

“Space, Place, and Community in *Binti*”

[Intro music]

Erika Gotfredson: Hello everyone, and welcome to our second episode in the 2021 Big Read podcast series. I’m Erika Gotfredson, and today I’m joined by guests Alex Anderson and Ane Costa. Today we’ll be discussing the topics of space, place, and community in the *Binti* trilogy, written by Nnedi Okorafor. So what I’m going to do first is I’m going to ask my guests to introduce themselves and share a little bit about themselves, and then I will provide us some introductory material, and we will jump right into the conversation. So Alex, do you want to get us started with introductions?

Alex Anderson: Of course. Thanks, Erika. My name is Alex, and I’m a second-year PhD student here at Purdue University in the English department, more specifically on the Literature, Theory, and Cultural Studies track. I’m also working towards the Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality certificate, so looking forward to that. Most of my research interests at this point focuses on how memory, inherited memory, and trauma inform representations of hauntings and ghosts in women’s writing. And I started reading *Binti* for a pedagogical training course that’s taught here by Professor Derek Pacheco on how to teach literature in the undergraduate classroom. But I ultimately ended the trilogy really reading it for fun, so I can see why so many Purdue professors are teaching it in their literature classes, and perhaps I might do so as well in the future.

Erika: That’s awesome. Ane, what about you?

Ane Costa: Thanks, Erika. So, I’m Ane Costa. I’m a fifth-year PhD candidate in LTC as well. I study postcolonial literature with an emphasis in Black diaspora and Black feminism. I am teaching *Binti* this semester as part of the Big Read program in my sci-fi and fantasy class, and I... yes, it’s been... It’s going to be very, very interesting. I’m teaching at the time when the author is going to be here, so I’m very excited too.

Erika: That’s awesome. Well thank you both for joining us. I’m excited to have a lively conversation with you both about what I believe is truly a fantastic trilogy.

[transition sound]

Erika So let me jump into some background information, and then we’ll get started. So I wanted to first take a minute to kind of track the different movements that our protagonist Binti takes throughout the book. Obviously we’re talking about space, place, and community, and I think it’s really important to kind of ground our conversation in our realization that a lot of this trilogy is showing Binti the protagonist in transit between these different places. So I wanted to track that before jumping into our first question. So we see in the first novella that Binti leaves her home in Osemba, and she boards Third Ship and travels to Oomza University. So that is some of the plot that happens in the first book, though obviously there’s still a lot more that happens there. In the second novella she travels back home from Oomza University, and once she’s home, she travels into the desert with the Enyi Zinariya people who come to pick her up and take her into the desert for a few days. And then, in the third novella, she travels back to Osemba to try to save

her family, and then the trilogy concludes with her arrival back at Oomza University. So she's traveling a lot throughout the trilogy, and that really brief overview doesn't even include some of the smaller journeys that she makes, like when she takes her friends out into the desert outside Oomza University during the short story. So there's a lot of traveling, and then something else to kind of add into that conversation is that each one of these journeys that she takes brings her into contact with a different group of people, or just a different group that she meets. So she meets the Khoush, the Meduse, and the Enyi Zinariya throughout her journeys, and then she's also surrounded by such a diverse student and professor population at Oomza University. And so I think... the work I'm trying to do in framing this conversation is to show that intergroup relations and issues of community are very much tied up with the travels that she takes throughout the book. So let me throw out this first question. At its core, as I've mentioned, the trilogy is one about Binti's travels, as she leaves and returns home numerous times. What do these journeys mean for Binti's identity and for the progression of her story throughout the trilogy?

Ane: Well, I can start. I think it's common sense that the places you go, the things you do, and the people we interact with impact our identities, and often Binti will say, "I am so many things. I am so many roles," which is a beautiful metaphor for this process of identity construction she goes through. But she learns this in a difficult way, I think. She's feeling the changes not only in her mind, in herself, but in her body, in the anatomy of her body. So she's pretty much becoming these experiences and becoming these new things. And of course, with that the perception of the world changes as well, right? And still, she finds this way to remain connected with her roots—"roots" which has such a significance in this novel, right? This word "roots." And, of course, especially through the otjize, that she, you know, passes in her body and her hair, and without which she feels naked, so how it makes her feel connected to her culture. So, yes, it's very, very interesting how there is mobility, and there's change, but there's also this connection to her roots, to her culture.

Erika: Absolutely. Alex, what are you thinking?

Alex: Well I think that the trilogy as a whole definitely is a wonderful example of how physical journeys often parallel other kinds of journeys, like emotional, spiritual, I would say mental, and even educational is a very prominent feature in the trilogy, particularly in coming-of-age genres. And in fact, I think there could be an interesting reading of *Binti* as a kind of Africanfuturist twist on the traditional European bildungsroman, but maybe that's another podcast episode.

Erika: Oooh! Yeah!

Alex: But, additionally, one of the things that like I really appreciate about the trilogy is the way that the reader follows Binti through multiple journeys, and I know that seems like a kind of obvious statement, but I think that so often coming-of-age stories incorporate the motif of journey in order to emphasize one singular journey, so there's like one quest, there's one goal, etc. And while those narratives are certainly exciting—I mean, off the top of my head, *Lord of the Rings* is like a fairly famous example—but I worry that readers and especially younger readers who are perhaps Binti's age internalize that emphasis and interpret that to mean that they only have one chance to accomplish the things they want to accomplish. And I think that this

misconception is especially prominent in stories about young adults pursuing higher education by leaving home and going to college. And I think that understandably, Binti does feel pressure to do well upon her arrival at Oomza University. I mean after all, she's like the first from her tribe to be invited to study there, but I think that *Binti* more successfully than other texts demonstrates that journeys happen in stages and that that's the way that the world works. I mean sometimes you just have to learn by going where to go.

Ane: That's such a good point. Yes. And it makes me think of another book, which also brings a solo Black woman traveling, and it's kind of a trope, but which is *Americanah* from Adichie, and she also goes to America... she goes to the United States, to study, to go to the university, and how this also has this huge impact on her identity and the way she deals and understands the world, so yes, so it's very good point.

Erika: One of the things that I'm thinking about in relation to both of the comments that you're bringing up, Alex, first your point, this idea that it isn't just one journey, but the journey takes on this multiple identity, and it keeps extending, and I think that's so fascinating because Binti doesn't know what that journey is going to be when she sets out. She leaves home to go on this journey to school. And in many ways if that was the story alone, it would be a story that was relatively familiar to a lot of us who have also left home, right, to go to school, to go pursue a university degree, a college degree. And yet, all of these changes happen, and her story—where she ends up being the only person alive on the ship, and then she ends up at Oomza University but realizes that she needs to go home to see her family to go on this pilgrimage—and so this journey, it keeps shifting in ways that she can't anticipate when she leaves. And then Ane, to bring in your point of how her body and who she is physically changes in relationship to every path, every journey that she takes, I'm just fascinated by this idea that her original quest—to use a word that Alex brought up—is one for knowledge and this love of mathematics, and yet she comes in contact with all of these different groups and realizes misperceptions that she had, and she has to grow not only as a scholar but also just a human in how she engages with these different groups, and so the quest even kind of changes as she comes in contact with all of these different groups, which I think, again, to Alex's point, you don't know, you don't know what that journey's even going to look like when you start out. So I think that's a really, really interesting point.

Ane: And as they say so many times in the book, it's not just a journey outward but also inward, and, as well as just learning about other people, she's also learning about herself and about the parts of herself that have been sort of oppressed, I guess, by her own community, like for example her father is a Zinariya. Her father is part of that community, they call them the “desert people,” right, but her father is part of that, and still she has to go through a process to accept that as part of herself as well. And that's pretty much inward journey, something she has to do along the way, I guess.

Alex: I also appreciate Binti's characterization, especially in the first novel. I feel like it's very common in novels of any genre where the protagonist is a 17-year-old woman for her to not be super competent, is perhaps a kind way to say that, but what I appreciate about Binti is that, obviously she's not perfect, obviously she doesn't have answers at every single turn, and she does make mistakes at times, but she is so self-aware for so much of the novel, even when that's

an uncomfortable process. And I think that definitely speaks to what you're saying, Ane, about the... it's a journey inward in addition to anything that you have to do externally, and in fact, often the first step to doing anything externally is starting with grappling with maybe the uncomfortable bits of yourself.

Erika: Mmhmm. So what do we make of the changing relationship that Binti has to her home? Because I think she is self-aware about the changes in her feelings towards home, and she gets on Third Ship to go to Oomza University, and at one point she says something along the lines of "I feel most at home here surrounded by this group of scholars"—again this is pre-attack by the Meduse. But she says, "I feel most at home here, and I'm the farthest I've ever been from home." And I'm just fascinated by the way that home becomes such a loaded term for her. And it takes on added complexity with every leg of this journey that she takes. So what did y'all make of that? I think we've already mentioned it a little bit, Ane, that she kind of has to come to terms with like, home is not this ideal place, but it's a place that in many ways has kind of constricted her. What else do we think about how home kind of morphs for Binti throughout the book?

Ane: I love this topic. Actually one of the critics that I study for my dissertation talks a lot about home and how home is the opposite of travel because the idea of home is the stability and it's a place, a geographical place that you belong to, think like you belong to. And then when... this is the opposite of travel, which is completely unstable, and there is no sense of geographical place that you belong to. And I guess Binti is in that journey to find... to the point that she becomes part of it, you know, part of something that travels, and she has to actually be traveling all the time, that she goes from seeing this place where she was born to as part of herself, but to a point when she can actually see that it's not just that, not just something stable, but it goes with her. It connects with her through her culture, through her people, but not necessarily just by being there in the physical space.

Alex: I wonder too if home for Binti throughout the trilogy relies less on place or space and more on her relationships. I mean, not only with herself but also with characters like Okwo and with Mwinyi, like those are people... I wonder if home, ultimately, becomes more of a state of mind or even a state of being for Binti. But then of course, the novel also complicates ideas of stagnant states of being because those are always already in flux too, so it's definitely an interesting, nuanced way of thinking about stationary versus mobile homes.

Erika: Mmhmm. Mmhmm. I like that distinction, Ane, that you brought up, this idea that we often pit like home versus journey. And I think that this whole trilogy kind of explodes that, and as both of you were talking, I was thinking of this moment where Binti returns home for the first time and she gets in an argument with her family, and they are nagging on her for why she left, and she says something along the lines of like "Now home is what is oppressing me." And in that moment, she's been having all of this nostalgia for getting home, and she finally gets home, and the changes that have happened to her and her departure from home changes how she directly feels about that space. And so I like this idea that it's constantly in flux, Alex, like she's never having a static or stagnant relationship with home because her contexts and her world are constantly expanding, which then inherently changes her relationship to what home even means.

[transition music]

Erika: I wonder if this is a good place to transition into our next question because I want to talk about the land, and what I'm thinking here, and I think this is a way of kind of tying into the conversation that we're already having, is land is so important to this story in so many different ways. And when we think about Binti, specifically this otjize that she has on her body all of the time, and she's literally kind of wearing the land of her home community even as she travels into these other spaces. But then land isn't always a space of rejuvenation. In fact, the conflict between the Khoush and the Meduse is quite literally started over scarcity of resources and water. And so we see all of these kind of different versions of what land can be. So what do we think about land in the book? Do we have a version of kind of a productive relationship to the land, especially as all of these different communities kind of have a different relationship to it?

Alex: I think that the role of the land, and by extension resources from the land, is one of the most complicated, at least to me, components of this book, but... because I think when we talk about, you know, does the trilogy provide a vision for a productive relationship to land, I would say that it does, but I think that the text shows us that despite all of the like land-based technology and inventions that different communities have access to, there's still so much that's unknown about the land and its potential resources, and that those unknowns, perhaps surprisingly, can be productive or rejuvenative. So I'm thinking in particular, there's this like, I don't even know that I would call it a scene, it's more of a brief moment where Binti brings Okwu to her family's home in the second book, and she's kind of wonders flippantly what would happen if Okwu were to like go out into the water, because she's kind of like, "Well it is... like it is kind of a jellyfish, so like could it swim or would the water kill it?" But Okwu gets in the water and successfully swims, and like who can even say if Okwu knew that it was capable of that? So I think that that's just a moment that is very brief in the text, but it's a moment where the reader becomes aware that there's still so much that's unknown by all of these communities, and like they're discovering things about the land and its resources in real time. And I think that that is exciting and is definitely... could function as a promise for rejuvenation.

Erika: I love that.

Ane: Yeah, I am really thinking about this scene right now. It's very, very interesting, but for me what mostly, I guess, represented the whole conflict of land in this story is the difference between the way the Enyi Zinariya and the Himba communities deal with the land, as opposed to the Khoush and the Meduse as well, because I read the dispute between the Khoush and the Meduse as a more... a dispute to control the land and of power over the land. Meanwhile, for the Himba people, for Binti, she even says, "We are sons and daughters of the soil," so they have this relationship as part of the land, as opposed to conquer it and rule it. And I'm not really sure how to put this, but there's also this part when they talking about the way they live, so the roots of the trees show them where to find water, how to find water, so they have this relationship with the land that is so, so much more different than the Khoush and the Meduse, and when she questions them, "Why do you... why are you even having this fight? Because you don't need to." It's very interesting, because it is... it became clear to me that it was a dispute of power and was a conflict of power, of control, rather than just, you know, survival of the land or something like that.

Erika: Well, and I think it's so fascinating how the fate of different characters is wrapped up in the survival of the natural elements of the world. And so, for instance, Binti's family in the Root, their home, they survive because the Root survives and takes care of them, and then when Binti gets in New Fish, her body is in New Fish at the end, it's only because New Fish is there and is accessible to them—this living animal that also is a means of transportation—that Binti is able to be revived, and so Ane, I like your point of different ways of conceptualizing, and we see ways that are rooted in power and exploitation and manipulation and then the characters that perhaps we are maybe most invested in—and maybe I'm just meaning Binti there—but Binti and her family who already have maybe a productive, or healthier relationship with the land. Their stories, their lives are... go hand in hand with the not only survival but also flourishing of the land and of the natural elements that are available to them. And what better metaphor for a productive relationship with the land than that our survival quite literally depends on the natural world.

Ane: Yeah, and being a harmonizer.

Erika: Exactly.

Alex: Yeah, I think the... Binti's roles as a harmonizer, and this is something that I absolutely adore about science fiction and perhaps more recently like the genres of speculative fiction too, I love how they completely disregard boundaries between human animals, non-human animals, and the land, and I think that, especially in science fiction, like that's where not only characters who are aliens but also like the metaphor of alien is so valuable, because it... I mean, also from the readers' point of view, it complicates who at any time you're supposed to be rooting for, 'cause we can't just look at like, that character is strictly a human animal, so I know I'm supposed to sympathize and root for them. It's like, well, wait, hang on, wait a second. So I think it's also like a challenge in empathy for readers too. So like should we be sympathetic to the lands or should we think of the land as character, like what you're saying, Erika, or should we continue to root for like the speaking alien human hybrid characters?

Erika: Mmhmm. Mmhmm. Well, and Okwu is consistently humanized for us over the course...

Alex: Yeah.

Erika: ... of the novel in ways that when we're introduced to the Meduse at the beginning, the first interaction that we have with them is extreme violence and terror on Binti's part, and again the entire novel is, except for this one weird moment in the third book, is focalized through Binti, and so we're experiencing this terror that she has to the Meduse, to this non-human group that she's trying to deal with and contend with within the space. And then we see slowly... Well I guess, first off, her interactions with this group are kind of initially dictated by all of the different narratives and histories that she's heard and the misperceptions that she's had and grown from just hearing stories about them, and then she finally comes into contact with this group and yes, there's this moment of violence, but then also consistently throughout the book, we're seeing Okwu and Binti's relationship morph and change as they enter these different spaces together. And so, even this initial like alien/human interaction doesn't hold throughout the entire book. Any final thoughts about this before we jump into our last section?

Ane: I was just thinking about the idea of treeing as well.

Erika: Yeah...

Ane: As part of this connection with nature, let's say like this. And I'm not sure how to go from that, but I guess there's a very, very important thing to be said about treeing and how we... It just perhaps makes her completely calm, right, whenever she does it. She's able to reach this, I don't know, I want to say nirvana, but I'm not sure exactly what's she reaching. But it's very interesting to see how this contact with this very natural form of being, this very natural state, let's say, makes her able to understand things much better. And um... Right. I guess that was it. Yes.

Erika: Mmhmm. Well, and Mwinyi, his ability to harmonize quite literally gives him the capacity to communicate with different animals. And so again, even in that moment, Alex, like you said, the distinction, the boundaries are broken, because in this ability to communicate, I think, he learns how to harmonize from elephants who teach him, and in much the same fashion as the rest of the novel or the rest of the trilogy, there are these misperceptions that people have in certain circumstances, and so there's this misperception that elephants are super violent and super dangerous, and then he has this moment of being able to communicate, and the script is rewritten for him and how he perceives elephants and animals, and so it's the ability to be okay, I guess, what the boundaries kind of slipping, both for the characters but also for us, that maybe even explodes the idea, like you said, Alex, who are we rooting for? Well, in many ways, almost every single person, every single entity, including the lands, including almost everything, is humanized for us at some point in ways that we build empathy and kind of explode even the idea of a central protagonist.

[transition music]

Erika: So let's talk about the book's conclusion because I have a lot of feels about it. The trilogy builds to this moment of conflict between the Khoush and the Meduse, and all throughout the trilogy, we have seen Binti in these spaces where she's able to harmonize between these different groups and to again break down some of these boundaries and kind of create productive relationships between different groups. I'm thinking specifically here, the Meduse and the scholars at Oomza University, she's able to assure that no violence happens and kind of mediate in a way that is productive and everyone walks away feeling like they got what they needed from that exchange. And so we build to this moment where, I don't know about y'all, but at least I was kind of expecting Binti to be able to successfully harmonize between the Khoush and the Meduse, and then we see Binti dies, and in the process of Okwu and Mwinyi taking Binti's body into outer space, the narrative shifts us completely away from the conflict. We don't know what happened. And when I was like planning this podcast, that was my first realization of like an, oh my gosh! We don't know what happens. And first off, I'm just like sitting in that realization, which is still mind-blowing to me, but we've been talking about community and these different relationships and interactions that she has with all of these groups and non-human animals and human animals, etc., etc. Do we have a productive version of community at the end? Is that even

possible given the ongoing conflict that is still in the background of the novel or of the book? What do y'all think?

Ane: That's a very difficult question. So first, I think us not knowing what happens with the Khoush/Meduse conflict suggests that this is beyond Binti's power, I guess, and she cannot fight it. But her... Let's say that her... what she had to accomplish in the novel, it has happened, right? She has accepted her very complex identities. And we can see that when she gives her whole name, right, when she just says her whole name, so she's accepting it, and I guess that part of her journey was that, and maybe the conflict is beyond her power or something like that. It's really puzzled me that she did not contact her parents.

Erika: Hmm.

Ane: So, for someone who was pretty much throughout the novel missing her community, I guess she had to break with it at some point, at least in the second part of the... the second novel, right, the second segment there. She, I guess, partially, I guess, I don't want to say that she completely detached from them but she does have a... She has some sort of breaking with her community, let's say, and I think she will eventually do it eventually. I hope so. I hope she reaches out. But I guess she sees her... the part of her community in a different angle right now. She knows that they have to join maybe the Enyi Zinariya, right, and I guess break their own prejudice against these other people. And somehow she found herself at Oomza Uni., as a place that, I guess, many, many people are cohabitating, and I won't say that it's without tension because it is. There is tension. But still, it's a place that, I guess, she feels not so further... she doesn't feel so, I guess, different or something like that, although she's the only one of, you know, that is of her kind that is there, but she found something, I guess, special there at Oomza Uni.

Erika: Yeah, absolutely.

Alex: Maybe it's because I'm an American Gothic scholar in part, but I kind of really enjoyed the ending's seeming ambiguity, not only because, again, it's a play on readers' expectations. Like I agree with you, Erika, and you, Ane, that the trilogy does seem to be setting the stage, building up in, you know, inserting a lot of tension throughout, leading up to what we think will be one moment of conflict, after which, one way or another, everything will be resolved, and I found it a little comforting in a strange way that the reader isn't given access to that moment, one, because I think that that is realistic. I mean, climactic moments rarely happen in life, or at least like we don't like interpret them as those major dramatic, climactic moments as they're happening in real time, you know what I mean? But I... also in another sense, I appreciated Binti's role, and I... as the novel suggests, or as the trilogy suggests, her continuing role, as kind of having to negotiate whether or not she's going to be an actor in an individualist community or more of a collectivist society. And I think that, especially Binti's choice to return to Oomza University at the very end demonstrates that like, while she's interested in serving her community, she understands that she will be able to serve her community best if she continues to pursue her own education and her own interests, and her own passions, even if at times, she is skeptical or even critical of those institutions that bestow her with that education. So I think that she's interested in and enacting service, but she's not wholly subservient at the same time. And I

think that's perhaps a more nuanced and more generative way of considering the role that Binti will play in the future and her continuing character development. So maybe the strategy is—and by strategy I mean like this narrative strategy, this particular ending—is a more global or, I guess in Binti's case it truly is universal, way of defining what community leadership looks like. And I wonder if like the resolution of conflict is not the main takeaway from this trilogy, but rather it's like, What does community leadership look like in shifting environments?

Erika: Hmm. Okay, I have a comment and then a follow-up question. So I think... I love the point that... this idea of Okorafor is being realistic with us in taking us away from the conflict and not letting Binti achieve completely harmonizing in the situation to the extent that there is no more conflict, because I think it is one thing to give this young woman power and agency in these different situations to be a player in those conversations and those conflicts, and it's another thing completely to give her the complete control to wipe out the conflict altogether. And I think, in that second version, it wouldn't do justice to the deep, deep stakes involved in that conflict. As much as I want to buy into the narrative that a single individual can completely change the world, I don't think that does justice to these deep-rooted, structural issues over resources and environment that are happening here. And so I think that maybe Okorafor is being so explicit about setting us up for that reading and then withholding it from us to very intentionally think as readers, okay, what does this mean for an individual? Like yes, I can have power in this situation, I can effect some sort of change, but also I need to be invested in kind of deep-rooted and structural changes that are not just centered around me or stemming from me but also a community act, perhaps. So then, one of the things that both of you brought up is, like I mentioned, okay, we're shifted away from the conflict on Earth, and both of you said, "yes, Erika, *and we go to Oomza University.*" Is that the ideal, or is the ideal withheld from us? And I think, Alex, you already started articulating this, but I just think that this is maybe a productive space to kind of wrap up our conclusion, especially thinking through like, we are in a university setting, and much of this book is in a university setting. Is academia, is the university the ideal here? Or are there ways that Okorafor can simultaneously privilege this space and also show that it's a bit problematic as well?

Ane: I would definitely say a little bit problematic. I think she purposefully complicates things and really does not give us a straight answer about this. And I truly believe that Binti could have... could still grow if she decided to go back to her community. And the reason she does not, I guess, is not because the academic setting is the best place. Even Mwinzi won't do the university thing; he doesn't want to. So, not necessarily, I think, it's because the academic life is the way, but because this is the place she wanted to be from the beginning, and she still feels that she has a part there, as much as she felt when she went back home the first, second... in the second part of the novel, she decided that she had to do the pilgrimage, right, at some point, and then of course, things got out of the way, completely different thing happens, but she feels that she has perhaps still a role to play at that environment. And, of course, she also feels good there. She tells us many times she feels good at this environment as well. So, yeah.

Alex: I think that the text is absolutely skeptical of the role that the university plays, not only like in individual lives but also institutionally, and I've thought about this a little bit. I think that, well, number one, like how can higher education, how can Oomza University be this kind of like

utopian space or place if Binti is the first Himba girl to ever be invited to attend? So it's like, already that's a red flag. It's like, hang on.

Erika: Isn't Okwu the first Meduse as well?

Ane: I think so. I think so.

Alex: Yes. I think so. So I think...

Ane: And there's tension there too, right, between him and the professors and the Khoush students who don't accept Binti.

Alex: Yes, they have an actual fight!

Ane: Yes, true. So there's a lot of tension.

Erika: Do you want to keep going, Alex? Sorry, we cut you off.

Alex: Oh, no. So I was thinking like, yes, it's encouraging that the university is, you know, sending invitation to students who have perhaps like not had access or haven't been explicitly invited to join the ranks of higher education. But you got to be skeptical of the institution that took so long to extend that invitation, and, what you're saying, Ane, like there's violence in the classroom, like there's Okwu and its professor, like they draw weapons on one another and it's... I mean we can't say we didn't see that conflict coming.

Erika: Right.

Alex: So, I think that it's, yeah... Yeah, I think that the text is absolutely skeptical of its power.

Erika: Well, and the role that the university plays in stealing this stinger from the Meduse and then placing it in a museum, and thinking about the way that knowledge is built within academia and certain narratives and practices that go into creating histories and versions of histories that are often very problematic. Yeah, I think absolutely we can't privilege the version of a university space that Binti returns to. So then is it safe to say... I mean I don't... it's uncomfortable, I think, as a reader to just be like, well, there are no answers, like Okorafor is just like pointing out some issues and giving us no answers, but is it really just... and maybe this is a place to conclude, but is it that the different stories we tell or genres that we use, such as a coming-of-age, whatever, that always want to end and tie everything up in a bow... when it comes to community literally across the universes, like that's not something that you can tie up with a bow, with, you know, a pretty conclusion that leaves everyone happy?

Ane: Yes, I think Binti being at the university is a very important thing, first of all, because I think, even mentioning that the Khoush pretty much constructs the idea of the conflict between them and the Meduse through education, so she as a Himba, as part of the Himba community, had to learn the Khoush narrative, you know, which was, of course, against the Meduse, so she had all these preconceived ideas of this community, and of course this is done through education,

pretty much. That museum, I think it was a really good way to start the novel's conflict and present that conflict because it reminds me so much of the *Black Panther* scene.

Erika: Yeah, it does.

Ane: And I know Okorafor also... you know, she wrote some of the comics for *Black Panther* as well. But it's brilliant because that's... you know, education plays such a huge part in colonial, you know, the struggle, and I guess Binti being at the university is a way of changing this narrative as well. I guess we could see this as a positive, maybe?

Alex: I do think there's a line at the end of *Night Masquerade* where Binti's having a conversation with Dr. Tuka, and at one point, Dr. Tuka looks at Binti and says, "Your family is bigger than any Himba girl's ever was." And I think that even if the institution, even if Oomza University or Oomza Uni. rather, is, even if it's problematic, even if it disrupts like previous understandings of community, it ultimately does give Binti access to not only more communities but other ways of knowing, right, like she's interacting with other narratives and counter-narratives and challenging what she's previously held as truth before and ostensibly setting an example for like and paving the way too for other students from other previously marginalized communities to interact with the University in that way as well. But I think that if there's like a positive moment towards the end, that line of like, yeah, you struggled so much, but you have this whole community. And not only do you have access to that community, but you can choose how much and how you interact with individuals within that community.

Erika: So it's... the image that we get at the end is, instead of this utopia that in many ways maybe Oomza Uni. was positioned for Binti's story, like the culmination of kind of everything that her life was building up to, the story progresses. It disrupts that. We see the problematic nature of many of the things associated with the University, but it's a starting point in thinking through, What does productive community look like? What is productive community in relationship to the individual look like? And what is productive community look like in different global and universal contexts when we're considering so many different players that are within these conversations? That sounds to me like a productive place to end. So any final thoughts before we wrap up?

Alex: I would just say, the last thing, I think, also, that and Mwinyi perhaps proves that the university is not even the only way to try to tie communities together because he actively chooses to not take that path. So I think that, again, Okorafor kind of like cleverly is giving us what looks like a formulaic happy ending, a utopian setting, and then it's like, unh-uh, but look at this outlier character who has a completely different path.

Erika: Yep.

Alex: So definitely a lot of good things to consider moving forward.

Erika: Yeah. So starting the conversation, starting the process of thinking about these things, instead of providing us with an answer. I love that.

[transition sound]

Well I think this is a good place to wrap up. Thank you, Alex and Ane, both for joining us, lovely conversation. I think the topics that we discussed and the themes within the book are just absolutely fascinating, so thank you both for joining. Really appreciate it. And then to our listeners, this is our last podcast episode of the semester, but we do hope that you will join in a few weeks for when Nnedi Okorafor will be on campus with us talking about her brilliant trilogy. So she will be here on Wednesday, November 3rd, and we are all excited for that. So until then, enjoy, and we will hopefully see you soon. Bye everyone!

Ane: Thank you!

Alex: Thank you!

Sources:

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