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ABSTRACT

International aid often functions as a neocolonial extension of colonial power structures. Aid to Africa is particularly problematic because of ideologies casting the continent as backward and devoid of agency, which have material consequences for African lives. Afrofuturist imaginings offer a space where these politics of aid can be challenged, as Afrofuturism centers Africa and the African diaspora in our understandings of futurity, and works to undo racist, sexist, and Westerncentric ideologies in the present. In this essay, I analyze the 2018 Afrofuturist film *Black Panther* for its representations of the politics of aid. Ultimately, I argue that although *Black Panther* challenges some neocolonial assumptions by staging an African country that is developed in ways that break Western norms, it reproduces and even strengthens other aspects of coloniality by portraying Wakanda as an exceptional African nation, equating economic development with morality, and reinforcing the idea of aid as a universal good.

Ytasha L. Womack contends that "Afrofuturism unchains the mind."[1] Afrofuturist creations empower African and African diasporic subjects to center Africana ontologies and epistemologies in ways that fundamentally refigure futurism by weaving together the spiritual and technological, embodied and mechanical, natural and created.[2] Afrofuturist projections do more than inspire hope that futures may be liberatory; they enable such futures by enticing us to enact them in the present. Kodwo Eshun writes that "powerful descriptions of the future have an increasing ability to draw us towards them, to command us to make them flesh."[3] Afrofuturism thus acts not only to disturb the hegemony of white, Western, heteropatriarchal futuristic descriptions, but also to call liberatory futures into being.

However, simply imagining Black subjects as the center of the future is not automatically liberatory, as it may still problematically inscribe heteropatriarchal, racist, or ableist politics and leave in place the universal designation of the human that Sylvia Wynter terms "Man."[4] In this essay, I am interested in how Afrofuturist imaginings of the future interact with the contemporary ideologies that structure aid and development. International aid often functions as a neocolonial extension of colonial power structures.[5] Aid to Africa is particularly suspect because of the West's ethnocentric ideologies casting the continent as backward and devoid of agency, which have material consequences for African lives.[6]

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Afrofuturism offers a means to decolonize aid and development as it centralizes African and African diasporic agency and calls communication scholars to make decolonial future visions a reality in the present.

The 2018 Afrofuturist film *Black Panther* provides a provocative context for analyzing the politics of aid, which I argue functions as the linchpin that secures the film's plot and relationships. The desire to help other Black people grows throughout the film, eventually cementing T'Challa's maturation into King, his nation's burgeoning international leadership, and his romance with Nakia. The beginning of the film establishes a conflict between T'Challa and Nakia regarding the need to provide aid. Nakia says that she cannot stay with him until Wakanda agrees to aid other countries: "Share what we have," she exhorts. "We could provide aid and access to technology and refuge to those who need it. Other countries do it; we could do it better." At first, T'Challa responds, "We are not like these other countries," seeing Wakanda's separatism as imperative to protecting its lifestyle. However, by the end of the film, he changes his mind, recognizing that Wakanda's lifestyle exists at the expense of other Black communities and feeling a paternalistic responsibility toward them. During the film's credits, Wakanda emerges on a global scale as a purveyor of aid, and T'Challa's decision to reposition the nation allows him to win over his love. Given the centrality of aid to the film, I examine how and if the representation of a fictional African nation purveying developmental assistance refigures the politics of international aid in ways that delink from coloniality.

Representations have material consequence, since "media … have the power to shape, influence, and suggest who people are and subsequently how they can acceptably be treated."[7] Afrofuturist representations, in particular, hold potential to inspire material transformation by engaging with what Richard Iton terms the Black fantastic. For Iton, popular culture offers an important political space for Black liberation, as it legitimates the normatively impossible, surpasses nation-state borders, and refuses colonial modernity.[8] And yet, centering Black subjects in popular culture does not automatically undo systemic inequalities.[9] The Black fantastic is a mode of delinking, using Black cultural production to disrupt typical renderings of the known and possible, "displac[ing] modernity … along with its norms and modal infrastructures."[10] The Black fantastic opens the imagination, enabling the construction of futures typically relegated to impossibility. To inspire material change that reaches Afrofuturist goals, media must engage with the Black fantastic, and divest from coloniality.

I have witnessed firsthand the consequences of failing to do so. As a white Western woman and reformed aid worker, I have participated in the material and psychological damage wrought by white saviorism and Western ideologies of development. My subjectivity emerges in and through neocolonial, racial, and gendered politics of relation that intimately entangle me in the world of African development, and yet that world is not mine.[11] I attempt to decolonize aid in my research through what María Lugones calls "world traveling," by reflexively moving across subjective realities to worlds where I am the oppressor in order to understand and delink from coloniality.[12] In this essay, I first contextualize the politics of developmental aid to Africa within coloniality, addressing the possibilities that Afrofuturist delinking could hold. I then analyze the film's portrayal of Wakanda and its desire to purvey aid. I argue that although *Black Panther* challenges some neocolonial assumptions of agency and development through centering an

African country as the developed aid-giver, it ultimately reinforces colonial modernity, thereby hindering the film's Afrofuturist potential.

(De)colonizing development

International development aid has functioned since its inception as an extension of colonialism. Countries ravaged by colonialism continue to be ravaged by loans that leave post-colonial nations worse off economically than before and keep them in a never-ending cycle of debt to the West. For instance, "when aid flows to Africa were at their peak, poverty in Africa rose from 11 per cent to a staggering 66 per cent," initiating calls that further governmental aid was needed.[13] Whether provided by governments or nonprofits, aid perpetuates paternalistic relationships between providers and recipients by assuming a lack of agency on the part of those served, and enabling a superiority complex in its purveyors.[14] Structurally, developmental aid further reinforces the systems it purports to change.

Aid to Africa holds unique qualities because of the West's fixation on the continent. Achille Mbembe notes that "Africa as an idea … has historically served, and continues to serve, as a polemical argument for the West's desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world."[15] Africa is figured by the West as an empty signifier into and against which the West brutally asserts its own self-definition. By this, I do not mean to add to "the preconceived overgeneralization of African people's lived experiences through a Western cultural lens,"[16] but rather point to how such overgeneralizations form the white Western epistemological basis for self-understanding. As Armond R. Towns explains, it is precisely "enactments of racial violence against the Black body that *extended* some people into their humanity—a humanity overdetermined by what we now call 'White masculinity.'"[17] Western ideology equates Africa with ontological emptiness in order to extend white masculine humanity through the West's desire to be exceptional, to be saviors.[18] As Godfried Asante demonstrates, whiteness is not simply epistemological, but "a localized production enforced through material realities," with material consequences.[19]

For decolonial scholars, the modern condition arises out of the intimately connected racial-colonial networks wrought between the slave trade, physical colonization, indentured servitude, plantation labor, and textile labor.[20] According to Walter D. Mignolo, "coloniality is constitutive of modernity, in the sense that there cannot be modernity without coloniality."[21] Colonial modernity suppresses the ontologies and epistemologies of the racialized and colonized by universalizing the white, Western liberal subject as representative of all of humanity.[22] To bring suppressed ways of being and knowing to the fore, decolonial scholars attempt to delink ontologies and epistemologies from colonial modernity. Delinking is "any practice, discursive or otherwise, that facilitates a divestment from modernity/coloniality and invents openings through which decolonial epistemic shifts can emerge" by thinking, acting, and relating outside of Westerncentric knowledges and logics.[23] Delinking allows us to conceptualize and enact relations of aid in ways that do not support neocolonial logics, national exceptionalism, or white savior ideologies.

Delinking engages the Afrofuturist goal of "unchain[ing] the mind" and brings forth modes of being and knowing unrecognized within white, Westerncentric systems. Using this delinking lens, I examine *Black Panther* and how it portrays aid through an

Afrofuturist depiction of a fictional African country poised to provide aid both to other countries in Africa and to a low-income Black community in the U.S.A. On the one hand, the film challenges neocolonial logics that structure developmental aid by representing development in ways that break Westerncentric norms. On the other hand, it fails to delink fully from Western epistemologies of aid by maintaining logics of colonial modernity through positioning Wakanda as an exceptional African nation, equating development with morality, and reinforcing the idea of aid as a universal good.

The politics of aid in Black Panther

Positioning Wakanda as exceptional

The first "present day" scene of the film opens on T'Challa watching British news discuss his upcoming ascension to the throne of Wakanda. His aircraft hovers above the Sambisa Forest of Nigeria. Below, vehicles carrying kidnapped girls and women wind through the jungle. After an action sequence wherein he and his guard Okoye suspend the vehicles and kill the kidnappers, we find that he has interrupted the mission of his love interest, Nakia, who planned to infiltrate the group by posing as a kidnapping victim. Before Nakia leaves with T'Challa, she instructs the grateful women (and one boy) to "Carry yourselves home now." Those rescued respond to both with bowed heads and a chorus of thank yous. They watch, amazed, as the aircraft lifts off, activates its invisibility shield, and flies away, leaving them behind in the jungle.

Just as the ship flies away, so Black Panther proceeds apart from portrayals of Africans other than Wakandans for its duration. This scene sets the audience's interpretive schema for understanding Wakanda in relation to other African nations. For one, the jungle setting is not insignificant. The forest hearkens both to primitivistic portrayals of Africa and Africans and to viral Western aid campaigns such as #BringBackOurGirls.[24] By placing Nakia on a mission to infiltrate a Boko Haram-esque group, the film sets up the conceit that eventually drives T'Challa's decision to reveal Wakanda's true wealth to the world: the developmental ability to aid other African nations and African diaspora communities.

With these opening scenes, Wakanda is positioned as the exception that proves the rule—a theme maintained throughout the film. By deploying Wakandan power against violent terrorists to defend and "save" helpless women and children, Black Panther ironically sets Wakanda apart as an exceptional African nation and leaves subservient stereotypes regarding Africa firmly in place. In a superhero film, having a technologically developed nation with a superpowered leader is not in itself exceptional; what makes Black Panther appear innovative is the association of these things with Africa. T'Challa rises above the petty warmongering of other African nations, and Okoye is a warrior rather than a victim, because Wakanda is exceptional. Africans other than Wakandans are "flattened" in the narrative and used as foils for the Wakandan heroes, repeating logics of whitewashing and white saviorism behind Black character masks.[25] Wakandans challenge stereotypical representations of Africans, but a single story of poverty, violence, and victimhood remains in place for the rest of the continent,[26] as well as the global African diaspora.

Equating development and morality

If the relationship between Wakanda and Africa is that of an exception that proves the rule, then the relationship between Wakanda and Black U.S. communities is that of "Good Black Men" versus "Bad Black Men."[27] In white supremacist culture, "'Good Black Men' embody Black masculinity within the permissible confines of whiteness, while 'Bad Black Men' challenge the confines of whiteness."[28] This binary opposition is clearly portrayed in the pitting of T'Challa against the African American Erik Killmonger as narrative stand-ins for Black people more broadly. Killmonger advocates a global revolutionary politics of overthrowing the oppressor, a position repudiated by his characterization as a haphazardly violent Black man whose willingness, for example, to kill his own lover renders him decidedly immoral in comparison to the unwaveringly ethical and deliberative T'Challa. Indicative of its own limitations, *Black Panther* cannot portray Killmonger as a "Good" subject because ultimately the Good Black Man must be "grateful, compliant, silent, etc.," and Killmonger would rather die than remain within the bounds of whiteness.[29]

As others have noted, the Good Black Man/Bad Black Man trope victim-blames African Americans writ large for their economic insecurity.[30] *Black Panther* extends this trope further by relying on a neocolonial logic that equates development with morality and poverty with immorality. T'Challa stands in for the paternalistic savior, responsible for helping the underdeveloped African diaspora, and Killmonger by extension. One of T'Challa's central struggles is coming to terms with the fact that his father left Killmonger to grow up in Oakland, CA, after slaying Killmonger's Wakandan father. By implying that it is *because* he grew up fatherless in Oakland that Killmonger became dangerous and deadly, Killmonger's performance of a Bad Black Man is portrayed as the direct result of economic insecurity, obscuring the fundamental political challenge that Bad Black Men represent to white supremacy. *Black Panther* reinforces this perspective by also implying its logical contrapositive: Wakandans are moral because they are economically secure. By directly associating poverty and violence, the movie reinforces white supremacy by promoting the idea that economic development is what secures the possibility of being/becoming Good Black Men.

Dewesternizing development but maintaining the universal good of aid

Although *Black Panther* represents a colonial-modern elision between development and morality, the portrayal of development does not fully replicate colonial modernity. The film presents an Afrofuturist rationality of development that delinks development from colonial-modern logics that diametrically oppose technology and spirituality, or machinery and nature. Wakanda's development is qualitatively different than that of the West; it depends on tradition, spirituality, and nature in addition to technology. Wakandan culture also fully integrates magic and metal, using the heart-shaped herb given to them by the panther goddess Bast to anoint their leaders—who garb themselves in clothes made from vibranium technology. The refusal to separate technology and spirituality is in line with Afrofuturist sensibilities that destabilize white, Western technofuturist norms.[31]

Although the film reimagines the content and quality of development, many of the structures and logics that guide aid's neocolonial dissemination are left undisturbed.

Black Panther ends by portraying aid as an unqualified good that must be shared with other nations. In the bonus end-credits scene,[32] T'Challa gives a telling speech at the United Nations:

> For the first time in our history, we will be sharing our knowledge and resources with the outside world. Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows. We cannot. We must not. We will work to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on this earth should treat each other. Now, more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth. More connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis, the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one, single tribe.

T'Challa establishes a moral imperative of aid: Wakanda *cannot* and *must not* stay removed from global affairs. The declaration of intent to export development to Othered nations assumes that development, a hallmark of colonial modernity, is necessarily desirable and useful. This moral imperative extends the logic that development underwrites morality—Wakanda *must* aid others, out of concern for their ability to become Good Black Men (and Women). And to perform this identity acceptably, they must inch ever closer to whiteness through saviorhood.[33] Building a "social outreach" and "science and information exchange" in Oakland falls directly in line with the expectations that Good Black Men will reinforce white supremacy—and do so in opposition to Bad Black Men who resist blame for their own poverty. Rather than engage with the "anarchist-inflected imagination" of the Black fantastic, Wakandans replicate typical nation-state politics and neoliberal dynamics of aid.[34] Wakanda could have engaged with Black nationalist politics of collective coalition-building beyond and in excess of nation-states, but instead it whitewashes collectivity by positing a colorblind global solidarity. In doing so, *Black Panther* fails to interrogate the neocolonial logics undergirding contemporary development before taking it on as an African project. Although Wakanda's ability to offer aid breaks some stereotypes regarding Africa and challenges some ideas of what development can be, the fictional nation remains an exception that proves the neocolonial rule rather than the catalyst for decolonial logics of aid.

Toward Africana rationalities of aid

To conclude, I explore an Africana conceptualization of aid that *Black Panther*'s director Ryan Coogler and producers Kevin Feige and David J. Grant could have used by responding to the question they failed to ask and answer: What might it look like to center the Afrofuturist analytic of *shaping change* in representations of aid and development? The inevitability of change is central to Afrofuturist writings, primarily traced back to the work of Octavia E. Butler. In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler introduces the idea of shaping change as a religion: God is change, and humans may either act to shape change or live within its grip.[35] Understanding change as inevitable and therefore working intentionally to shape its manifestation produces "a lineage in the black diasporic traditions where the cruelty of bondage and murder become portholes of redemption."[36] The ability to shape change is one legacy of slavery in the African diaspora, the ability to take terrible conditions and create life, beauty, and hope.[37]

Shaping change is also central to African imaginings, though it may be said to have a different flavor. In diasporic texts, shaping change is often used for survival, while African

texts demonstrate an ethic of shaping change for holistic communal benefit. African epistemologies are "rooted in the concerns of the everyday," holism, and collectivity.[38] As Mohale Mashigo writes, "Our needs, when it comes to imagining futures, or even reimagining a fantasy present, are different from elsewhere on the globe; we actually live on this continent, as opposed to using it as a costume or a stage to play out our ideas."[39] Shaping change extends from and transforms contemporary African material conditions.

Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* provides a dynamic example.[40] In the novel, aliens make first contact with Earth off the coast of Lagos, Nigeria. They have come to find a home, and as such make contact not just with humans, but with all species. What they offer in return is change. Their representative explains, "We do not want to rule, colonize, conquer or take. We just want a home. What is it *you* want?"[41] The aliens of *Lagoon* offer aid by considering and actualizing the desire of Earth's living creatures, thus portraying a decolonial Afrofuturist politics of aid. For one, the novel demonstrates shaping change by accentuating African agency, rather than denying it. African decision-making is the root of shaping change; here aid is an unnecessary, but helpful, allyship. Additionally, shaping change does not institute a linear trajectory of what development is or can be, recognizing instead that change is inevitable; though one may act to shape it, the next moment may bring something unpredicted. As African futurisms are holistic, change affects not only one subject, but everything around them. Rather than tracing a linear path like Western development, shaping change has ripples and reverberations that disrupt teleological progress or linear apprehension. Finally, shaping change provides a form of development based in communal relations. Even posing the question "What is it that *you* want?" is foreign to Western, colonial-modern epistemologies of aid that are dependent on knowing that one has something others are presumed to need and want, that one is able to save them.

From this vantage point, *Black Panther* had the potential to do so much more. Instead of imagining aid as providing technology or resources, Wakandans should have asked other Africans and members of the African diaspora: What is it *you* want?

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 2013), 44.
2. Alondra Nelson, "Introduction: Future Texts," *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 1–20; Womack, *Afrofuturism*.
3. Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 290–91.
4. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

5. Jenna N. Hanchey, "Agency beyond Agents: Aid Campaigns in Sub-Saharan Africa and Collective Representations of Agency," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 9, no. 1 (2016): 11–29; "All of Us Phantasmic Saviors," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (2018): 144–60.

6. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

7. Rachel Alicia Griffin, "I AM an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice, and Resistance," *Women's Studies in Communication* 35, no. 2 (2012): 148.

8. Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

9. Ibid., 16–19; Rachel Alicia Griffin, "Problematic Representations of Strategic Whiteness and 'Post-racial' Pedagogy: A Critical Intercultural Reading of *The Help*," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 8, no. 2 (2015): 147–66.

10. Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 28.

11. Aimee Carrillo Rowe, *Power Lines: On the Subject of Feminist Alliances* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

12. María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 14.

13. Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009), 47.

14. Hanchey, "Agency beyond Agents"; "All of Us Phantasmic Saviors"; Maria Eriksson Baaz, *The Paternalism of Partnership: A Postcolonial Reading of Identity in Development Aid* (New York: Zed Books, 2005).

15. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 2.

16. Gloria Nziba Pindi, "Hybridity and Identity Performance in Diasporic Context: An Autoethnographic Journey of the Self across Cultures," *Cultural Studies ⇔ Critical Methodologies* 18, no. 1 (2018): 24.

17. Armond R. Towns, "Black 'Matter' Lives," *Women's Studies in Communication* 41, no. 4 (2018): 355 original emphasis.

18. Hanchey, "All of Us Phantasmic Saviors"; Teju Cole, "The White-Savior Industrial Complex," *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2012, http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/.

19. Godfried Asante, "Glocalized Whiteness: Sustaining and Reproducing Whiteness through 'Skin Toning' in Post-Colonial Ghana," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 9, no. 2 (2016): 92.

20. From this perspective, colonialty and modernity are inherently linked. See Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*; Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking," *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (2007): 449–514; Darrel Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords and the Struggle for Liberation* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2015). For an examination of global racial-colonial networks, see Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

21. Mignolo, "Delinking," 464.

22. Towns, "Black 'Matter' Lives"; Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom."

23. Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords and the Struggle for Liberation*, 25 original emphasis.

24. For more information, see Amanda Holpuch, "Stolen Daughters: What Happened After #BringBackOurGirls?" *Guardian*, October 22, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/oct/22/bring-back-our-girls-documentary-stolen-daughters-kidnapped-boko-haram.

25. Griffin, "Problematic Representations of Strategic Whiteness and 'Post-racial' Pedagogy," 151; Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 214–15.

26. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," *TED*, July 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.

27. Bryant Keith Alexander, *Performing Black Masculinity: Race, Culture, and Queer Identity* (Lanham, MD: Alta Mira Press, 2006), 69–97.

28. Rachel Alicia Griffin, "The Spectacularization and Serialization of Whiteness: Theorizing 50+ Years of O. J. Simpson's Contentious Notoriety," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 11, no. 3 (2018): 363.

29. Ibid., 364.

30. Brian Wilson, "'Good Blacks' and 'Bad Blacks': Media Constructions of African-American Athletes in Canadian Basketball," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 32, no. 2 (1997): 185–86.

31. Nelson, "Introduction."

32. Rather than thinking of this scene as having been cut or extraneous, I believe its placement in the end credits highlights its importance. End-credit scenes function in Marvel movies to preview films to come and provide teasers for major plot points. Being placed in the end credits highlights the importance of Wakanda's debut as a technologically advanced country on the international stage and implies this will be pivotal in future Marvel movies.

33. Griffin, "The Spectacularization and Serialization of Whiteness."

34. Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 198.

35. Octavia E. Butler, *The Parable of the Sower* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1993).

36. Lonny J. Avi Brooks, "Cruelty and Afrofuturism," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2018): 102.

37. Brooks argues, "white cruelty ironically served as the pathway to Afrofuturism and the imagining of more powerful futures for the black diaspora" (Ibid., 101).

38. Joëlle Marie Cruz, "Reimagining Feminist Organizing in Global Times: Lessons from African Feminist Communication," *Women & Language* 38, no. 1 (2015): 24.

39. Mohale Mashigo, "'Afrofuturism Is Not for Africans Living in Africa'—An Essay by Mohale Mashigo, Excerpted from Her New Collection of Short Stories, *Intruders*," *The Johannesburg Review of Books*, October 1, 2018, https://johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/2018/10/01/afrofuturism-is-not-for-africans-living-in-africa-an-essay-by-mohale-mashigo-excerpted-from-her-new-collection-of-short-stories-intruders/.

40. Nnedi Okorafor, *Lagoon* (New York: Saga Press, 2014).

41. Ibid., 218 original emphasis.