening on an individual and a communal level, because on an individual level Binti is experiencing this moment where she is stereotyped, and her body is literally under scrutiny and also touched by people who she did not give permission to do that. But then on a communal level, there's narratives about her people that are existing in other people's minds that are affecting how they are interacting with her. And so I think the thing that's so beautiful to me about this book is how representation is happening on so many different levels, representation and marginalization. We see Binti experiencing this as an individual, but she also has to be aware in every space that she goes into: What are the narratives about my people that are influencing how others are thinking of me? What are the narratives that I have of other people that are influencing how I think about them? And so it's even that interesting interplay between the individual and kind of the broader societal narratives that are doing the work of continuing, I think, the marginalization that starts kind of on that individual level.

Juanita: I think that's a very important point you bring up because quite often, we don't realize how we've internalized these narratives or these stereotypes, whatever word you want to use, until we are confronted or find ourselves in the situation that is different than what our every-day, most common existence is. And it makes me think, she might not really have had a chance to question this, these internalized narratives of other people that she have had if she hadn't even left to go to university.

Erika: Right.

Malik: Oh, that's…and I'm glad you brought that up, Juanita, because something that stood out to me with her character development as well is that she ends up…Okay, after the traumatic incident to where the Meduse slaughter a number of people on the ship on the way to the university, she has to confront her animus and prejudice against the Meduse with Okwu's character, and there was like a moment in the book where she talks about, she carries the edan that basically she credits for like preserving her life in contrast to the others that were there, and that was like part of what I had mentioned earlier with some of the family members of the person who she was interested in at the beginning of the book, Heru, calling her a beggar and stuff like,

"how'd this beggar survive?" and so forth. But over the development of the book, she develops this trust with Okwu, and she ends up like not using the edan anymore because she trusts him, and when she goes back to her home, she's confronted by her people, the fellow Himba people, who see her as a traitor, and also she has to confront her own prejudices of the Enyi…

Erika: Zinariya?

Malik: Zinariya. The Enyi Zinariya. Because they're known as like, the derogatory term for them is "desert people," but once she finds out that she has ancestry from them, she incorporates them into a larger part of her name. And she's like, "Yeah, I am Himba, but I'm also Enyi Zinariya." And I think that was something that stood out to me a lot too. It's just like, you can see the character development in this coming-of-age story to where her interactions with other people is forcing her to not just learn about new people, but unlearn previous stereotypes and prejudices she's had about other people because she is incorporating, whether it's the Meduse or the Enyi Zinariya people, incorporating them into her identity as well. And she is all of these things.

Juanita: I find it interesting too, Malik, that you refer to Okwu as "he."

Malik: Oh, "it"!

Juanita: Because is he really a "he"? Oh no, I mean, it's so easy for us to do. I'm not saying that to you as a critique. I'm saying this to say that the person, the entity, that she becomes close to, the entity that helps her through her identity journey, is not a human.

Malik: It's a jellyfish-like creature, yeah.

Juanita: And it's very significant and made me think about, is there a bigger message about us interacting with…It made me think about what you might call eco-feminism literature, about interacting with our environment can be healing, can help us also in our journey of identity.

Erika: Hmm, that's interesting.

Malik: That's true.

Erika: Yeah.

Malik: That's a really good point, Juanita.

Erika: Malik, when you were talking, I was thinking about how narratives of different groups…I think to me the trilogy is not only interested in the narratives that can kind of lead to stereotyping or marginalization, but also how those narratives can become cultural narratives that are present in oral histories, or the history that's being taught in school, or the museums that people go to see. And I think that that's one of the things that Okorafor…I read it as an explicit way of going, okay, not only do we see that these stereotypes exist, but also they become widespread in the process of kind of making cultural histories for a certain group of people. And so Binti grew up

learning that the Meduse were a very, very violent group, and she has to, through her interactions with them, learn otherwise, even becoming a part of them. But also thinking about like the museum scene and these different places of narratives and histories that we use today and how they can often be problematic, rooted in colonial histories, problematic histories, problematic narratives. And again, I think that goes back to this idea of kind of all the different levels of representation and marginalization that are happening here, starting with Binti as one small young girl, all the way up to kind of these cultural forces that are literally influencing how people in groups interact with each other—I think it's absolutely fascinating.

Juanita: And it is interesting too how her journey of finding out and deciding who she is, who she wants to be, how it causes stress in her relationship with her childhood friend.

Erika: Yes.

Malik: Yeah, Dele.

Erika: Absolutely.

Malik: And I think it ties back to her identity as a harmonizer as well because I remember in some of those instances with her interactions with Dele, she was saying that he doesn't get it because he's not harmonizer like she is.

[Transition sound]

Erika: I wonder if this would be a good place to transition to my next question because I think marginalization, narratives, stereotypes, kind of some big picture issues that are happening here…but then, like, if we look at the book, and I know we're doing an audio podcast so our viewers can't see us, but I'm holding up the front of the book right now, and I am obsessed with the cover of the book, and also a lot of Nnedi Okorafor's books include a close-up face of a young Black girl on the front. And so it's not just *Binti*, but it's also a trend amongst a variety of her different novels. And I think that gets to one of the things that kind of keeps coming up in our conversation, is that Binti and her identity sits at the intersection of all of these different identities that are marginalized and oppressed within the different spaces that she enters into. So she's young, right? She is a girl, and we know, even within the Himba culture that she loves, that there are certain rights and privileges that she isn't supposed to have. She does. She gets to see the Night Masquerade, right? But she isn't supposed to experience that. She's a young Black girl. She's Himba in spaces that largely don't have Himba people in them. And so she sits at all of these intersections. And then, to bring in Juanita's point, the book explodes this already nuanced identity to continue to add…she becomes Meduse, right? She kind of keeps adding these different layers to her identity. So what do we think about—to use the term intersectionality here—kind of the intersections of her identity, and how might these different facets maybe disrupt or push back against some of the marginalization that she's experiencing?

Juanita: Hmm, that's an interesting question. I think in some ways, it helps her to view some of her family…it helps her deal with some of the tension that she has with her family members, because I think as she sees herself wrestling with, unpacking multiple identities, I think she's

able to see some of her family having multiple identities and her mother being, they call it a mathematical…what's the term they use? Something like a mathematical seer? A mathematical…

Erika: Yeah, she can visualize the math.

Juanita: Yeah, exactly. So it's like, not only is she my mother, she has this personality. Or even her father, even though she knows her father has this traditional role as far as being against the people of Okwu, her father still builds that tent and researches to create an environment that's amenable. So, her father, he's a harmonizer also. So I think she…it helps her understand that life is full of nuances, and you're going to meet people and also entities, non-people, who are just as nuanced.

Erika: Yeah. I think she even says at one point, like, "I didn't leave home to change who I am or to change who we are as a people, but rather to kind of expand how we think about ourselves." And so she wasn't ever trying to like not be Himba, but rather to expand maybe what being Himba meant within that kind of broader context, which I think is really cool.

Juanita: What do you think, Malik?

Malik: I've been thinking about this since I read the book, and I wonder if Okorafor is trying to say something with…this is supposed to be a coming-of-age story for Binti, but how she is positioned in the book as a harmonizer, not just with her relationship with mathematics, but she's the one who has to be resolved—has to be the one to resolve, excuse me—these tensions between these various groups of people and non-human entities. And I wonder if she's saying something in regards to the role of gender and how historically, women and Black women have been shouldering the load for that sort of thing not just like…well just within the history of like the entire diaspora.

Juanita: Now that you mention that, can we talk a little bit about Binti's rage and Binti's fury?

Malik and Erika: Yes!

Juanita: I kept on thinking about a book written by Brittany Cooper called *Eloquent Rage*.

Malik: Yeah, I've read….yeah, yeah.

Juanita: And there's been a lot of recent feminist books about women having the right to express their rage because traditionally, stereotypically, you know, rage was something that women were supposed to contain, but I love how Okorafor gives Binti these moments of rage and how she's able to release it. It just excited me from a feminist perspective, a Black feminist perspective.

Erika: I love that point. I've been thinking about this process that Binti takes to kind of discover who she is, or rather is becoming, right? Because it's not a stagnant thing throughout the book. And we see that when she becomes part Meduse at the beginning, that's when she starts

experiencing this rage, and when she first gets to Oomza University, she thinks that something's wrong. And she's like, "I need to go home, and I need to go on my pilgrimage in order to cleanse myself of this anger." And I think—exactly to your point, Juanita—she realizes, kind of the longer the story progresses, that this rage is part of her. It's part of her kind of new identity, but also that it can be very productive and useful in different contexts. And I think that goes back to what I was trying to articulate earlier, this idea that if she was just kind of stuck in this one version of what it meant to be Himba, then she wouldn't ever be able to see the rage as something that can be productive, and in the process of leaving, she realizes that being Himba, being a girl, can look different. It can be different, and it can…having this rage can be something that's very useful for her on top of her harmonizing, but also the rage can be productive in the spaces too, so I really appreciate that point.

Juanita: And in the text, you know, the rage, at one point it interrupts her mathematical skills, and she has these panic attacks. But as she learns that it's part of her, it becomes less disruptive.

Erika: Yeah.

Malik: And I wonder if that has something to do with the growing relationship that she had with Okwu, and it trying to like make sense of the reality of the stereotypes that that group has of being like hive-mind—I think they use that word quite a bit in the book—and being always angry as savages. And I think I remember there were instances where she thought after like adopting some of the *okuoko*, she was wondering if some of that Meduse DNA, for lack of a better word, was infused with her, but it might not have even necessarily been that, but it was just a way of, like being able to—like you said, Juanita—like channel her anger and her rage and what not. Least that's what I'm thinking.

Juanita: Yeah, this quote stood out to me, and it's related to what we're talking about, about these realizations, because she says—I forget what page it's on, I usually write the page number down, and I didn't—but she's talking about Himba and the Khoush, and she says, "But in matters of girlhood and womanhood and control, we were the same." So she's finding out that the more she discovers herself and the more she goes on this journey, she's finding out that there was similarities between these warring peoples, at least from the perspective of womanhood and girlhood, than there are differences.

Erika: I'm fascinated by this point. I've been pondering this question for the past few days, this idea of, what does it mean for Binti to become all of these different identities? Because one version, a more simplistic version of the story, could just be that Binti comes into contact with all of these different groups and rewrites the scripts in her mind about who these people are. Okorafor does not stop there. She goes, "No, Binti, you're going to become or realize that you have been part of these groups." So it's not even just how she perceives them, but she actually becomes them. And I've been trying to like wrap my mind around what that means in terms of how these different groups interact, and I'm wondering if it goes back to, Juanita, what you're saying, this idea of realizing the similarities between the different groups, and I'm wondering if Binti's role that she kind of plays in these different groups that she comes in contact with, her very act of becoming Meduse, for instance, is the way that she kind of reconciles her understanding of who they are, because, yes, she experiences this new rage, but she also never

loses her ability to harmonize. And so by realizing that she's not kind of fully Meduse, she can also come to kind of wrap her mind around them as not completely this raging, violent group. And I don't know what to do with that, but I find it so fascinating that it's not even just stopping at, okay, we need to rethink how we think about other groups, but also that she becomes a part of them and that becomes…the connections, the similarities, I think, become part of how that process works. That's really fascinating to me.

Juanita: Hearing you say that almost makes me wonder if Okorafor is wanting us to think about the issues of empathy and being allies—or I like to use the term accomplice, you know, accomplices, those kinds of things—roles and the implications of those kinds of roles, particularly with a group that we might traditionally have been warring with.

Erika: Absolutely.

Malik: Now that y'all have mentioned it, she did say something about like the…I was looking at an interview of hers where she talked about the idea of hybridity, and how she wants to include that, just not with the concept of Africanfuturism, but just in how she interacts with people in general. Because you said something about empathy, Juanita, and the interviewer had brought up something in regards to winning an award that had the likeness of H. P. Lovecraft. And H. P. Lovecraft, it was like known, has a history of being antisemitic and racist, and she talked about that she knew about it, but it didn't come into the forefront until a relative's spouse—it might have been her sister's husband, I can't remember exactly—but he came, and he was a poet, and he came to her saying, like, "Is that H. P. Lovecraft?" And she was like, "yeah," and he said, "I need to show you something," and he showed Okorafor a poem that, I'm pretty sure it was a poem that was very anti-Black. But she did talk about in the sense that like she doesn't necessarily…she believes in inclusivity and not erasure. Like, she obviously finds what H. P. Lovecraft's found to be problematic, but it's important to understand that…where that writing from historical context and where future, like later writers like herself come in to make the ideas of science fiction and her realm of Africanfuturism more inclusive. So, I think that might be something as far as like the empathy goes—maybe that's something that she's trying to weave into the *Binti* trilogy as well.

Erika: That's really interesting. Yeah, thank you for sharing that. This is a…for lack of a better transition, before we move on to the last segment, I do want to bring up Binti's girlhood because I think that's also such a fascinating part of, you know…we've mentioned kind of coming-of age, and this idea of, again, Binti sits at this intersection of being a young woman, being Himba, being Black, being—I think, Juanita, you mentioned—experiencing mental health, that's another way that she's kind of struggling, I think, with identity and having these, these moments of PTSD.

Juanita: Yeah, she even gets a PTSD diagnosis.

Erika: Yes, exactly. And so she has all of these different facets of her identity that she's having to work through, and one of the ones that is so striking to me is that she is such a young woman who is taking her fate into her own hands and leaving her home to go to a university. And I think it's worth mentioning because we all work at a university, and we work with undergraduates

who, like, at a very basic level, this story is going to resonate, like the idea of leaving home. So, how does Binti's girlhood maybe kind of further influence the way that you think about her as a character? Why is it important that she's a young woman that's kind of going through all of these experiences?

Juanita: Well, in the course I'm teaching right now, I teach it from a perspective called lifespan feminism. In other words, so everything that we're…every time that we're discussing, we looking at it through girlhood, adolescence, emerging adulthood, and through senior citizen. And to me, it's…Susan Douglas, is the one who coined this term. And to me, it's a bridge-building feminism. And as I think about the story and Binti, I think of how her girlhood and how she's going through this search for identity, how this hybridity, how her wanting to go through her quest or her passage, how all this is going to implicate the woman Binti, the woman that she's going to become. It's almost like she's gathering…all these things are going to inform that woman. She's gathering tools. She's gathering answers to questions that will inform the decisions she has to make as a woman, so I think, I love to see this, her girlhood—it's like she's living the questions right before our very eyes in the story.

Erika: Oh, I love that. And she's kind of like exploding—not exploding—but pushing the boundaries of what it even means to be a woman in her culture.

Juanita: And even the way she left home, you know, she had to basically sneak.

Erika: Right.

Juanita: So, and I know we're going to talk more about this mathematics and STEM thing, but it's interesting to me too, her mother…it's called "mathematical sight"—I looked at my notes—that her mother has. And I'm just wondering how…but yet her sisters, we don't get, just from the way they're portrayed in the conversations and the glimpse, we don't get that sense that that kind of exploration or…having a going-off and enjoying something and exploring a topic of fear that you enjoy is not something that they wanted to do, so obviously she was in a household where she probably felt different, even as a child.

Erika: Yes. Yeah. And she knows that she's making a decision that automatically makes her unappealing as a partner within her culture, and what heavy stakes involved in a decision to, you know, choose the path of her calling, which she seems pretty convinced that this is her calling to go to this university and study this subject that quite literally influences how she sees the world. But it directly…it has direct implications for who she is perceived as a young woman, or becoming a woman in her home culture.

Juanita: And bringing it back to students here at Purdue, as you first initially said, you know, thinking about the students are here in the midst of a pandemic. It had to be a extra special challenge to make a decision to come to campus in this kind of situation. And we don't know how many of them were maybe perhaps persuaded to reconsider by their parents or their families. So just taking that leap to go into emerging adulthood by leaving home and coming to a college campus—it's not to be taken lightly. And sometimes I think we do take it lightly, but for some students, for many students, it's a very significant decision.

Erika: Right.

Malik: Yeah.

[Transition noise]

Erika: I think this is a good place to transition into talking about math in the book. And this might be kind of our concluding topic, but we all work at a university, but not only that, we work at Purdue University, which, we all know, is a heavily STEM institution, though the three of us are in the humanities, right? A lot of the students that we are in contact with are interested in math and engineering and science, and that extends to our lovely protagonist here. I think…it's such a fascinating choice to me for Okorafor to make Binti such a genius mathematician. So like on a very basic level, it's rewriting who we even think can be a mathematician, a scientist, etc.

Malik: Yes.

Erika: So what does this choice of Okorafor's mean to you in how we read Binti as a character and *Binti* the trilogy?

Juanita: Can I ask you a question first, Erika?

Erika: Go for it.

Juanita: Do you know if the STEM side of campus, anyone is actually reading this book or sharing this book?

Erika: I do. I can give a shout out. I know there's at least one book club in the Chemical Engineering department that's reading it, and that's part of our goal as the Big Read is to pick books that are interesting to not just the book nerds like us that read all the time, right? But to use that as a bridge. So we're working on it, and I know of at least one group who's reading it. Is it, you know, as extended as we would like it to be? Maybe not, but…

Juanita: But I'm glad to hear that, though.

Erika: Yes, definitely.

Juanita: Small steps. Small steps before giant leaps.

Erika: Exactly.

Malik: I guess I can share something that stood out to me with Okorafor choosing to use mathematics as the subject through which Binti tries to reach the full realization of herself. I think she's trying show that…she's trying to pull away from the idea of mathematics and just like the idea of STEM or just science related stuff being Western-centric. Because I had stumbled across an article from somebody named Claudia Zaslavsky that talked about

ethnomathematics in some book that she wrote back in the ’70s called *Africa Counts*. And she talked about how she was gaining respect…well, she discovered about how fascinating the Yoruba counting systems were. And I think one example that she uses stood out, was talking about, for example, if they wanted to say the number 65, they would say five from 10 from four 20s. Or the number words for 45 would be five from 10 from three 20s. And this would be something that would be, if we were translating it from the Yoruba language, this was what it would look like. I’m hoping I said Yoruba earlier and not just Igbo. And I’m thinking that she’s trying to center the idea of, this is something that is infused into daily experiences of people from various ethnic groups in Africa, and they’ve came up with their own sorts of ways of negotiating the world around them and keeping track…like and using particular like hard science like mathematics to organize their daily lives without like Europeans coming in and like giving them this knowledge. It’s something that they’ve done for centuries beforehand. It was something that stood out to me. That was just, that was something that I wanted to look up and make sure, like maybe this was something that Okorafor was speaking to in regards to making note of the…because she says that she’s—I think I’ve heard her say in the interview—she thinks about the near future in regards to writing particular sci-fi Africanfuturistic ideas, so maybe she’s looking at this as ways in which folks from the African continent can build for better or bigger futures, if that makes sense.

Juanita: I tell you that reading this book, as you said, we’re all humanities people, but it made me really think about math in my everyday life.

Malik: Yeah. Same.

Juanita: How I might have overlooked systems of mathematics in my everyday life. And I love…I got excited when she talked about her hair because I’ve read things about how mathematical African braiding is.

Malik: Yes, yeah.

Juanita: And I had the chance a couple years ago to go to Ghana, and I went to the village where they make a lot of the kente cloth, and the patterns and how they weave and how they know, and, you know, kente is multi-colored, and how mathematics is involved in even knowing what thread . . .

Malik: Like geometry and stuff.

Juanita: Exactly. In order to get this in pattern. So it really made me think about how I have overlooked mathematical systems in my day-to-day life, and I kind of got excited about that, because even though I’m not a STEM person, I have great appreciation for the disciplines.

Erika: I love Binti’s version of math because I think about Binti and Oomza University and the students and departments and disciplines that she’s surrounded with, and it seems like so much of what is happening there, for instance Okwu is studying, I think he’s. . . they. . . it. Excuse me. It is studying.

Malik: Yeah, it.

Erika: Even there, right? The paradigms that influence the way that we talk that don't pertain to the story that Okorafor is writing. But Okwu is studying weaponry, I believe. And to me, Binti's math is so different, and I'm fascinated by how her mathematics becomes…to me, it's rooted in more curiosity and connectivity to the world around her instead of these other versions where technology and innovation can become a means of war or violence. And so Binti's math and the way that she uses math doesn't seem to participate in that paradigm.

Malik: It's tied to the land.

Erika: Yeah, yeah.

Malik: I think what stood out to me is that it's tied to the land, and she's making like a pivotal point to make sure that the idea of mathematics and how it's used for her and other Himba people is connected to like material realities, and it's not just a bunch of abstract like concepts and words. It's like tied to their daily experiences, the lives that they live, their immediate environment, and since I'm like doing the research, my own research, around environment, that's what just instantly stood out to me. It's like, and I don't want to like pivot off to what we're talking about earlier, but just the idea of like, amongst the first things that she's trying to do is like try to find sand, something to remind her of home, so she's able to like invoke like the need of like properly doing the treeing or mathematics that she's doing. It's like, it's so pivotal like having the right type of environment for her to have a full realization of mathematics for her.

Juanita: And one of the…one of my favorite lines, it says, "She's medicating with a soothing equation."

Malik: Yes, yeah.

Juanita: That math is medication—wow. In another line, she says, "Mathematics are cartwheeling through my brain." I mean, it's just…

Malik: Okorafor has some really great prose, like prosy sentences.

Juanita: Exactly. I'm reading this, and I'm like, who in the math department needs to be reading this? I think they would get excited of this kind of descriptive language about mathematics, you know?

Erika: Right. The idea of being so passionate about something that it like permeates every fiber of your being and directly filters like how you see the world around you is just so beautiful. And, of course, I understand none of the equations that she's talking about.

Juanita: Me neither.

Malik: Yeah, same.

Erika: I haven't taken math since high school, which was a long time ago, but yeah, it's just beautiful.

Juanita: But it's also quite interesting because a part of my syllabus—we haven't gotten to it yet—we're going to talk about women in STEM and, you know, how gendered and how gender construction the discipline is. And I'll never forget talking to a math professor here, and I was sharing with him how my granddaughter, she's nine now and at seven, she loved math, and one of the first things he said is, "I hope they don't teach the love out of her."

Erika: Yeah.

Juanita: You know. And I thought about that quote. And listen, I mean, I want her, if that's what she ends up liking, I want her to be excited like Binti. I want the math to be cartwheeling through her brain. I want it to be soothing to her. I want her to be able to find applicable uses of mathematics to who she is, to her identity.

Erika and Malik: Yeah.

Erika: Maybe as a way of concluding, I think that this trilogy is such a beautiful picture of what mathematics, maybe even academia larger, can be, maybe like an aspirational vision of what it can be when there are more women and people of color at the table that are participating and not only doing the studying, but also like charting the path of what the disciplines even look like, because again Binti's math is not the same as a more Western-centric version of math. Hers is a math of curiosity and connecting to the world around her and using it to harmonize amongst groups of people, and it's productive, and it's healing, and it's breaking down boundaries that exist.

Juanita: And it's stylish. It's even in her hair.

Erika: It's stylish too! The style is good. Yes, she has people looking at her hair in the ship and admiring this beautiful hair that she has. Yeah, yeah, I love that. Any final thoughts before we wrap up?

Juanita: I guess my final thought is, this is not the first book by Okorafor that I have read. I read *Who Fears Death*, and I love that one too. But I just…I would encourage anybody listening to this podcast that, especially if you're in the STEM disciplines, I think you would get excited about this book. I think you would get excited—especially those who are in the women and gender, women in science, women in STEM program—I think this book could be a entry into some very exciting and needed dialogue between the disciplines on our campus.

Malik: It reminds me perfectly of what you said…what you said, Juanita, reminds me perfectly of what Dr. David had mentioned during her speech and the Okorafor quote of Africanfuturism not being a wall but a bridge. And I echo the sentiments that you held. I think this book will be like a tremendous bridge for STEM students to get better acquainted with Africanfuturism.

Erika: Yeah, absolutely.

[Transition sound]

Erika: Well, I think that's a great place to wrap up. If you can't tell, dear listeners, we love this book. I love the book selection. I love that the Big Read gives us a chance to have such meaningful and important discussions about topics that really, really matter in the world that we're living in. So thank you both to Malik and Juanita for joining today. You've been fantastic guests, and I'm very grateful to have had a lovely conversation with you. And to our listeners, please don't forget to check out our Big Read website. We have many more events, including another podcast, coming your way later this semester, leading up to the brilliant moment that Nnedi Okorafor will be visiting us in November, which we are all very excited about. So thank you all for listening, and we'll sign off there. Bye everyone!

Juanita: Thank you for having us. Bye!

Malik: Yes, bye.

[Conclusion music]

Sources:

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