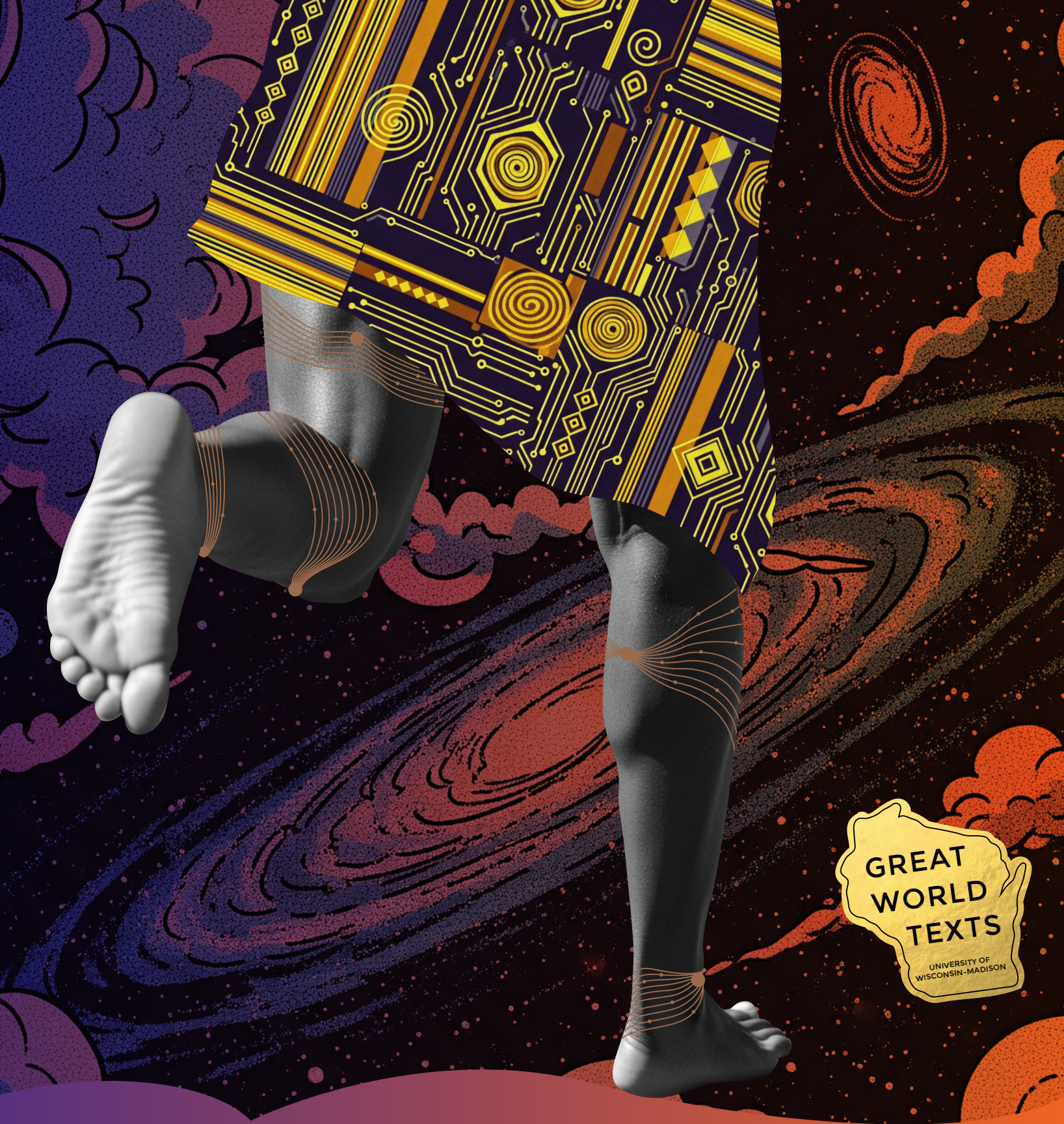




DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

GREAT WORLD TEXTS IN WISCONSIN, 2025–2026

Teaching *Death of the Author* in Wisconsin

A Guide for Educators

2025–2026 Great World Texts Program
UW-Madison Center for the Humanities



Prepared by
Theophilus Okunlola, Department of English



432 East Campus Mall, Madison, WI 53706
humanities.wisc.edu

Table of Contents

<i>LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</i>	5
<i>UNIT 1. SETTING THE STAGE: THE CONTINENT AND ITS FICTION</i>	6
<i>UNIT 2. DISABILITY WRITING</i>	17
<i>UNIT 3. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND DEATH OF THE AUTHOR</i>	29
<i>UNIT 4. AFRICAN DIASPORA NARRATIVES</i>	37
<i>UNIT 5. THE FAMILY PARADOX</i>	49
<i>UNIT 6. LITERATURE AND SOCIAL MEDIA</i>	58
<i>UNIT 7. PREPARING TO MEET THE AUTHOR</i>	72

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The University of Wisconsin–Madison occupies ancestral Ho-Chunk land, a place their nation has called Teejop (day-JOPE) since time immemorial.

In an 1832 treaty, the Ho-Chunk were forced to cede this territory.

Decades of ethnic cleansing followed when both the federal and state government repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, sought to forcibly remove the Ho-Chunk from Wisconsin.

This history of colonization informs our shared future of collaboration and innovation.

Today, UW–Madison respects the inherent sovereignty of the Ho-Chunk Nation, along with the eleven other First Nations of Wisconsin.

UNIT 1. SETTING THE STAGE: THE CONTINENT AND ITS FICTION

ABOUT THIS UNIT

This unit is designed to support introductory class discussions by providing historical, cultural, and literary background information about Africa, African fiction, African science fiction, and the writings of Nnedi Okorafor. This contextual information will be important to students' engagement with *Death of the Author*. Unit 1 is meant to serve as entry into key ideas and concepts that students might be unaware of because of their limited knowledge about Africa and African literature. Therefore, we encourage teachers to spend time working through the subsections of this unit to familiarize students with historical and literary contexts that will enrich their understanding of *Death of the Author*.

The first subsection, "African is Not a Country: A Brief Cultural Frame" is meant to provide a portable summary of ideas about the continent while also addressing possible stereotypes about Africans that are popular in Western media and culture. The information provided on Africa should not be taken, by any stretch, as exhaustive or representative of the totality of the continent. Rather, it is meant to offer information about some of the ideas in *Death of the Author* that we will later discuss in this guide. The second subsection, "African fiction" traces a quick genealogy of fiction writings from and about the continent that represent African science fiction.

We focus on African science fiction because genre presents the richest framework for understanding *Death of the Author*, in addition to the fact that Okorafor is arguably the most prominent African sci-fi practitioner. The second subsection will define key terms such as "Afrofuturism" and "African science fiction." We will end this unit with a final section on "Africanfuturism," where we will look at both the history and implications of the sub-genre. All three subsections have discussion questions, class activities, and assignments.

PREPARATORY AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Wainaina, Biyavanga. "How to Write About Africa." *Granta*. 2 May 2019. <https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/>
- Burnett, Yu Joshua. "The Great Change and the Great Book: Nnedi Okorafor's Postcolonial, Post-Apocalyptic Africa and the Promise of Black Speculative Fiction". *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2016.
- Okorafor, Nnedi. "Africanfuturism Defined." 19 Oct. 2019. <https://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html>
- Talabi, Wole. *Africanfuturism Anthology*. 20 Oct. 2022. <https://brittlepaper.com/2020/10/free-download-of-africanfuturism-an-anthology-stories-by-nnedi-okorafor-tl-huchu-dilman-dilarafeeat-aliyu-tlotlo-tsamaase-mame-bougouma-diene-mazi-nwonwu-and-derek-lubangakene/>

- Paulson, Steve., Nnedi Okorafor., and Ainehi Edoro. “‘Africanfuturism’ and Dreaming of Bigger, Bolder African Futures.” *Wisconsin Public Radio*, 10 Dec. 2022.
<https://www.wpr.org/books/wakanda-africanfuturism-dreaming-african-futures-black-panther-ttbook>
- Pundt, Johanna. “Organic Fantasy and the Alien Archetype in Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon*.” *Exploring the Fantastic*, Batzke, Ina, Eric Erbacher, Linda Heb, Corinna Lenhardt (eds), Bielefeld, 2018.
- Samatar, Sofia. “Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism”. *Research in African Literatures*, vol, 28, no. 4, 2017.
- Wa Ngũgĩ, Mũkoma. *The Rise of the African Novel: Politics of Language, Identity, and Ownership*. University of Michigan Press, 2018.

OPENING ACTIVITY

What do you know about Africa?

The goal of this activity is to allow students to understand key facts and details about Africa. To achieve this goal, this activity has three main steps.

1. Divide the class into groups and let students in the groups discuss and write down some of things that they have seen, read, imagined, or heard about Africa.
2. Using a combination of online interactive learning tools and games such as [Africa Guide](#), [Sheppard Software](#), and [Settera](#), ask the students to fact check some of their ideas and associations. How accurate or inaccurate are they? What new things did they learn about Africa as a whole or a specific country?
3. Let each group share some of their findings with the class.

Because the interactive learning platforms we listed above contain more information than what students can absorb within a single class period, we suggest that teachers encourage students to continue using these digital tools at home to increase their knowledge about the continent. Alternatively, these learning platforms can become a part of the pedagogical tools woven into each class session in which *Death of the Author* is taught.

AFRICA IS NOT A COUNTRY: A BRIEF CULTURAL FRAME

Nnedi Okorafor, is a Nigerian American writer of Igbo descent. She was born in the United States of America to Igbo Nigerian parents. While her writing has been influenced by her American cultural identity, her Nigerian and Igbo origins has had far greater influence on her works, a fact she herself has admitted (See Nnedi Okorafor, “Organic Fantasy”). But what exactly does it mean to be both Nigerian and Igbo? To properly proffer an answer to this question, one must locate Nigeria within the cultural and political history of the African continent.

For readers in the U.S., “Africa” can sometimes feel like an abstract, faraway place, which is often portrayed as either “suffering” or “exotic.” Another common assumption is that Africa is one big monolithic region defined by rural life, a landscape of forest or plains, baking under a glowing orange sun setting over acacia trees. The phrase “Africa is not a country” has become a rallying cry against these kinds of misconceived notions of African worlds. The fact is that Africa is a vast, diverse continent made up of 54 nations, thousands of ethnic groups, and more than 2,000 languages. The cultures, histories, and political realities of a country like Egypt, defined by Arab identity, are very different from those of South Africa, with its legacy of settler colonialism and thus a minority white population, and from Nigeria, a nation of over 200 million people and immense ethnic diversity.

The continent contains different languages and ethnic groups such as Zulu, Kongo, Mandinka, Igbo, Yoruba, and several others. The histories and cultures of these ethnic identities predate both colonialism and the foundation of more modern nation-states in Africa. Therefore, one of the ways to understand Africa is through the lens of its precolonial histories and cultures. These precolonial histories remain noticeable today in the thousands of indigenous languages spoken by different groups across the continent, the different kinds of linguistic systems, literary traditions, cosmologies, political forms, and cultural practices such as cuisine, fashion, music, and so on.

When reading African literature like *Death of the Author*, it is helpful to understand that Africa’s modern nations emerged from the violent history of European colonization. European presence in Africa is dated to the 1400s when Portugal arrived on the coast of Southern Africa. However, arguably, it was the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 that catalyzed what is now called the “Scramble of Africa,” and the subsequent formalization of colonial rule across the continent. European nations like Portugal, Germany, Britain, and France, all divided different parts of Africa among themselves and claimed legal ownership of their allotted regions, annulling the rights of existing African societies. Colonial rule continued in most parts of Africa until the middle of the twentieth century when many African nations fought for their independence. The aftermath of colonialism can be seen across the continent today in areas such as language and culture. For example, English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish are spoken in diverse African countries because of colonial cultural imposition.

It is also important to keep in mind that African history did not begin with colonialism. Much of African literature, for example, draws from older sources rooted in pre-colonial worlds. These sources include oral storytelling traditions, epics, folktales, praise poetry, spiritual systems, and ritual performance. These texts and the cultures that developed them still thrive today.

Africa can also be understood from the perspective of its global diaspora. The African diaspora simply refers to people of African descent who are settled in different parts of the world because of the Atlantic and Sahara slave trades and migrations. The African diaspora includes, African Americans, African Caribbeans, African Europeans, African Latin Americans, Black Canadians, and many others. An African descent is a commonality among all these identity groups. While the African diaspora groups we have mentioned have a common African heritage, people within these groups do not always view their relationship with the African continent in the same way. While some celebrate their African roots, others remain ambivalent, and some even dismissive. There is no one way to be an African, and there is no

single way to be a diasporic African. Okorafor belongs to the category of Africans in the diaspora. In addition, she celebrates the influence of her African ancestry, and is critical, when necessary, in both in her life and writings.

These three ways of seeing Africa are central to understanding *Death of the Author*. Nnedi Okorafor draws attention to Africa's precolonial and cultural heritage of Africa in the novel through her main characters who are Zulu, Igbo, and Yoruba. Although these characters are diasporic Africans who predominantly live in the United States, they also retain parts of their cultural identity through their language, fashion, food, and other traditions such as the masked spirits (sometimes called masquerades). Rather than being seen as only an exotic display of African culture in the diaspora, the masquerade is a reaffirmation of a people's culture and heritage. The masquerade first appears in Chapter 2 of the novel: "The Wedding" (see page 19). The masquerade will appear again in Chapter 33: "Wake-Keeping" (see page 261) during the wake-keep of Zelu's father, Secret. Introducing masquerades at both a wedding—a joyous occasion—and a wake-keep—a sad occasion—is the novel's way of tying the cultural identity and heritage of the characters to important moments of their lives. We will further explore the intersections of African culture and diaspora identity in Unit 4.

African literary texts like *Death of the Author* often show how Africans within the continent and in the diaspora grapple with their dynamic historical and cultural heritage. Therefore, understanding the layers of meanings and symbolisms in African literary texts requires a consideration of the multiple layers of cultural identity and history that has influenced the texts and the issues they portray. As we will discuss later in this unit, Okorafor's writing is profoundly influenced by her Igbo cultural background and her diaspora identity.

Suggested Questions for Discussion

1. Following the class activity, 'What do you know about Africa,' and some of the descriptions about the continent provided in this guide, why do you think Africa remains a largely misunderstood continent?
2. Consider the following passages from *Death of the Author*:

I'm married to a wonderful man named Arinze. He's Igbo, like me, though both of his parents are Igbo, whereas only one of mine is. What's interesting is that he was born in Chad (2).

She peeked inside the ajar door. Inside was a conference room, and it seemed that just about all the men attending the wedding were in here, from the teenaged to the elderly, Nigerian to South African, Igbos and Yorubas to Zulus (13).

3. What do the above passages intimate about the geographical and cultural identity of Africa and Africans?

Suggested Close Reading Exercises

Read the following passage and pay attention to the use of alliteration and italics. Carefully consider that the passage is from an interview with Chinyere, Zelu's sister:

What *matters* is family. Without family, you're nothing. You're debris tumbling through space. Unseen, unconnected, uncollected, unknown, no matter how famous you are.

Zelu will always be *part* of our family. She will always be my sister. No matter what. Oh, it's been rough. The fact is that Zelu never really cared about family. Zelu had to do her thing (1).

1. Why do you think the novel begins with an interview? What patterns does the first interview set for the subsequent interviews throughout the *Death of the Author*?
2. What is the purpose of the alliteration, "unseen, unconnected, uncollected..." and the italics, "matters/part," in the passage? Do the two elements have any special significance?
3. In the larger context of the novel, what do the alliteration and italics that appear on the first page suggest about African/African diaspora family dynamics in narrative?

AFRICAN FICTION

Chapter 3 in *Death of the Author* introduces one of the novel's most central themes which is the significance of stories for Humes (robots) and humans. Ankara, the scholar Hume, makes two crucial points. First, it identifies how, with all the intelligence and love of the robots for stories, they could not only consume stories, copy and paste them, but "couldn't capture the narrative magic that humanity could wield" (30). Second, Ankara stresses that "Stories were the greatest currency to us, greater than power, greater than control.... To consume a story was to add to our code, deepen our minds" (30). The two points Ankara raises suggest that stories reflect the complexity and profundity of the creative human mind. Similarly, stories serve as one of the most potent ways humans (and robots) communicate and pass down their essence and history across generations. Essentially, the totality of human history will be lost forever without stories and nowhere is this power of storytelling more visible than in the history of African fiction.

Death of the Author is a part of the history of African literary fiction that explains the world through African perspectives. African stories, both the oral and later written forms of fiction, have been essential to transmitting cultural knowledge and ways of thinking. They carry the weight of African experiences, blending precolonial cultural heritage with colonial histories, as well as postcolonial life and the shifts taking place in an increasingly globalized world. Okorafor brings all of these to life in a novel that shows how African storytelling can re-invent the world.

For many new entrants to African fiction, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is widely recognized. It is one of the most taught African novels in the world. But it is part of a history of storytelling that has evolved into the contemporary moment from which *Death of The Author* emerged. Before *Things Fall Apart* was published in 1958, African writers had published novels for decades.

Earlier works like *Guanya Pau* (1891) by Joseph Jeffery Walters, *Chaka* by Thomas Mofolo (1925) and *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* by Amos Tutuola (1952) drew on existing archives of oral traditions that includes epics, myths, folklore, poetry. These novels had elements of fantasy and deep understanding of cultural knowledge, which the authors used to develop unique fictional worlds and critique the early institutionalizing and expansion of colonial power.

However, modern African fiction, beginning with *Things Fall Apart*, started to define and represent Africa's colonial and postcolonial challenges. This postcolonial anxiety can be described as questions surrounding the identity and culture of Africa and the African at the end of colonialism, and subsequently at the outset of independence in the continent. Apart from Achebe's first novel, other novels in this category include: Ousmane Sembène's *God Bits of Wood* (1960), Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not Child* (1964), Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* (1968), and several others. Because fiction became the avenue for thinking and representing the evolution of state and culture in postcolonial Africa, the genre then also served a pedagogical function, a form of education. Indeed, Chinua Achebe himself stated that the novelist is a teacher (See Achebe, "The Novelist as a Teacher.")

Within modern African fiction, an interesting kind of tradition called 'magical realism' developed, most notably with the publication of Ben Okri's *Famished Road* (1991). Put simply, magical realism refers to texts that blend magical elements with realistic and everyday occurrences, and in so doing, blur the boundaries between the magical world and the quotidian. Magical and fantastical elements are often a part of many African oral stories, and some of the early written fiction in African and colonial languages also draw on these fantastical elements in their narratives. It is therefore not surprising that some modern African fiction, which blends aspects of African cultural tradition with the modernist and realist form of the novel, also incorporate the elements of the supernatural and magical. Within magical realism, the terms, tradition and modernity (which represents the realist form of the novel) are to be seen as "mutually interconnected," not oppositional (See Ato Quayson, "Magical Realism and the African Novel"),

Therefore, magical realism is an attempt to appropriate the tools found in both African indigenous belief systems, and realist fiction for strategic contemporary purposes (See Ato Quayson, "Magical Realism and the African Novel"). In other words, what distinguishes the writing of Ben Okri from earlier African written fictions who also present elements of the fantastical is their thematic concerns around the representation of Africa's contemporary postcolonial challenges. It is also necessary to mention that magical realism as a form is not exclusive to Africa. The form is replete in writings from Latin America such as *The Kingdom of This World* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Alejo Carpentier and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, respectively.

To be clear, modern African fiction has always been infused with African indigenous knowledge systems in ways that stretch the notion of realism as it is known, for example, in British or American novels and literary traditions. To put it differently, while they adopt the realist tradition of the novel, many modern African fiction texts do not adhere strictly to realism as a genre of writing. Therefore, as a formal tradition within modern African fiction, magical realism pushes the limits of realism even further than the novels that emerged in mid-twentieth century.

Magical realism has also been compared and, arguably, seen as a precursor to African science fiction because the latter genre blends elements of the fantastic, that is often seen in magic realist texts, with techno-scientific elements and themes. In African science fiction, fantasy, realism, magic, and techno-science all intermingle to capture how African novelists have dealt with the question of genre. In the next sub-section, we will explore the meanings and interests of African science fiction, otherwise called ‘Africanfuturism,’ as genre.

Suggested In-Class Activity

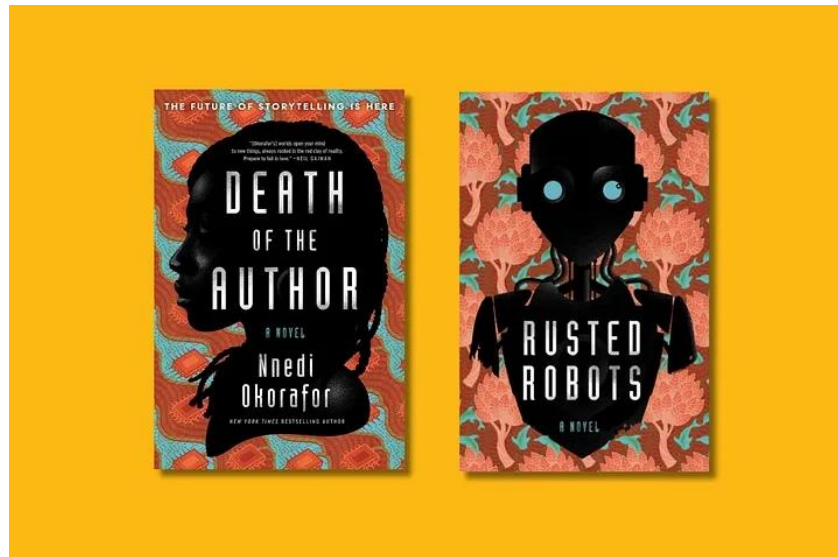
Rusted Robots in chapter 3 begins by stressing the importance of stories. It seeks to emphasize why we tell stories. Many other African writers have stressed the significance of stories. Chinua Achebe, for example, stated that “People create stories create people; or rather, stories create people create stories.” Chimamanda Adichie also gave a famous TED Talk titled, “The Danger of a Single Story.” The video of Adichie’s talk is available [here](#).

After playing the video, divide the class into groups and ask the students to ruminate on the following questions:

1. Whose stories do we tell and what are the dangers that come with losing a story?
2. How is Adichie’s understanding of the importance of a story similar or different from the Humes idea of a story?
3. Based on some of the issues Adichie raises alongside the polemics about stories that the Hume (Ankara) lays out, what are the roles of African stories in representing African culture and history?

AFRICANFUTURISM

As the previous section shows, for over a century African novelists have developed a rich tradition of experimenting with hybrid forms. One of the most complex and generative aspects of this tradition is the question of genre. From the beginning, African writers (having to draw from both indigenous oral traditions and the European novel), developed diverse formal and aesthetic practices for integrating seemingly distinct modes. Is *Death of the Author* a realist novel or sci-fi? Arguably, nothing summarizes the relationship between African fiction and African science fiction better than the way Okorafor invites us to ask such a question. This two-facedness of the novel is brilliantly captured in the two different covers of the novel. Depending on your version of the novel, you will likely have one cover with the title, *Death of the Author*, and the other bearing the title, *Rusted Robots*. The choice to use both covers that capture the two interwoven stories in the novel is Okorafor’s way of announcing an intersection and continuity between the realism of African fiction and the scientific fantasy of African science fiction.



In *Death of the Author*, Okorafor foregrounds the problematic of defining genre and the distinctions between them in African fiction. Thus, Africanfuturism as a genre allows her to present African fiction and African science fiction as parallel. And we can make this claim because Okorafor has been central to the development of African science fiction, and she was the one who coined the term, Africanfuturism.

In a blogpost in 2019, Okorafor defines the term she calls Africanfuturism. She writes, “Africanfuturism is a sub-category of science fiction.... Africanfuturism is similar to ‘Afrofuturism’ in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history, and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly 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” (See Nnedi Okorafor, [Africanfuturism Defined](#)). She continues, “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.” From the foregoing, we can deduce that Africanfuturism is defined alongside a parallel concept, ‘Afrofuturism.’ Afrofuturism was coined by cultural critic Mark Dery in 1994. He describes the term as “Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century techno-culture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future...” (See Mark Dery, “Black to the Future”).

While the identity of Blackness connects Afrofuturist and Africanfuturist narratives, part of their major difference is the experience of slavery and colonization. Most certainly, capitalism and racial ideologies underpin both the histories of slavery and colonization. The uneven power and social structures these histories created not only subjugated Africans and African Americans, it also obscured their contribution to knowledge and cultural productions. Hence the political and cultural urgency of Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism to center the experiences and narratives of Africans and African Americans. On this broad note—centering Black experiences and narratives—the visions of both Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism align. However, as Okorafor argues, these two genres of science fiction articulate the experiences and visions of blackness from different philosophical, geographical, mythological, and aesthetic perspectives. By insisting on this distinction, Okorafor reminds us not to flatten the diversity of

Blackness in a global context. Literature does not exist in a vacuum. The intersection of Blackness and the future through the form of science fiction and fantasy will look different in Africa, the Caribbean, Brazil, and the United States, and is rooted in distinct (though interconnected) histories, cultural worlds, social forces, and cosmological frameworks. Another way to think about this is to ask your students:

1. How is a movie like *Black Panther* both in conversation with and different from a novel like *Death of the Author*?
2. What assumptions do both stories have about the African world and its relationship to the US or global forces?

Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism are not opposites, rather their differences are only a reflection of “the sum of the varying experiences and the proceeding discourses and socio-political peculiarities [of Africans and African Americans] have ensured differing worldviews” (See James Osofo, *Moving the Center: Positions and Locations of African Speculative Fiction*).

Apart from the obvious techno-scientific elements in her work, other important thematic trends in Okorafor’s Africanfuturist texts include discussions about gender and cultural belonging and hybridity. In her representation of gender, Okorafor places female characters at the center of events in her stories that they become inseparable from our understanding of the narrative. In essence, Okorafor’s texts are not just African stories, they are stories of and about African women navigating the vagaries, stereotypes, and cultural barriers against women. These cultural barriers are often both Western and African, and we see this in how Zelu confronts challenges within both the United States and her own African family.

As a discourse about cultural belonging and hybridity, her novels articulate what it means to be someone who has been shaped by two different cultures. This influence of two cultures often creates a kind of hybridity—a mixture of cultures that result from encounters through migration, colonialism, slavery etc. Okorafor is someone who occupies this space of cultural hybridity as a Nigerian American. Zelu and most of the characters in the *Death of the Author* also represent this category of cultural hybridity. Moreover, by combining the realism of African fiction and the scientific fantasy of African science fiction, *Death of the Author* represents a fusion of genre that can make us say what we have in the novel is a hybridity of genre.

In this guide, we will look at disability representation and politics as another significant area of discussion in Okorafor’s novel. Robotics, technologies and visions of the future in Okorafor’s texts, including *Death of the Author*, should not distract readers from understanding the complex layers of contemporary cultural and political issues that her writings contribute to. For Okorafor, Africanfuturism is not an attempt to alienate us from the issues of the present, it is only a means of re-enchanting us to pertinent questions about culture, politics, and literary creativity that have been central to human interactions for centuries.

Suggested Discussion Questions

In an interview on Wisconsin Public Radio on 10 December 2022, Steve Paulson hosted Nnedi Okorafor and literary scholar, Ainehi Edoro to talk about Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism. Listen to the interview [here](#). Then answer the following questions:

1. After reading the first three chapters of the novel, what are the major differences African fiction and Africanfuturism? What similarities can you also identify between the two genres?
2. What are some of the features of Africanfuturism identifiable in chapter 3 of *Death of the Author*?

In-Class Activity

This activity is a debate centered on Ankara's (the Hume) assertion that "no automation, AI or machine, could create stories. Not truly" (30). For her, the ability to create stories is one of the things that distinguish humans from AI, machines, or robots. For the debate, students will be divided into groups where they will argue for or against the following prompt:

With the rise of AI technology in the world and the promise that the technology will only get smarter, do you agree with Ankara that only humans can truly create stories? Or do you believe that AI technologies can create stories as Compellingly as humans would?

UNIT ACITIVITIES AND PROJECT IDEAS

- Divide the class into small groups. Each group will find and read two Africanfuturist short stories written by two different authors. After reading, they will write an essay of no less than 750 words. In the essay, the students will analyze the elements of Africanfuturism in the texts by paying attention to the themes of the stories and their representations of Africa.

Students can begin their search to select two Africanfuturist short stories by looking at the [African Speculative Society Website](#), which features a published list of short stories they can review.

Students can also look at [Brittle Paper](#) is a foremost literary platform for African literature. Brittle Paper published the first ever anthology on Africanfuturism. Specifically, the blog published an anthology of Africanfuturist short stories in 2020. The anthology is still accessible on the website.

- This second project will suit students who like to create comics, cartoons, and graphic arts. For this project, students will work in groups of two or three to choose one African country and read about its history and culture. Using what they have learned, the students will develop a science fiction graphic narrative about a central figure (historical or mythical) in the culture and history of that country.

Along with the graphic narrative, the students will write an ‘Artist’s Introduction’ of 500-750 words where they will introduce the African country and their central figure. Students should explain the creative choices they made that qualifies their work as an Africanfuturist narrative. Students should feel free to use digital tools like Canva, Comic Life, Pixton, or any other digital platform that allows them to design their graphic form.

UNIT 2. DISABILITY WRITING

ABOUT THIS UNIT

Death of the Author is an important contribution to cultural texts that focus on the representation of disability in our contemporary society. In her novel, Okorafor shows examples of the prejudice and challenges that disabled people navigate such as invisibility and the lack of social awareness about the significance of prosthetic technologies for disabled people. The novel attempts to develop a careful and generative perspective about disability that confronts ableist rhetorics that have hurt people with disabilities.

Similarly, cultural representations about disability, like *Death of the Author*, are essential because people with disabilities remain largely invisible and are one of the most prejudiced groups across the world. Recognizing that people with disabilities constitute a significant part of the national and global population necessitates a reorientation about some political and cultural assumptions and attitudes towards disability. Some of these assumptions include the portrayal of people with disabilities as social burdens, the view that their bodies are deviations from the “normal” idea of the body, inaccessibility to adequate care and welfare, and inaccessible buildings and environments. *Death of the Author* also brings our attention to some of these cultural and political attitudes towards people with disabilities in our society.

This unit will look at the representation of disability in Okorafor’s novel and in our society. The first subsection, “Understanding Disability,” will examine the definitions and models of disability as well as provide important histories of disability rights and activism around the world. The discussion in this section will provide a critical background to understanding how questions about disability are both cultural and political concerns. The subsection encourages students to think about disability outside the world of the novel and see how everyday interactions, advertisements, images, and other media either heighten or mitigate prejudice against people with disabilities.

The second subsection, “Disability and Visibility,” places *Death of the Author* in broader conversation with how people with disabilities are seen or overlooked in both culture and politics. When we refer to visibility and invisibility, we simply mean how people with disabilities are seen, recognized, respected, and integrated into our society. As we will see in this subsection, prejudices, social structures, and cultural attitudes can easily render people with disabilities invisible. Questions about visibility and invisibility of people with disabilities are central to disability rights and justice, and essential to grasping the intricacies of their construction in *Death of the Author*.

In the final subsection, “Disability, Robotics, and Prosthetic Technologies,” we will examine the ways in which the techno-scientific discourse of African science fiction complicates our understanding of prosthesis and further creates a link between humans and machines. We will define prosthetics and outline their importance for people with disabilities. Then we will proceed to elucidate how Okorafor’s novel (and indeed, lots of other fantasy narratives), redefine the purpose of prosthetics. Can techno-scientific rendering of robotics and prosthetic technologies risk becoming an ableist representation of the body? How does robotics contribute to the questions and the complexities of visibility? The subsection will not

attempt to find easy answers to these questions, but it will provide guiding questions to help students think through the complex relationship between genre and political identity.

PREPARATORY AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Baker, Clare and Stuart Murray. “Disabling Postcolonialism: Global Cultures and Democratic Criticism.” *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2010, pp. 219-236.
- Eaton, William. “Disabled Persons Rally, Crawl Up Capitol Steps.” *Los Angeles Times*, 13 March. 1990.
- Eli Clare. “Notes on Natural Worlds, Disabled Bodies and the Politics of Cure.” *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*, Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara (eds), U of Nebraska P, 2017
- Habib, Dan and Samuel Habib. My Disability Roadmap. The New York Times. 17 May. 2022.
- Meekosha, Helen “Decolonising Disability: Thinking and Acting Globally.” *Disability and Society*, vol. 26, no. 6, 2011, pp. 667-682.
- Quayson, Ato. “The Repeating Island: Race, Difference, Disability, and the Heterogeneities of Robben Island’s History.” *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*, Ato Quayson. Columbia UP, 2007.
- Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin. *Keywords for Disability Studies*. New York UP, 2015.
- Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation. The Fundamental Principles of Disability. 22 Nov. 1976.
- Wong, Alice, Tiffany Peterson, and Linda Williams. “Invisible Disabilities.” Disability Visibility Podcast, 29 Jan. 2018.
- Wong, Alice (eds). *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century*. Vintage Books, 2020.

OPENING ACTIVITY

Disability: A Glossary of Terms

The goal of this activity is to educate students about key and appropriate terms used to address people with disabilities and also within disability studies. We recognize that the first place to start any conversation about disability is to learn some of the key terms that students might be aware of but may not know how to use correctly.

1. Divide the class into groups and ask the students to research for the definition of terms such as ableism, accessibility, disability, universal design, and others.
2. Ask students to share some of the things they learned about the terms they researched.

NOTE: The goal of this activity is not to criticize students about how they may have been using terms about disability inappropriately, but rather, to raise awareness of issues regarding disability rights and inclusion. Students should also note that there are some terms they will see that do not have one definitive usage or general acceptance. For example, in this unit, we use both “person/people with disabilities” and “disabled people/person.” The reason is because neither “people with disabilities” nor “disabled people” is universally accepted as the standard terms to be used. Some scholars have used any and/or both terms in their works. There are many other terms that are also not universally accepted. Therefore, what is important is not just the accuracy or acceptability of the terms, but also the awareness about what a given term represents within broader discussions about disability rights and inclusion.

UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY

In the introduction of this unit, we stated that there are different forms of disability that can be loosely classified under the broad categories of cognitive, hearing, mobility, vision, self-care, and independent living. Cognitive disabilities are wide ranging, and they include autism, dementia, ADHD, dyslexia, and a few other conditions. Amputation, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, paraplegia, and stroke are only a few examples of disabilities classified under mobility. At the same time, the long-term effects of some chronic diseases like asthma, Covid, Hansen’s disease (leprosy), diabetes, and arthritis often cause significant disabilities. Psychiatric disorders are also largely classified as disabilities. The examples listed as disabilities here are not exhaustive, but their range shows the broad nature of what constitutes disability.

Defining Disability

The Americans with Disability Act of 1990 remains the highest legislation on disability in the United States today (See Americans with Disability Act, 1990). The ADA is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against Americans with disabilities in “public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and many public and private places that are open to the general public” (See ADA, “What is the Americans with Disabilities Act?”). The law “guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, employment, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications” (ADA).

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a person is considered to have a disability if they meet any one of the following criteria:

1. Has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities (such as walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, or working).
2. Has a history or record of such an impairment (someone who had cancer that is now in remission).
3. Is perceived by others as having such an impairment (someone with visible scars from a past injury)

Although the law has become very popular today, it faced different opposition and delays after it was proposed, and it took a rally of disability rights activists in front of the Capitol building in Washington DC to ensure the passage of the law. The rally drew people with disabilities from at least 30 states in America. The disability activists, dropping off their crutches, wheelchairs, powerchairs and other devices, decided to crawl up the Capitol 100 steps of the building to show an example of the environmental barrier that they often confront (See William Eaton, “Disabled Persons Rally, Crawl Up Capitol Steps”). The rally was an example of how disability works as a site for activism and agitation for social inclusion.



An image from the Capitol Crawl Protest in March 1990 (See [LA County Department of Mental Health](#))



An Image from the second day of the Capitol Crawl Protest. This image shows activist occupying the Capitol's Rotunda (See [Disability Rights Florida](#))

The definition of disability in the 1990 act is intentionally broad to ensure protection against discrimination in areas such as employment, public services, transportation, and access to public accommodations. This description of disability offered by the Americans with Disability Act is similar but not the same with how disability is defined within the academic field of study which is referred to as disability studies.

Scholars in disability studies define disability not merely as a medical condition or physical impairment, but as a social, cultural, and political attitude and prejudice against people with disability. From a social perspective, disability is not located in the individual's body or mind, but in the environmental and attitudinal barriers that prevent full participation in society. These include inaccessible buildings, discriminatory policies, and social stigma. For example, a student with dyslexia may struggle in a traditional classroom. But if the school provides audio textbooks and flexible learning tools, the barrier is removed. From a social perspective, it is not dyslexia that disables the student, but the lack of accommodation. From a cultural and political perspective, disability is seen as a form of human diversity and identity. Within this perspective, disability is similar and intersects with class, ethnicity, gender, and race in ways that reveal systems of power and oppression.

In all these descriptions and perspectives, disability is not seen as a deficit or loss, and this is because social prejudice and discrimination against people with disability is based on the view that being disabled is a kind of abnormality or loss. Therefore, scholars of disability and legislations about disability counters these negative stereotypes by presenting disability as a state of being, and an identity that needs to be understood to guide against marginalization and discrimination against disabled people.

Suggested Discussion

Watch [this video](#) from the US Capitol Crawl protest in March 1990. In the video, different activists spoke about the need for a legislation for disabled people. After watching the video, ask the students following questions:

1. How did the physical act of crawling up the Capitol steps challenge public perceptions of disability? What assumptions about people with disabilities were being challenged by the protestors' actions?
2. Why do you think the protestors chose the U.S. Capitol as the site for their demonstration? What message were they trying to send to lawmakers?
3. What role did media coverage play in the impact of the Capitol Crawl? How might the protest have been received differently without it? In other words, what is significant about the media visibility of the disabled people who were protesting?
4. Apart from leading to the passage of the Americans with Disability Act, what other kinds of political influence did you think the protest have? Encourages critical thinking about cultural and political narratives.
5. What can we learn about disability today from the history of the protest?
6. In what ways do you think schools today can reflect on the values that the Capitol Crawl protests?

Disability vs. Impairment

Impairment is another term that is often used to describe the conditions of disability. To better understand the broad meaning of disability, let us look at how it relates to and differs from impairment. "Impairment refers to the specific physical or cognitive deficiency that leads to a reduced capacity to fully actualize all aspects of one's life." (See Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness*). Impairment is regarded as more appropriate than terms like handicapped and deformed (See Michael Ralph, "Impairment," *Keywords for Disability Studies*). On the other hand, disability refers to the processes, often social, environmental, and political structures, that worsens the effect of impairments and thereby causing further inhibition for people with impairments (See Ato Quayson; Michael Ralph).

Let us attempt to distinguish the terms with a common example. A person who uses a wheelchair likely has an impairment associated with mobility. For such a person to conveniently move around with their wheelchair, they would need access to ramps or elevators. However, when there are neither ramps nor elevators to ease the movement of that person, then the lack of those structures has become a disability for the person. This example shows that disability is not just about a person's body. It is also about how the environment is built in a way that includes or excludes them. In other words, how we define disability informs how we build the world around us, and what we build affects who gets to participate fully in the world.

However, although the terms impairment and disability can be separated, they are also often used interchangeably. This is because more often than not, impairment may not be easily separable from the social, environmental, and political discourse within which it exists. In other words, “*both* impairment and disability are social; simply trying to determine what constitutes impairments makes clear that impairment doesn’t exist apart from social meanings and understandings” (See Alison Kaefer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*).

Historically, the move to distinguish between impairment and disability, while also attempting to define disability, was spurred by one of the earliest activist waves on disability rights that occurred in Britain in the 1970s. This activist movement led to the social model of disability. In general, when we talk about models of disability, we mean different ways of defining and thinking about what disability means and how it works in society.

Suggested In-class Activity

ADA Design and the School Environment: Students will examine key sections of the ADA standards for accessible design and analyze how the law influences the design and accessibility of school buildings and facilities. They will reflect on how these standards promote equity and inclusion for students with disabilities.

1. Divide students into small groups.
2. Assign each group a section of the ADA Standards for Accessible Design. Using this [accessibility checker website](#), each group can choose to study spaces such as Site Arrival Points, Exterior Routes, Interior Routes, Libraries, Cafeteria, Gymnasium, and other options provided on the website.
3. Have students read and summarize the requirements for the part of the school they have chosen. Ask each group to identify and analyze spaces that they have studied in the school to see how it meets the ADA standards. In their analysis, let them answer the following prompts:
 - a. What does the ADA require for this part of the school?
 - b. Why might these requirements be important? What specific features create access or barriers?
 - c. How does this promote inclusion?
4. In spaces that may not meet ADA standards, ask students to propose one change that will make the space more accessible. Debrief: How has the exercise and assessment of the built environment changed your definition and understanding of impairment and disability?

DISABILITY AND VISIBILITY

In *Death of the Author*, Okorafor presents issues about disability and invisibility as one of the core ideas that about disability discourse in cultural productions and political activism. Examine the following two passages from the novel:

She'd wheeled herself into the middle of the middle of the room, observing everyone, yet feeling... disconnected. She had such great news, huge news, mind-blowing news, but she hadn't shared it yet, and no one had noticed her. She was alone. (69)

It was a great moment, even in her affected state of mind. The pause before anyone reacted was one she'd remember for a long time. In that pause, she was certain her family finally heard her, saw her, understood that all her prior nonsense had been leading down path she was meant to be on. However, it was only a moment. (72).

The two excerpts, taken from Chapter 9 of the novel, portray Zelu as lonely, unnoticed, and dismissed, if not invisible. Even after the novel mentions that Zelu's family finally recognizes her, their recognition is fleeting. Despite her announcing her enormous achievement, she remains at the periphery of her family's interests due to her disability. Her disability, more than any other thing such as her choice of career, embrace of technology, disinterest in marriage, or drug usage, underlies most of her conflict with her family. Zelu's family dynamic represents the ways in which people with disabilities often remain largely anonymous in their familial, cultural, social, and political contexts.

Questions about the invisibility of disability have been central to disability rights and activism because they reflect larger social-political forms of exclusion that people with disabilities regularly confront. By definition, "Invisibility refers to the absence of disability from the conversations and activities that establish the way a society functions, encompassing social relationships, intellectual and artistic work, and politics" (See Susannah B. Mintz, "Invisibility"). Invisibility surfaces in the erasure of people with disabilities from cultural and political histories. Histories of national formation of states hardly feature participations or contributions of people with disabilities. When such people are featured, their disabilities are typically framed as something they "overcame," which then allowed them to contribute to their society.

Disability is also made invisible through analysis of cultural forms like literature, film, comics and other forms of media where representations of disability are interpreted as metaphoric. In the analysis of cultural forms that take disability as metaphoric, disabled people are taken as indications of something else, say, a social milieu or cultural limitation. For example, a character whose legs are crippled and lives in precarity in a play may be interpreted as a symbol of the 'crippling' economy and the subsequent poverty that comes with economic collapse. This kind of interpretation takes the material and embodied experience of the character in the play for granted and sidesteps it to make a claim about social and economic instability. What such interpretation therefore achieves is an erasure of disability (See David T Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*).

Death of the Author confronts this issue of invisibility of disabled people throughout the novel. By centering a protagonist who is disabled, the novel draws attention to disability and makes it difficult to interpret the character as a reference to something or someone else. Zelu influences both the reading and the popular culture of American society through the success of her book, its adaptation to a movie, and the

social media engagement about her work and her exoskeleton. *Death of the Author* therefore stages a significant conversation about visibility of disabled people because “If invisibility is ... associated with a lack of political and social agency, becoming visible would imply gaining a measure of legitimacy, whether as a result of community effort or by making oneself known through activism, art, or research... (See Susannah B. Mintz, “Invisibility”). Zelu gains visibility through her art and offers a counterpoint to invisibility.

Suggested Close-Reading Exercise

Consider the following passages from the *Death of the Author*:

It was a great moment, even in her affected state of mind. The pause before anyone reacted was one she’d remember for a long time. In that pause, she was certain her family finally heard her, saw her, understood that all her prior nonsense had been leading down path she was meant to be on. However, it was only a moment (72).

Zelu shrank back, digging her nails into her palms. Her family *knew* how popular her book was, but still, they couldn’t stop seeing her as the child who fell from the tree and needed help just to go to the bathroom (133).

To stay in my place in the family. Sometimes, they expect me to stay invisible. I know my parents do. Invisible enough that no one will start asking questions and look at me so closely that they remember that an Onyenezi-Onyedele is “crippled” (144).

Divide the class into small groups and assign these passages to them. Ask the students to answer the following questions:

1. Identify specific words from the passages that convey ideas about the invisibility and visibility of disability.
2. Why do you think the words you have selected convey ideas about visibility and invisibility of disability?
3. How does Zelu’s family’s relationship with her reveal wider social perceptions about disability invisibility?
4. Beyond these three passages above, identify other passages within the novel that also elucidate ideas about disability, visibility, and invisibility.

DISABILITY, PROSTHETICS, AND ROBOTICS

Death of the Author is a disability narrative that centers questions about prosthetics and robotics in ways that animate discussions about the intersections of disability, medicine, and technology. Prosthetics has at least two interrelated meanings. One, it refers to “artificial body parts, devices, and materials that are integrated into the body’s daily routines” (See Katherine Ott, “Prosthetics.”) It also refers to assistive devices that enable people to undertake a particular task. As assistive devices, prosthetics help with communication, mobility, sensory support, and a host of other tasks. Prosthetics vary according to the body parts or tasks that they perform. Some prosthetics are integrated to body parts, others are implanted, attachable and detachable, wearable, etc. Examples of prosthetics can include: “peg legs, split-hook hands, and myoelectric limbs that yoke nerve signals from remaining muscles, to artificial skin, replaced

hip joints, eyeglasses, hearing aids, strap- on penises, and reconstructed bones. Some prosthetics use sensory feedback, thought control, or neuronal elements to move limbs, process speech, or simulate vision” (See Katherine Ott, “Prosthetics.”)

While there are different types of prosthetics as has been listed above, the boom of prosthetics and the development of body parts is partly connected to the history of warfare in the twentieth century. The injured veterans of World War I and II needed different kinds of prosthetics and rehabilitation. Scholars have pointed out that the aftermath of World War II led to significant advancements in biomechanics, which in turn led to the integration of robotics into prosthetics (See Katherine Ott, David Serlin and Stephen Mihm, *Artificial Parts, Practical Lives: Modern Histories of Prosthetics*). However, the advancement of biomechanics and robotics equally meant that prosthetics became associated with the medicalization of disability. Prosthetics became a way of attempting to cure and fix so-called “abnormal” bodies. Ironically, people with disabilities who use prosthetics were still seen as abnormal within their society because of their reliance on prosthetic technologies only served to highlight what society already classified as bodily deficiency. Therefore, the medical discourse that positions prosthetics as a way to fix bodies ultimately falls apart when understood within broader social and political attitudes about disability.

Prosthetics have material significance and are essential for the daily needs and functions of people with disabilities. However, in several cultural narratives, productions, and popular imagination, prosthetics are often used to present the image of a cyborg, a human with enhanced and extraordinary physical abilities through technological and mechanical elements built into their body. Such devices transform the disabled or chronically ill person into a superhuman or even a superhero. Think of the famous Tony Stark in Marvel’s movie series, *Iron Man*. The initial reason that made Tony Stark develop the arc reactor that powers the iron man suit was to prevent the shards of shrapnel in his heart from killing him. Tony Stark himself, when asked about the iron man suit in a testimony before the US senate committee, says, “it is basically a high-tech prosthesis” (See Jon Favreau, *Iron Man 2*). His statement is true because while the suit technology gave him the fame and glamour of a superhero, the primary reason Stark decided to create it was because of survival. However, the superhuman abilities of the iron man suit was more fascinating to everyone in the world of the movie, while Tony Stark’s debilitating health condition which necessitated the arc reactor and, subsequently the suit, became insignificant.

The example of how prosthetics and robotics is presented in *Iron Man* raises a challenge: the primary and everyday functionality of prosthetics can easily be made invisible when said prosthetics endows the disabled person with superhuman strength. Notably, the whole *Iron Man* franchise is also built on this superhuman and superhero achievements of a character who has a significant health condition. Therefore, it is not the society in the movie’s world that are fascinated with the superhuman enhancements of Tony Stark’s prosthetics, many consumers of the movie (and comics) franchise today also easily see superpower, not necessarily the survival from the precarious condition that the prosthetics ensures.

As a cultural production like *Iron Man*, *Death of the Author* equally provides the perspective of prosthetics for daily movement and access, while also hinting at how Zelu’s exoskeleton endows her with a superhuman enhancement in Chapter 40 when she runs away from her kidnappers. The rapturous response of the online community and the subsequent commercial success of the exoskeleton following Zelu’s almost superhuman feet indicates how popular perception can easily erase the quotidian usefulness

of prosthetics and even the experience of the person with disabilities in favor of the enhanced human potentials that robotics technologies can unlock.

In analyzing the cultural representations of disability, prosthetics, robotics, the question of form and genre is also crucial. Let us make this point by going back to *Iron Man* and *Death of the Author*. Arguably, the fantasy and sci-fi genre of *Iron Man* is one of the reasons that people will easily tend to downplay the functionality of prosthetics as against the superpower it grants. The non-realist nature of fantasy means most people watching the film will be more enamored by the otherworldly and superhuman representations in the film. The genre does not necessarily need to take its audience to task about the material significance of prosthetics to people with disabilities, and therefore, even when disability is presented, it is interpreted as a metaphor for something else, something more fantastical such as a superhero like the Iron man (See Stuart Murray, *Disability and the Posthuman*).

However, on the other hand, in *Death of the Author*, a novel that combines the realist mode with science-fiction, the use of prosthetics only occurs in the realist genre of the text. In placing prosthetics within a realist framing, Okorafor attempts to show an experience of disability that should not be interpreted as a metaphor, while also portraying the importance of prosthetic technologies for the daily use of people with disabilities. To be clear, the idea that disability can be interpreted as a metaphor because it is represented in science fiction and the fantasy genre is part of a larger problem of disability invisibility. Glossing over how prosthetics create access and support the various tasks of people with disabilities in favor of enhancement of human strength is not statutory. Therefore, the problem is not simplistically about the genre; it is the penchant to gloss over disability, to see through it, and use it to explain something seemingly more grandiose and more fitting into social constructions of human and bodily eminence.

Suggested In-class Activity

Re-read Chapters 16, 18, and 22. These chapters introduce Hugo, the exoskeletons, and people's (her family and bystanders) reactions to Zelu's use of prosthetics.

1. Divide the class into groups, discuss the following questions:
 - a. In the chapters you have read, what were the general assumptions about prosthetics? Was it seen as a cure or something abominable?
 - b. Is prosthetics presented as a restorative device? Is it something to enhance human capacity like the arc reactor in *Iron Man*? Or is it presented as both restorative and enhancing?
 - c. How did the prosthetic technology affect the visibility of Zelu?
2. After the group discussion, the whole class should consider the following the questions:
 - a. How do prosthetics and robotics challenge traditional ideas of the human body in the novel?
 - b. Can prosthetics unintentionally reinforce ableist ideas such as curing disability? What does the novel suggest about this possibility?
 - c. How should schools and public spaces adapt to support both assistive and enhancing technologies?

UNIT ACTIVITIES AND PROJECT IDEAS

Book Review: Write a review of *Death of the Author* where you explain how the novel uses prosthetic technologies and robotics to illustrate the complicated issues about disability, visibility and invisibility. Use textual evidence from the novel to exemplify your viewpoint. You may also read reviews written about other novels to get an example of how book reviews are written. Some examples include *The Fault in Our Stars* (2014), *The Hate U Give* (2017), *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018).

Podcast on Disability: Record an episode of a podcast where you will discuss issues relating to disability and invisibility. Your conversation should include a section about invisible disabilities and how people who have such disabilities are often marginalized and treated with suspicion. The episode may also feature discussions about how disability is made invisible in public discourse and history. You might decide to start with a game where you will name national heroes and leaders who have disabilities and how they have been remembered in national histories. Are their disabilities mentioned? If they are, are they mentioned as something they overcame which suggests an ableist perspective to narrating the experience of people's disabilities.

To prepare for the project you can do the following:

1. Listen to [this podcast](#) on *Death of the Author* where Nnedi Okorafor talks about many aspects of the book, including disability. You can also listen to the Disability Visibility podcast, [here](#), and you can listen to the Disability History Association podcast [here](#).
2. Try to answer the following questions in your podcast episode:
 - a. What does “invisibility” mean in the context of disability, and how does it show up in everyday life?
 - b. Can you share a moment when you or someone you know (a historical figure or literary character like Zelu) felt unseen or unheard because of a disability?
 - c. How do media and pop culture contribute to the invisibility—or visibility—of people with disabilities?
 - d. What role does the built environment (like schools, public spaces, or transportation) play in making disability visible or invisible?
 - e. Are there specific policies or laws (like the ADA) that have helped address invisibility? Where do they fall short?
 - f. What can schools, communities, and media creators do to make disability more visible in empowering ways?
3. The time limit of the podcast should be between 8-12 minutes. You can record using your phones and laptops. To edit your recording, you can use a software like Audacity, Garageband, and Adobe Audition.

UNIT 3. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND *DEATH OF THE AUTHOR*

ABOUT THE UNIT

In this unit, we will examine the title of the novel and how it relates to the narrative, especially with a focus on the depiction of artificial intelligence (AI). Nnedi Okorafor states in her post about the book on 17 June, 2024, that the title of the novel, *Death of the Author*, is inspired by an essay of the same title by French philosopher and literary theorist, Roland Barthes. The essay, published in 1967, makes the controversial claim that in studying or interpreting a work of literature, what the author thinks of the work or what we imagine the author intended for the world should not matter. Since its publication, the essay has generated both positive and negative responses from writers, literary critics, and scholars. Because the essay also inspired the title of Okorafor's novel, we will do a short review of the essay in the first subsection, "Reviewing Barthes' Death of the Author."

Even though Barthes' essay inspired Okorafor's novel, the novel adds an interesting perspective to the conversation about the primacy or not of the author in literary writing through its depiction of AI. Therefore, the second subsection, "The Author and Artificial Intelligence," will examine how the notion of the death of the author is relevant to the rise of AI and creativity. We will look at what some writers think about AI and creativity and study how Okorafor's novel both teases out and complicates the relationship between authorship and AI, and its implications for the idea of the "death of the author."

PREPARATORY AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *The Rustle of Language*, Roland Barthes, Richard Howard (trans), New York, 1986.
- Eff, Myk. "AI and the Rebirth of the Death of the Author: The Informational Advantages of Statistically Average Writing." 20 Aug. 2024. <https://medium.com/higher-neurons/ai-and-the-rebirth-of-the-death-of-the-author-the-informational-advantages-of-statistically-3777a277287e>
- Gunkel, David. "AI Signals the Death of the Author." *Noēma*, 4 June 2025. <https://www.noemamag.com/ai-signals-the-death-of-the-author/>
- Luccioni, Sasha. "AI is Dangerous, but Not for the Reasons You Think." *TED TALKS* 6 Nov. 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXdVDhOGqoE>
- Okorafor, Nnedi. "AI to Support & Not Replace Artists." 9 Nov. 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbJGejRAkfl&t=7s>

OPENING ACTIVITY

In November 2023, Okorafor granted an interview where she states her position concerning the role of AI in creativity. In the interview, Okorafor maintains that AI would only support and not replace artists.

Begin the class by watching the interview [here](#). After watching the interview, invite the students to share their views concerning the role of AI in creative activities such as writing stories and visual arts by answering the following questions:

1. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of AI in creativity?
2. Are there parts of Okorafor's views concerning the role of AI that you agree or disagree with? If so, share why.
3. In your opinion, how do you think AI can affect our understanding of creativity?

REVIEWING BARTHES' DEATH OF AUTHOR

In the last chapter and final page of *Death of the Author*, the novel presents a response to Barthes essay. After stating the title of her story, "Death of the Author," the reasons she chose the title, and how different types of automations have responded enthusiastically and positively to the story, Ankara says, "My novel has sparked a great change. How amazing! I have come to understand that the author, art, and audience all adore one another. They create a tissue, a web, a network. No death is required for this form of life" (435). Ankara's conclusion highlights three components that were also the basis of Barthes's argument in his essay: author, art (text), audience (reader). However, while Ankara sees an inseparable connection and importance of these three components, Barthes dismisses the author and favors the text and reader.

To understand how Okorafor's novel responds to Barthes, let us quickly review the 1967 essay. The essay, "The Death of the Author" is one of Barthes's most influential works. In the essay, Barthes argues that traditional ways of studying literature or making sense of literary texts puts too much focus on the author when interpreting texts. Barthes argues that the text, and the readers, are the ones who give meaning to a work of literature.

He begins his argument by stating that it is difficult to know who exactly is speaking when we hear characters expressing views in a text. We cannot conclude whether it is simply the character that is speaking, the author speaking through the character, or if the character is expressing a universally received wisdom. Rather than assume or find out who is speaking, Barthes argues that "We can never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, every origin. Writing is that neuter, that composite, that obliquity into which our subject flees, the black-and-white where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes" (49).

Barthes argues that historically, the author is just a mere mediator, a person through whom a story/narrative is produced. Because the author is only a mediator, it must not dictate the understanding of the narrative. The author, Barthes says, is only a "modern character... produced by our society as it emerged from the Middle Ages... [and] discovering the prestige of the individual, or, as we say more nobly, of the "human person" (49-50). By stating that it is a product of social and philosophical changes, Barthes challenges the historical validity of the identity of the author. Even though the author has no historical validity, Barthes criticizes how "the image of literature... found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions..." This might seem like a strange claim to make, but Barthes is simply drawing our attention to the fact that we need to also

question what we think we know of the author. Just as our understanding of a literary text evolves through time, what we “know” of the author also changes. If the author is as unstable as the text as a space of meaning, we need to be mindful of granting authors the sovereign power to define the meaning of a text.

Instead of the author, Barthes says that it is the text that speaks, and a text is a summation of different cultural codes and ideas. This submission about the preeminence of the text has two implications:

1. The first implication is that no idea is original or exclusive to any author. An author is at best an imitator of other people and sources of culture.
2. The second implication is that since a text is a pool of cultural codes, it is open to many meanings and interpretations. For Barthes, “[T]o assign an Author to a text is to impose a brake on it, to furnish it with a final signified [meaning], to close writing.” On the contrary, when the author is taken away, the reader can appreciate the layers of meanings and cultural ideas that constitute the text in the first place.

The final point Barthes makes in his essay is about the importance of the reader in the interpretation of texts. According to Barthes, the “reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any of them being lost, all the citations out of which a writing is made... [the reader is] *someone* who holds collected into one and the same field all of the traces from which writing is constituted.” The relationship between the reader and the text is the most important, and therefore, Barthes concludes his essay, “the birth of the reader must be requited by the death of the Author.” Barthes concluding sentence, placed side by side with Ankara’s submission, “the birth of the reader must be requited by the death of the Author/“No death is required for this form of life,” shows how the novel directly responds to the essay.

Ankara’s submission insists on the co-existence of the author, text, and readers because each of these components provide open-ended interpretations and understanding of a text. Understanding the author’s life, culture, and background can help in analyzing different cultural codes, metaphors, and symbols that are present in the text. Similarly, a text is an invitation to a dialogue and a conversation between readers and the author. It is this dialogue that we find at the end of the novel: “All of automation wants to discuss my story. They have many questions for me, and I haven’t answered them yet. And when I continue to not answer, they’ll probably start seeking out and talking to each other instead. Good.” (435). The novel ends by highlighting this dialogue that takes place between Ankara and her readers, and possibly among the readers also to show that part of the significance of a text is the conversations that it generates. Zelu’s novel also generates conversations too. People dialogue Zelu’s novel online, she meets people who also want to talk to her about the work. These conversations are a part of worldmaking that storytelling ensures. They enrich the experience of the readers about the text, and the world being reflected by the text. To return to Ankara’s submission, the strength of this dialogue is based on the coexistence, not the death, of the author, text, and reader.

However, the essay and the novel are not different in all regards, they overlap regarding the place of the cultural text. Okorafor’s text is carefully designed, to paraphrase Barthes, as a site where multiplicity of genres and cultures are collected for the reader to untangle. This multiplicity of genres makes Okorafor’s *Death of the Author*, an intriguing text that provides insights about African culture in the diaspora, and about the fluidity of literary forms. Analyzing the novel either from the perspective of literary fiction or African speculative fiction, as seen in the stories of Zelu and Ankara, provides layers of interpretations that can expand one’s understanding and appreciation of literature. Therefore, while we can easily identify how the novel differs from the essay’s position about the author, the significance of the text is one of the areas where both Barthes and Okorafor align.

Suggested In-class Activity

Interpreting a Text without the Author: Students will explore Barthes' argument that the author's intentions, identity, or background should not control the interpretation of a text and will practice analyzing texts independently of authorial context.

1. Briefly introduce Roland Barthes and the core idea of *The Death of the Author* using this [video](#).
2. Divide the class into small groups and ask students to analyze the passage below without revealing the author (**The excerpt is taken from Nnedi Okorafor's memoir, *Broken Places Outer Spaces***).

Now, I felt another, deeper sense of doneness. Something was finished. Something was broken. Something was hurting. Badly. The pain was deeper than anything I'd ever experienced. So painful that I couldn't even pinpoint where it was coming from. Things were melting together and falling apart. I didn't want to come up the well, but I did. I found a strong foothold and started climbing. Hospital bed. I groaned. I opened my eyes. It was time to get up. I couldn't get up (22-23).

3. In their analysis, the students should do the following:
 - a. Interpret the text: What themes, emotions, or ideas emerge?
 - b. Discuss how they arrived at their interpretation.
 - c. Share different readings and perspectives.
4. Reveal the author's identity and background.
5. Ask students the following questions:
 - a. Does knowing the author change or expand your interpretation and understanding of the text?
 - b. If it does, what exactly does it change about your understanding about the text?
 - c. Can a text have multiple valid meanings, for example, those meanings you get without knowing the author and the ones you get after knowing the author?
 - d. Judging from this exercise, do you agree with Barthes? Why or why not?

STORYTELLING IN THE AGE OF AI

At least twice in *Death of the Author*, Ankara, emphasizes that automation could not create stories like humans could. In chapter 3, Ankara says, "no automation, AI or machine, could create stories. Not truly. We could pull from existing datasets, detect patterns, then copy and paste them in a new order, and sometimes that seemed like creation. But this couldn't capture the narrative magic that humanity could wield" (30). Similarly, in chapter 49, the Hume repeats the same idea when she says, "Narrative is one of the key ways automation defines the world. Stories are what holds all things together... But true storytelling has always been one of the few great things humanity could produce that no automation could" (412). These statements by the Hume which suggests that the capacity for creating stories is one of

the things that significantly differentiates humans from robots is particularly important with the rise in the use of artificial intelligence in our contemporary society. Additionally, with these statements, the novel emphasizes the significance of humans as authors, thereby adding another layer to Barthes essay.

The rise of artificial intelligence, especially in relation to storytelling, has received lots of recent attention. In September 2023, George R.R. Martin, the author of *A Game of Thrones*, and many other famous writers signed a lawsuit against OpenAI, the maker of ChatGPT for property and intellectual theft (See Gerrit De Vynck, 'Game of Thrones' author and others accuse ChatGPT maker of 'theft' in lawsuit). The premise for the lawsuit is that AI tools are trained with published books without permission of these authors, therefore, "[Book] authors and publishers are ... pushing for laws to prevent use of published works for AI projects without permission. Artists, musicians, newspapers, photographers and bloggers have also filed claims" (See Will Oremus, AI guzzled millions of books without permission. Authors are fighting back). The lawsuit recalls the idea of "the death of the author," but with completely different stakes. Authors have become increasingly concerned about the ways AI intersects with creative work. While much of the public discussion centers on plagiarism and loss of income (concerns that are both valid and urgent) the dispute also raises larger existential questions about what it means to be an author, how storytelling is defined, and the fragile place of the creative arts in the age of AI.

In *Death of the Author*, the Hume's reflections on narrative invite us to consider this deeper view, linking the question of authorship in the AI era to the novel's broader exploration of how stories hold worlds together. It is against this background about undermining the role of authors and the imitative reproduction of texts that we can approach Ankara's comments above. Like Humes and automation, AI tools simply, "pull from existing datasets, detect patterns, then copy and paste them in a new order, and sometimes that seemed like creation," but as Ankara notes, this is not creation, it is an imitation. Therefore, we could say that *Death of the Author* is intervening in a contemporary discourse about the differences between human creation of stories and AI's imitations of the same. Ankara's insistence on human creativity suggests that the role of human authors cannot be replaced by AI. Perhaps, one question being provided by Okorafor's novel is to interrogate the differences between creation and imitation, and its implications for our appreciation of stories.

But is Hume's statements simply drawing a fence around "human storytelling" to say, "AI can't do this?" We could begin there, but in order to understand the complexities of how Okorafor's text is posing the question of AI, we would need to move beyond this binary. The way Ankara and the Hume talk about storytelling makes it feel less like "stringing events together" and more like a force that organizes reality, a structuring energy, almost a cosmological function. When Ankara says automation can "pull from datasets" but can't create the "narrative magic that humanity could wield," Akara seems to be referring to something more than a literal skill gap between humans and machines. We could read it as an invitation to think of storytelling as something larger than the delivery of content, something that grounds the work of worldbuilding and holds things together at the level of meaning and connection. Philosophers call these cosmological and epistemological elements, but it simply means that storytelling is ultimately how we

configure the world and render it as something that we can know. Ankara is suggesting that those processes would always be the domain of the human. In that light, the AI conversation in the book is not really about whether machines can “write like us.” It’s about what counts as storytelling at all. If storytelling is a way of making the world cohere, of generating value and relation from lived experience, then copying patterns or remixing data is not the same thing. The novel seems to suggest that storytelling is closer to aligning imagination, emotion, and shared life than it is to simply producing a text. However, the fact that AI tools are trained with millions of cultural texts means they can become a repository that preserves and presents different historical, social, and cultural perspectives. In *Death of the Author*, Udide is an example of an automation that is a repository of knowledge: “Udide listened, learned, and acted by travelling across West Africa” (47). Udide in the novel is a synthesis of human cultures and robotic technology, and even though the robot could not create stories, its vast body of knowledge about humans and automations becomes important in the events that unfold in *Rusted Robots*. Ankara is another example of a repository of knowledge. Ankara along with Ijele, the Ghost, were the last automations to see Ngozi, the last human alive. Ankara listened to Ngozi’s stories, and “wealth of memories... [as] the last primary source of human memories on Earth” (121). The encounter with Ngozi profoundly changes Ankara, and this is why the Hume is able to create a story at the end of the novel (433).

The point here is that Okorafor’s novel does not dismiss AI, and at the same time, it does not think artificial intelligence can replace humans. Rather, the novel presents AI as a collaborator and an extension of humans. The relationship the novel provides between humans and AI is much like the interrelated relationship between the author, art, and audience. Therefore, instead of using automations and AI to signal the death of the author, Okorafor’s novel insists that humans are also the authors of automations, and thus, automations are part of the stories of humans. Ankara makes this point very clearly in the final chapter (51) of the novel:

When I was more than halfway finished with it, I paused and looked out into the forest. And then the title came to me easily enough: *Death of the Author*. I liked this title because our authors, the humans, have died off. But we have remained. *We* are their stories.

In the last days of humanity, humans cultivated a growing disdain for their own soul. Many didn’t even believe in the sanctity of the creative process anymore; they wanted to eliminate it and usher in automation to do the work. But it didn’t go the way the humans wanted or expected; creativity meant experiencing, processing, understanding human joy and pain. For a robot to create like a human, humanity had to ensure that a piece of themselves could live in *us*.

Death of the Author. My novel’s title carried Ngozi’s spirit, too. She was the one who started all this, by saving me and bringing Ijele into my world. Ngozi changed us. And then she died. She was the end of humanity. But she was also the beginning of something new.

Okorafor’s novel redefines the so-called “death” in *Death of the Author*. The death here is not metaphoric. Through the Africanfuturist genre of *Rusted Robots*, Okorafor is able to present death as an actual event and the extinction of humans from the planet earth. Nevertheless, the novel is apt to show that actual death of humans/authors, does not mean humans’ creativity dies with them. Their creativity and stories remain crucial: it was this story of humans that Ankara brings to light that saves the planet from eventual destruction from the Chargers. Intriguingly, the main character in Ankara’s story is Zelu, a storyteller, an author who had written about Ankara. Zelu’s story about Ankara, and Ankara’s story about Zelu shows an

intertwined relationship between humans and automations. Since Ankara says automations are the stories of humans, perhaps, we can suggest that the Hume's story is simply a continuation of Zelu's.

Suggested Discussion Questions

Watch this [video](#) about some of the challenges of AI systems, paying specific attention to what the speaker, Sasha Luccioni, says about artist's creative works. As we have mentioned above, at stake in arguments by authors and creative artists is not only the protection of individual works, but also a deeper question about stories and storytelling in a world where machines can generate convincing text. After watching the video discuss the following questions:

1. What makes a story truly authored, and what role does the human storyteller still play?
2. If AI can rearrange language in convincing ways, does that mean it is telling stories? Or is storytelling something more?
3. Could Ankara's view that stories emerge from lived experience, cultural ties, and human imagination be the difference between human stories and those generated by AI?
4. What other ways can you compare the works produced by humans and those generated by AI? For example, from the video, can you compare their impact on the environment as something to carefully consider?

Suggested Close Reading Exercises

Ask students to read chapter 51, the final chapter of the novel paying attention to the content and form. This chapter is significant for at least two reasons. One, its heading is the title of the novel, and it provides ideas about the possible meanings of the novel's title while also bringing a sense of finality to the narrative. Two, the chapter provides insights into the content of the story that a robot has written and its effect on other automations. The chapter starts with four short sentences, "I didn't write because I had to. I wrote because I *wanted* to. Something in me *needed* to. I began to do what no robot had ever done" (432). These sentences express Ankara's perspective about the reason for writing her novel.

1. Carefully consider the two italicized words in the passage, "*wanted*" and "*needed*." What is the significance of the two words? Read alongside the four other sentences, what kinds of meanings do the two words help to convey about Ankara's attempt to create a story?
2. Focusing on the entirety of chapter 51, what does the passage suggest about the relationship between Zelu and Ankara in the novel?

The following sentences end the chapter: I've acquired a unique skill; dare I call it an art? I've proven to myself something that humanity could never bring itself to believe. Writing my novel taught this to me, as well: creation flows both ways.

3. What does "creation flows both ways" mean in the passage? And how does that meaning shape your understanding of the novel?
4. Identify some of the effects Ankara's story has on other automations.

UNIT ACTIVITIES AND PROJECT IDEAS

Creating an Original Graphic Novel: Read the conversation between Ankara and Uside from page 409–413. This conversation was important because it was part of what spurred the story that Ankara eventually writes. Create a comic strip or an animation that is centered on the conversation between Ankara and Uside.

Tips for creating the comic strip:

1. Part of the goal of this activity is to see how you visualize the differences between the two automations: Ankara and Uside. How does the novel suggest Ankara looks like, and how does Uside look like? Use the description of the two automations to design your comic strip.
2. Summarize the conversation creatively. You are not supposed to include everything Ankara and Uside said to one another, rather try to summarize and paraphrase that conversation, bring out the core ideas they shared about stories and creativity.

Interview Exercise: Conduct interviews with family and friends asking them what they think about the role of AI in contemporary society. Consider asking them the following questions:

1. What do the interviewees generally think about AI?
2. How often do they use AI tools?
3. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of AI?
4. Do you think that AI replacing humans in some tasks is a genuine risk or an advantage? can replace humans in specific

To present your findings, choose one of the following:

1. Write a short essay in which you summarize the data, present the conclusions you draw from your findings, and explain to your reader why the knowledge people have regarding AI is important

OR

2. Create an infographic to present and analyze the responses from the interview.

UNIT 4. AFRICAN DIASPORA NARRATIVES

ABOUT THE UNIT

As stated in unit one of this guide, a significant part of Okorafor's *Death of the Author* is its exposition of the experiences of Africans in diaspora. The African diasporic lens in the novel is self-evident: Zelu, the main protagonist, is Nigerian American and so are her family members. But beyond Zelu and her immediate family, we have the likes of Msizi and Jackie who are of South African origins but who reside in the United States. Because of the African origins of these characters, the novel shows movement—both culturally and geographically—between the United States, Nigeria, and South Africa. It is also impossible to examine the digital and prosthetic technologies in the novel, Msizi's app and Zelu's exoskeleton, without referencing diasporic Africans. At the center of the novel, therefore, is an unmissable African diaspora presence that is typified by the representation of different cultural and geographical movements as well as the techno-scientific innovation.

However, even with the strong presence of Africans and African culture in the novel, the story also reflects the cultural, ideological, and geographical landscape of the United States. *Death of the Author* captures the multiple worlds, cultural perspectives and experiences of its characters. The idea of multiplicity of world and experiences is a defining feature of the African diaspora, and it is this feature that we will examine in this unit.

The first subsection of this unit is titled “African Diaspora: The History and the Present” and traces the history of the African diaspora and how it has evolved over several decades. We will also define Afropolitanism as a dimension of the African diaspora experience, as well as what the concept represents for thinking about the African characters we find in the novel.

The second subsection, “African Culture in the Diaspora,” examines two aspects of African material culture that are foregrounded in the novel: food and masquerade. Many parts of the novel make references to African foods, and some parts even pay sustained attention to it as a crucial point of pleasure and identity. In making images related to food and eating central to the narrative, the novel invites its readers to think about the significance of food to African diaspora identity formation and performance. The masquerade (or the masked ancestor tradition) is another aspect of African culture the novel presents in great details. As we mentioned in the first unit, masquerades surface both in periods of familial excitement and angst for the Africans in the novel. We will pay a closer attention to representation of the masquerade and its implication for an understanding of African diaspora identity.

The last subsection, “African Diaspora Narratives” will focus on the many cultural and geographical worlds in *Death of the Author* and how this leads to conversations about genre and the interpretation of the novel. By African diaspora narratives, we refer to cultural productions written by African diaspora writers which foreground the experiences of Africans in the diaspora as they navigate their multiple cultural influences and belongings. Finally, based on the different cultural and geographical contexts presented in the novel, we will reevaluate the differences between Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism and its implications for African diaspora narratives.

PREPARATORY AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Falola, Toyin. “Introduction: The Old and New African Diaspora.” *The African Diaspora: Slavery, Modernity, Globalization*, Toyin Falola, U of Rochester P, 2013.
- Gardaphé, Fred and Wenying Xu. “Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures.” *MELUS*, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 5-10.
- Okorafor, Nnedi. “Full Frame: African Influence with Nnedi Okorafor.” *CGTN America*, 14 November, 2020.
- Okorafor, Nnedi. “Organic Fantasy.” *African Identities*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 275-286.
- Sakiru Adebayo. *The New African Diasporas Podcast*. January, 2024
- Selasi, Taiye. “Bye-Bye Babar: Or, What is an Afropolitan?” *LIP Magazine*, 5 March, 2005.
- Selasi, Taiye. “Don’t Ask Where I’m From, Ask Where I’m Local.” *TED TALKS*, October, 2014.
- Okpewho, Isidore and Nkiru Nzegwu. *The New African Diaspora*. Indiana UP, 2009.

OPENING ACTIVITY

The Making of the African Diaspora

The goal of this activity is to introduce students to the history of the African diaspora. We cannot talk about the history and the making of the African diaspora without starting with the transatlantic slavery. The mass spread of Africans across different parts of the world began with slavery, therefore, an intricate study of that history will provide a much needed context for the things we are going to study in this unit.

1. Divide the class into small groups. In groups, ask students to study these “Introductory Maps to the Transatlantic Slave Trade” found on the SlaveVoyages interactive website. The maps detail the routes, numbers, and years that the transatlantic slave trade took place.
2. Ask the students to also study the Intra-American slave trade, found on the same website, paying attention the timeline and circulation of enslaved people within the Americas.
3. After their research, ask the students to answer the following questions:
 - a. Which three regions of Africa did the greatest number of enslaved people originate from?
 - b. Using the “Timeline” tab along with the maps, mention when the transatlantic slave trade began and when it was at its peak.
 - c. What part of the Americas received the greatest number of enslaved people?
 - d. What are the main similarities and differences between the transatlantic slave trade and the intra-American one?
 - e. How did the intra-American slavery further the spread of the African diaspora?

AFRICAN DIASPORA: THE HISTORY AND THE PRESENT

In Unit 1, we defined the African diaspora simply as people of African descent living outside the African continent. That movement, forced or voluntary, has taken place over centuries and continues today. While many think of the diaspora only in terms of the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism, today's diaspora also includes migrants, artists, and intellectuals who move across borders for education, work, or creative freedom.

In *Death of the Author*, we meet African characters who live and work in the United States and return to the continent often. These characters, especially Zelu, represent a kind of global African identity conditioned by frequent movement (both physically and culturally) and deep ties to both Africa and the West. Zelu's storytelling is rooted in African histories and landscapes yet informed by global influences. Her ability to move between Nigerian, South African, and U.S. cultures gives her work a transnational quality. Authors like Nnedi Okorafor, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Taiye Selasie, and Yaa Gyasi write from this kind of diaspora experience. Their work often explores how people live across cultures, carry memory, and remain connected to their roots while building new lives elsewhere.

There are two major ways to distinguish the global Black diaspora. First, is the global Black diaspora that occurred as a result of slavery, and the second is the one that follows the aftermaths of colonization. The Black diaspora resulting from slavery refers to the Africans that were forcefully transported through the transatlantic slave trade that created identities that include African Americans, African Caribbeans, African Europeans, Afro-Brazilians, Afro-Cubans, and many others. For this diaspora, because the slave trade was the onset of their identity formation, the same remains a crucial site for the formation of cultural memory and history for them.

The second type of diaspora can be traced to colonization in Africa in the twentieth century. Part of the result of the colonialization was a voluntary migration of Africans to colonial nations in Europe, initially, and later to North America. Part of what catalyzed the migrations and movement across spaces is globalization and transnationalism that became especially pronounced in the twentieth century.

Let us quickly define globalization and transnationalism. Globalization refers to the integration of the world's economic and cultural forces. The goal of globalization is to create interdependence in almost all areas—economic, cultural, technological, communications—between nations around the world. Quite similarly, transnationalism also refers to the interconnections and relationships between people, institutions, and cultures that exist beyond the confines of single nation-states. Both terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but they have slight differences. Although transnationalism emphasizes interconnections beyond single nation-states, those interconnections are very limited in scale and may be limited to only a few countries. However, the scale of integration and interdependence between nations covered under globalization is unabashedly large. Something can be transnational without necessarily being globalized. Therefore, while both terms emphasize interconnections, globalization is a more encompassing term. Furthermore, globalization is also used in the economic sense to denote describing integrated economies across the world. Put simply, transnationalism is a feature of globalization.

Transnational voluntary migration became particularly common since the 1980s in Africa that the new diaspora has also been referred to as the “transnationalist diaspora” (See Toyin Falola, “The Old and the New African Diaspora”). The diaspora we find in *Death of the Author* are those that represent voluntary migrants. They are highly educated and quite successful. Their movement back and forth to Nigeria and South Africa throughout the novel also shows the kind of intimacy they retain with their African roots. For Zelu, that intimacy is a necessary inspiration and context for her science fiction. Their ease of movement between nations also shows the transnational identity they embody. Many famous African writers such as Aminatta Forna, Chimamanda Adichie, Dinaw Mengestu, Helon Habila, Teju Cole, Yaa Gyasi, and others belong to the transnational African diaspora. The works these authors produce often straddle locations in Africa and the United States, specifically, and the West generally.

Suggested In-class Activity and Discussion Questions

1. Watch Taiye Selasi’s TED Talk titled, “Don’t Ask Me where I am From, Ask Me where I am Local”. Her argument about locality in this talk reflects some of the realities and experiences of the transnational African migrants, and possibly, those of other diasporas as well. Perhaps, there might be students in the class who share some of the experiences that Selasi portrays.
2. Ask the students to discuss the following questions:
 - a. Do you agree or disagree with Selasi’s idea of using the terms ‘local’ and ‘multilocal’ to describe diaspora identity?
 - b. If you agree with the terms, why do you agree, and if you do not, what are your objections to the terms?
 - c. Does the term multilocal describe the multiple cultural backgrounds of some the African characters in *Death of the Author*?
 - d. Selasi mentions three Rs in the talk: ritual, relationships, and restrictions. Choose two characters in the novel and explain how these Rs explain their experiences.
 - e. How does movement shape how a character sees the world?
 - f. How does Zelu’s relationship to Nigeria and the U.S. shape both her writing and her identity?

AFRICAN CULTURE IN THE DIASPORA

One of the most outstanding parts of *Death of the Author* is its attention to African culture. The novel goes beyond providing mere references to certain aspects of African culture to immerse its readers into some of the nitty-gritty of that culture and its practices by painting striking images. Examples of the aspects of African culture that the novel centralizes include fashion (the theme of ankara dressing), food, and masquerade. In this subsection, we will focus on both masquerade and food.

Masquerade

Ten of the novel’s fifty-one chapters reference masquerades (See Chapters 2, 19, 23, 30, 32, 33, 34, 40, 42, 50). In two of the ten chapters (chapters 2 and 33), masquerades occur, while the other eight references also alluded to the material and performative existence of the masquerade or the existence of the same in the psyche of the characters. Either as a material presence and performance or as a

psychological imagination, the novel suggests that masquerades are significantly entwined with the culture of the diasporic Africans, and this is why its images populate the narrative.

Death of the Author is only a recent addition to narratives, cultural performances and histories that, for at least four centuries, have established the interconnections between masquerade culture and African diaspora identity (See Raphael Njoku *West African Masking Traditions and Diaspora Masquerade Carnivals*). Arguably, what has sustained the interest in masquerade spectacles in Africa and the African diaspora is because of the rich historical and cultural repertoire it offers. Indeed, “Masquerades embody the essence of African civilization and the spirit of culture and customs that translate meanings to certain dimensions of the continent’s complex history. The songs, dance, drama, poetry, proverbs, and other accouterments of practices that go with the masquerade performances also represent a repertoire of intellectual traditions crucial to the recovery of aspects of lost African pasts” (See Raphael Njoku *West African Masking Traditions and Diaspora Masquerade Carnivals*).

In West African societies, masquerades are more than theatrical performances—they are deeply rooted cultural practices that blend spirituality, psychology, and social communication. Masquerades and the different processions they perform serve as powerful expressions of communal identity and belief systems. Masquerades typically involve performers wearing elaborate masks and costumes that transform them into spirit beings or ancestral figures (See Simon Ottenberg, “Illusion, Communication, and Psychology in West African Masquerades”). This transformation is not merely symbolic; it creates a complex system of communication and can allow communities to address sensitive topics—such as morality, social norms, and conflict—through indirect and symbolic means. Because the masquerader is seen as a spiritual figure, they can speak truths or critique behaviors in ways that would be unacceptable in ordinary social interactions. This makes masquerades a unique form of social commentary and psychological engagement. Moreover, masquerades play a crucial role in education and initiation, especially for young people. The emotional intensity of encountering a masked figure—often accompanied by music, dance, and dramatic gestures—can be both frightening and formative. These experiences help instill cultural values, reinforce community bonds, and mark transitions into adulthood.



E. A. Odekanyin, Ijele Masquerade, 2008, UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage

Specifically, the Ijele masquerade which is often referenced in the novel is one of the most iconic and revered masquerade traditions among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. Towering at over 12 feet tall and intricately constructed from bamboo, cloth, and cane, the Ijele is not just a mask—it is a symbol of communal identity, spiritual reverence, and artistic excellence. The Ijele is adorned with figurines representing animals, people, and mythical beings, each telling a story about Igbo life, morality, and belief. These figures once corresponded to smaller masquerades that performed alongside the Ijele, creating a rich tapestry of visual and symbolic communication (See Chike Aniakor, “The Ijele Mask”). Beyond its visual spectacle, the Ijele plays a vital social and spiritual role. It is believed to embody ancestral spirits and serves as a medium for connecting the living with the dead. Its performance is accompanied by a retinue of symbolic characters—such as the mother, father, and palm wine tapper—forming the “Ijele family,” which reinforces themes of kinship and community.

While the images and representations of masquerades we find in *Death of the Author* echo the cultural and intellectual traditions in Africa, members of the African diaspora evolve and sometimes reinvent these cultural traditions. Zelu and Msizi hint at this fact in their dialogue shortly after Secret, Zelu’s father, dies:

Msizi rubbed her shoulder. “He was a really cool guy,” he softly said, even though he hadn’t known her father well at all. “When we were dancing at Jackie and Amarachi’s wedding, he interrupted all us Zulus to dance his masquerade dance. He caused such a stir, the masquerade came out and joined. Your mother was frowning so hard.” Zelu laughed despite herself, face still pressed to the pillow. The Zulus were having their moment, and her father had stolen it to make it an Igbo moment, annoying her Yoruba princess of a mother. It was so like him. “He was a real cultural man, and he raised progressive children who would evolve the culture,” Msizi said (246).

In the excerpt above, masquerade performance—dancing—is evoked to show how Secret is a very cultural man. At the same time, the sequence of dialogue ends with the idea that Secret’s children, Zelu and her siblings, would evolve that culture. Masquerade performance and the evolution of culture are placed together to suggest that the influence and practice of African culture among the diaspora will involve evolutions, but what is paramount is for those evolutions not to erase the roots and the spirit of that culture.

Suggested In-Class Activity and Discussion Questions

Watch this [short video](#) on Ijele masquerade. The video provides some details about the geographical and cultural context of the masquerade and shows the masquerade in processing with lots of drumming and dancing. After watching the video, ask students to answer the following questions:

1. What are things that caught your attention in the cultural procession of the masquerade?
2. Following what you have seen in the video, in your words, describe Ijele masquerade.
3. How does the cultural procession of the masquerade in the video allow you to understand the role of masquerades in the novel? Give at least two examples from the novel to justify your response.
4. Share your response with the class.

Food

Like the masquerade, food is another aspect of African culture that is featured in the novel. At least three chapters in the novel have titles associated with food: Chapter 4 “Goat Meat;” Chapter 17 “Rice and Stew;” Chapter 38 “Palm Oil.” Of course, goat meat, rice and stew, and palm oil are not food and food items exclusive to Africans. However, placing these chapter titles alongside the novel’s wider representation of African culinary culture reveals the centrality of food to the narrative, and the connection between African culinary culture and diaspora identity. Scholars of literature have argued that the language, tropes, metaphors, and images of food frequently populate the pages of literary texts that foreground multiple ethnicities in the United States (See Fred Gardaphé and Wenying Xu, “Introduction: Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures”). A reason for this, they argue, is that food and culinary enjoyment constitute cultural pride for minority ethnic groups who are encumbered by the burden of assimilating into the White culture in the United States.

Food is therefore not just for pleasure; it becomes a cultural and identity marker that is used to establish intimacy with one’s culture. The significance of food to diaspora Africans has a long history that dates to the Atlantic slavery. Enslaved Africans with distinct culinary heritage had to improvise based on the kinds of food materials they got in the Americas. Sometimes, they practiced gardening to grow food items they want so that they can make the kinds of food that are closer to their African culinary taste. Obviously, while the cuisines the enslaved people produced had similarities with those in Africa, it was also quite different from it. But importantly, the legacies of their foodways persist till today. For example, we can trace the culture of gardening in the Caribbean to this history of food culture during slavery. Part of the origins of “Soul food” can be traced to this same culinary history. Thus, food represents an embodiment of history, culture, and identity to diasporic Africans.

For the generation of the diasporic Africans we find in *Death of the Author*, food continues to bear the weight of culture and identity. Chapter 10 in the novel is especially emphatic on the place of food to Nigerian Americans. In that chapter Amarachi, gives an expansive detail about culinary culture means to Nigerian Americans as she talks about the food, spices, African stores, and the way African foods are prepared. But before she proceeds to give a very insightful exposition about African culinary culture, she summarizes the significance of food to diasporic Africans: “One thing Naijamericans love to talk about is *food*. Food is one of our most intimate connections to the culture.... We learn to love and crave the culture by eating the food our mothers make to please our fathers” (See Nnedi Okorafor, *Death of the Author* 80). Since food is a way of building intimacy with the African culture for diasporic Africans, the language and images of African culinary culture in the text allows the narrative to further announce and identify itself with the African culture despite the novel’s transnational colorations.

Suggested In-class Activity and Discussion Questions

For this activity students will examine African cookbooks and YouTube channels by African chefs to understand examples and practices of African culinary heritage. Students should search for African cookbooks or YouTube channels by African chefs online. This [link](#) contains a good example of an African and Carribean cookbook. This [link](#) is a good example of a Nigerian cookbook. There are also many YouTube channels by African chefs that they can examine like this [one](#). After finding and studying the different recipes and videos from cookbooks and YouTube, ask them the following questions:

1. What are two things you learned from African culinary culture?
2. Did you find any similarities between your own culinary culture and some of the African recipes and methods of cooking that you studied?
3. How does the videos or cookbooks you have studied enhance your understanding of the representation of African food in *Death of the Author*.
4. Share your response with the class.

Suggested Discussion Questions

Read the following passage and discuss the questions that follow:

Zelu laughed despite herself, face still pressed to the pillow. The Zulus were having their moment, and her father had stolen it to make it an Igbo moment, annoying her Yoruba princess of a mother. It was so like him.

“He was a real cultural man, and he raised progressive children who would evolve the culture,” Msizi said (246).

1. Why do you think Msizi talks about the children “evolving” the culture? Is he suggesting a generational difference between Secret and his children in their respect for the African culture?
2. Are there examples of Zelu or her siblings evolving the African culture? If there are, highlight two of them.
3. Does the novel say anything about the American culture? If it does, what does it suggest about the diasporic Africans’ attitude towards aspects of the American culture that they are a part of?

AFRICAN DIASPORA NARRATIVES AND IDENTITY AMBIVALENCES

We ended the second subsection by stating that *Death of the Author* insists on identifying with African culture even though most of the novel is set in the United States. Notwithstanding, we should not assume, on the basis of that conclusion, that African diaspora narratives portray exclusively amiable relationships between members of the African diaspora and their African roots. However, this is not always the case because these narratives show moments of ambivalent love for Africa by reflecting “textual inscriptions on migration [that] foreground instabilities and the kind of contamination that intercultural contacts make possible” (See Cajetan Iheka and Jack Taylor, “The Migration Turn in African Productions”). Far from being stories that romanticize Africa, African diaspora narratives map out complicated allegiances that the transnational diaspora navigates as citizens and residents of multiple localities, which all have significant influences on their identity formation.

We encounter an example of this complicated relationship in Okorafor’s novel. In chapter 40, “Wahala Dey,” Zelu visits Nigeria, the thorny relationship with Nigeria is laid bare:

She looked at her exos next. She didn’t want to cover them anymore. She was tired of hiding herself for the sake of others. This entire *trip* hadn’t been what she hoped for, but really, what had she expected? She would never have been treated like a typical “daughter of the soil” even if she hadn’t had her accident. Now, whenever anyone saw her, they saw the exos first, and if they could get past those, when she opened her mouth, she only spewed “foreigner.” She was directly related to half the people she saw in the village and even carried the same last name, but she would never be “normal” to anyone there (334).

This passage brings together Zelu’s identity as a person with disability and a diasporic African. In doing so, the novel expands the notion of normality beyond its ableist definition for describing bodily difference. Here in the passage, normal represents a pejorative description of bodily difference as well as cultural difference. Being treated like a daughter of the soil is to be seen as fully Nigerian. But this is not the case for Zelu. Similarly, she “spewed foreigner” refers to her accent which immediately associates her with somewhere else: her Nigerian American hybrid and transnational identity. That accent proves that she is culturally different because language accent is, to a degree, cultural. Zelu’s love for the country, nor her indigenous culture can sidestep her diaspora identity; and even if she seeks to do so, her Nigerian relatives will be the first to remind her that she is different from them. But being bodily and culturally different must not be seen as negative. It is only a fact of her diaspora identity and her belonging to multiple worlds which also serves as her own entry point to understanding of her African culture.

Death of Author also attentively shows how Zelu is invested in Nigeria and her culture. Using the controversies around the adaptation of *Rusted Robots* we can glean how Zelu identifies her text with the Nigerian culture and what that identification means to her:

Her novel was set in Nigeria after humanity had died off. The robots populating that world carried digital DNA left behind by their creators. Zelu had written her characters as holding African DNA. She hadn’t fully expected her readers to understand this, but it was at the heart of the plot, just as much as the theme of humanity was. The drama, the twists, the communities, the languages, the accents, all the robo-bullshit was drawn from Nigerian cultures and people and politics.

All this, the movie chopped away. Ankara's character had been renamed Yankee and Ijele was Dot. Zelu had known that from the trailer, but it only went downhill from there. If Zelu's novel were an Ankara fabric, it was as if the movie had stolen, scraped, bleached, stretched, reshaped, and inverted it, and mass-reprinted some botched shadow of the original. The whole movie was set in the United States, not a hint of Nigeria. This wasn't an adaptation. It was a gutting. This film was cliché, vapid, confused, steaming trash. She didn't recognize the story she'd written at all.

And the audience *loved* it....

I've been deleted from my own story, she thought. They've just *erased* me (200-202).

Although she is also American, she does not recognize the resituating of the plot to the United States nor the renaming of the characters to something more American as something to be happy about. For her, leaving Nigeria, the heart and the culture of the story, out of the adaptation is tantamount to an appropriation of an African story to suit the viewing pleasure of an American audience. It is striking that Zelu sees the erasure of Nigeria in the adaptation as the erasure of herself also. Zelu's reaction to the adaptation of the movie is parallel to the discussion in unit one about the differences between Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism. Nigeria and Okorafor's Igbo culture are at the heart of her Africanfuturist texts. It is against this background that Okorafor insists that her works be labelled Africanfuturism because the politics and culture represented under the tag Afrofuturism does not capture what she is doing in her speculative fiction. To be sure, many other African speculative writers also in the diaspora agree that Afrofuturism does not adequately do justice to their own writings too. Similarly, we can also say that Zelu sees her novel, *Rusted Robots*, as an Africanfuturist text, and the adaptation has succeeded in misreading and misrepresenting the culture of the text.

It is striking that Zelu sees the erasure of Nigeria in the adaptation as the erasure of herself too. However, we should also ask, is America also not a part of Zelu's identity, especially when the *Death of the Author* later shows how she is not treated as a typical daughter of the soil? What about the erasure of Nigeria in the adaptation is so striking that makes Zelu feel serious angst against the film?

Transnational identity and belonging to multiple worlds have implications for the reading, reception, and interpretation (and in Zelu's case, adaptation) of African diaspora narratives. Alongside its representation of Africa and African culture, *Death of the Author* is mainly set in an American world and raises questions about race and popular culture in America. In representing aspects of both African culture and those of the United States, the novel reveals its multicultural world. In this sense, *Death of the Author* can be seen as a multiethnic American novel. The transnational perspectives in the novel demonstrates that there are no easy or straightforward answers to questions of identity in African diaspora narratives. However, Okorafor's novel suggests that despite the transnational range of the novel the intricacies of African culture that underpins it should not be ignored.

Suggested Questions for Discussion

Consider the following passage and discussion questions:

The whole movie was set in the United States, not a hint of Nigeria. This wasn't an adaptation. It was a gutting. This film was cliché, vapid, confused, steaming trash. She didn't recognize the story she'd written at all.
And the audience *loved* it....
I've been deleted from my own story, she thought. They've just *erased* me (200–202).

1. Why do you think the audience would have loved the film's adaption of the novel despite its entire removal of Nigeria?
2. Do you think the erasure of Nigeria in the film changes the story and makes it less of an African story?
3. What about the erasure of Nigeria in the adaptation is so striking that makes Zelu feel serious angst against the film?

Suggested In-class Activity:

1. Watch this [interview](#) of Nnedi Okorafor where she talks about her background and creative writing process. Answer the following questions after watching the interview:
 - a. How does Okorafor's background influence her ideas about science fiction?
 - b. How does her experience in America also shape her writing?
2. While *Death of the Author* is not an autobiographical novel, there are several aspects of the novel that draw from Okorafor's experiences which she mentions in the interview.
 1. Can you highlight aspects of her personal experiences and history that are apparent in *Death of the Author*.
 2. How does knowing a few details about her life change your understanding of the novel?

UNIT ACTIVITIES AND PROJECT IDEAS

Close-Reading Project: This project is meant to allow students to further sharpen their skills in close-reading. Students will write an essay which will include both a summary and an analysis. The steps for the assignment are as follows:

1. We have mentioned that *Death of the Author* is replete with references to masquerades and food. In this assignment, look for two references to either food OR masquerades in the novel.
2. After making your choice, you will write a one-page summary of the part of the novel where you have chosen the two examples you want to analyze. In your summary, state the general details about the events happening when food or masquerade is mentioned. Say the characters present, the setting of events, and other details that give a contextual background to the section of the novel.

3. After the summary, write an analysis of a scene where food or masquerade is mentioned. Because you are reading two references, you will be analyzing two events. You can try to build your analysis by paying attention to the following:
 - a. Is the reference to food or masquerade a metaphor, a symbol for something else or just a concrete example of a scene where people are eating or an appearance of a masquerade?
 - b. Does the reference to food or masquerade reflect the physical, emotional, or psychological state of the character(s)? If it does, what could this representation suggest?
 - c. Is the reference to the food or masquerade written differently? Is it italicized, set in bold, etc.?
 - d. What does the reference to food or masquerade suggest about the tone and mood of that point in the narrative?
 - e. What do these references mean or say about the African culture and its portrayal in the wider context of the novel?

Ankara Design Project: On page 30, Ankara, gave a description of an African wax print which she names herself after:

My name is Ankara. I gave this name to myself. It was the name of the African wax print known for bearing the same intensity on the front as on the back, originally designed as a form of visual communication. I was built with an Ankara theme, with geometric patterns and colors etched on my body and limbs that echoed the Ankara design of my operating system's user interface. Inside and out, I was Ankara. (30)

In this project, students will design an ankara pattern to match the description provided by the Hume in the excerpt above. Students can find samples of Ankara fabrics [here](#) on the UW-Madison Digital Collection website.

1. For designing, you can use digital tools like Canva, AdobeExpress, Visme, and many others
2. Write an Artist's introduction (750 words) where you state how you interpreted Ankara, the Hume's description for your fabric design, and which design tools you used.

UNIT 5. THE FAMILY PARADOX

ABOUT THE UNIT

Much of who we are is influenced by our relationships with family. Families influence how we see the world, how we understand ourselves, and how we relate to others. In *Death of the Author*, Zelu is a character of many layers. She is a writer, a disabled woman, a technophile, a daughter of Nigerian parents, and a sister in a large, opinionated family. In this unit we will explore how the novel's questions about technology, the body, and identity are connected to Zelu's familial relationships. Her relatives are both her fiercest critics and her most enduring anchors. They clash over her choices and challenge her independence, and yet they also pass down the traits and activities she finds most fulfilling, like her storytelling and love for swimming. This unit focuses on that paradox, showing how family in the novel is both a site of tension and a foundation for belonging. By exploring these dynamics, we will see how Okorafor uses family to connect personal identity with larger themes of cultural change, bodily autonomy, and the role of technology in collective experience. The family also presents a way into one of the novel's most distinctive literary devices: the use of interview chapters. We will see how the interviews open multiple perspectives on Zelu's life and reveal sides of her that the main narrative alone could not otherwise show.

One of the best summaries of Zelu's relationship with her family is seen in chapter 48, "Family Ties," when Zelu is about to inform her family that she is going to space: "They sat. Chinyere and Amarachi on the couch with her, Uzo on the floor (her phone up as she recorded), Bola on a chair behind the couch, and Tolu in their father's armchair. Her siblings. The closest people on earth to her, no matter how distant they often felt" (400). The quote indicates that Zelu's relationship with her family is fraught in many ways. She had many disagreements with her family members, and yet, she sees them as the people closest to her. Moreover, despite the differences between Zelu and her family, the novel also reveals moments of intimacy and ties that bind Zelu to her family. To understand the nature of the family presented in the novel, one will have to consider both the moments of tension and those of intimacy.

In this unit, we will look closely at these two perspectives to see how they play a key role in our understanding of Zelu, as well as the development of the narrative. We will draw on the chapters titled "Interviews" in the novel. There are eight interview chapters and each chapter is narrated from the perspective of one of Zelu's family members, partner, or friend. These interview chapters punctuate the narrative and offer different insights that allow us to further understand Zelu's relationships. There are two interrelated subsections in this unit titled "Family Fractures" and "Family Ties." *Death of the Author* is full of moments of family drama and disagreements. In the first subsection, we will look at some of these moments between Zelu and Chinyere. In the second subsection, we will consider how kinship subsists despite the family's disagreements. This unit will prepare you to discuss the significance of the interviews as a narrative technique that presents a complex overview about family in the novel.

PREPARATORY AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Edoro, Ainehi. “Greg Ruth Does Something Amazing with Okorafor’s Female Characters.” *Brittle Paper*, 5 Dec. 2018. <https://brittlepaper.com/2016/12/greg-ruth-amazing-okorafors-female-characters/>
- Grimbeek, Marinette. “Girls Making Families: Agential Assemblage in Nnedi Okorafor’s Speculative Fiction.” *Populating the Future: Families and Reproduction in Speculative Fiction*. Britt Johanne Farstad (eds), Kriterium/Gävle University Press, 2023.
- Niven, Alastair. “The Family in Modern African Literature.” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1980, pp. 5–17.
- Oku, Arit. “Africanfuturism and the Reframing of Gender in the Fiction of Nnedi Okorafor” *Feminist Africa*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2020, pp. 75-89.
- The Portalist. “Nnedi Okorafor’s Fantasy Explores the Transformative Strength of Female Rage.” *The Portalist*, 31 Jan. 2023. <https://theportalist.com/nnedi-okorafor-importance-of-female-rage>

OPENING ACTIVITY

Family Tree

In the first chapter, the novel introduces Chinyere, Zelu’s sister, who provides introductory details about the members of the Onyedeke-Onyeyezi family.

1. Draw a family tree based on the details from chapter one.
2. Based on what you later learn about each member of the family in the novel, describe each member of the family with three words.
3. Share the family tree you have drawn, and the words you have written with the class to see the similar and different ideas you have written about the family.

FAMILY FRACTURES

There is almost no point in the novel that Zelu does not experience tension with her family. Her family condemns her personal decisions she makes about her body, career, and relationships. Despite her significant accomplishments, Zelu is not celebrated by her parents or siblings.

Nnedi Okorafor’s works portray how female protagonists navigate their personal choices while considering questions about cultural norms and familial responsibility (See Marinette Grimbeek, “Girls Making Families: Agential Assemblage in Nnedi Okorafor’s Speculative Fiction”). Thus, “The conception of family in Okorafor’s fiction is neither static nor normative” (135). Arguably, family disagreements found in *Death of the Author* arise from the tension between normative ideals about familial responsibility and Zelu’s choices.

Consider the relationship between Zelu and her sister Chinyere. Chinyere is the first born and bears a lot of responsibility for her siblings. She reflects a communal sentiment about the family in very rigid terms. Incidentally, Chinyere is the first person we hear from in the novel, and from the outset, she describes her familial ideals and the ways in which Zelu fails to conform to these standards:

What *matters* is family. Without family, you're nothing. You're debris tumbling through space. Unseen, unconnected, uncollected, unknown, no matter how famous you are.

Zelu will always be *part* of our family. She will always be my sister. No matter what. Oh, it's been rough. The fact is that Zelu never really cared about family. Zelu had to do her own thing. Then she'd expect everyone else to deal with her mess. We will always love Zelu. We hang in there for her. She never made it easy, though (1).

Chinyere's main criticism of Zelu's attitude is based on Zelu's preference "to do her own thing;" Zelu often takes an individualistic approach to her life choices, rather than communal one. The Onyenezi-Oyedele family values the ties that hold people together and the responsibilities that come with those ties. This sense of collective life, of building and maintaining bonds and systems of support, is central to how they see themselves. It reflects a broader cultural value found in many African societies, but also in societies around the world, where families strive to balance individual freedom with the responsibilities of belonging. Judging by this cultural perspective about the family, Chinyere's expectation from Zelu can be understood. What then serves as a significant point of fracture in the relationship between Chinyere and Zelu is the push and pull between personal autonomy and the expectations of those we are closest to. Zelu respects her family, but she does not want to be confined by familial duties and responsibilities.

Zelu's family seems to care about her, but they also have a fixed sense of who they think she can be. It is almost as if they have not evolved in their perception of her from when she had her accident. In a sense, the novel raises questions about family and disability. The novel shows the family as a space built around normative ideologies about the body and presents a challenge for Zelu's belonging as a disabled person.

Another area that compounds the divide between the normative and non-normative ideas about the family is their embrace—or perhaps lack thereof—of technology and attitudes towards disability. Zelu's family are generally reticent about the self-driving automated vehicles and Zelu's prosthetic exoskeletons. Their lack of adaptability to these technologies can be seen in light of their rigidity about culture and conventional views about family. Zelu does not share her family's cultural rigidity, and therefore embraces technology. In Unit 2, we examined how disabled people confront the problems of invisibility. In Zelu's case, her invisibility begins with her family. Even at the height of her success and fame when she struggles with the film adaptation of her book, she finds that "Her family was no solace. They felt more distant than ever. None of them visited, though they called often. Her parents made excuses; her siblings simply didn't bother. She saw them only when she made the effort to go home on Saturday family nights. And even then, everyone talked about everything but what she was up to, which was fine until she noticed she was the only one no one asked about" (195). Zelu's invisibility in her own family makes technology even more crucial for her. Zelu not only embraces technology because she is both curious and adventurous, but also to support her autonomy as the only disabled person in her family. She therefore has to make the individual choice, even when her family criticize those choices, about using technologies for her own advantage. Moreover, technology offers a line of flight from the rigidity of her family and their refusal to see Zelu in her full self.

On a broader level, the family fractures in *Death of the Author* seek to mirror how the family is not only a private unit, but also a social institution which contains people with different interests, ideological positions, and physical bodies. The respect of the different interests within such an institution will be based on navigating and negotiating the balance between communal responsibility and individual autonomy. This kind of balance is what Zelu's family lacks for the most in the novel.

Suggested Close Reading Exercises

In Unit 1, students were asked to do a close reading exercise of a passage from the interview with Chinyere, this exercise builds on that previous one. Ask the students to do a close reading of any two interview chapters. The interviews throughout the novel serve like a biography about Zelu's life that is told by the people closest to her. Invite the students to read these interviews like a biography about Zelu's life, paying attention to what the person being interviewed says about Zelu and the kind of relationship they have with her. As they read, tell them to do the following:

1. List three characteristics they say about Zelu. To do this, pay attention to the kinds of words and phrases they use to describe Zelu, it gives a clue to what they think about her.
2. Compare the differences and similarities the interviews offer about the life of Zelu. Do they use similar phrases or words to describe Zelu, or are their ideas about her vastly different?
3. What does the interview suggest about the interviewee's intimacy or distance from Zelu. Are there elements of dislike, admiration, or ambivalence in the description of their interactions with Zelu?

FAMILY TIES

While there were several examples of fractures and obvious unkindness towards Zelu in her family, the novel also depicts moments of familial intimacy. Zelu is undoubtedly shaped by her familial culture in many ways, specifically her creativity and love for storytelling. In the interview with Secret in chapter 5, he explains Zelu's love for stories and links it to himself:

Zelu always liked stories, and I take credit for that. I've been telling my children stories since they were babies.... That girl loved stories. If anyone had one to tell, she was there, ready to drink it. I was the same way when I was growing up. I loved where stories took me. How they made me feel.... Stories contain our existence; they are like gods (40).

From Secret's interview, one can see how Zelu's love for stories is tied to her father's interest and his practice of telling stories. Even though her family criticized her choice to be a writer and storyteller, she is clearly not the first storyteller in the family. Secret's words bear a striking similarity to how Ankara, in *Rusted Robots*, describes what stories mean and do to Humes. Tracing the link among Secret, Zelu, and Ankara reveals a cyclical kind of relationship that is built on the love of storytelling: Secret greatly influences Zelu's love for stories and storytelling, and Ankara, an offshoot of that passion for stories, echoes Secret's views about stories, and finally writes a story about Zelu.

The interview then becomes a narrative technique and an optical apparatus that reveals different aspects of Zelu's life throughout the novel. The interview chapters especially show the underlying similarities between Zelu and her family. Without the interview, our understanding of Zelu's relationship with her family will only be based on the frictions that she has with her family. But the interview presents another perspective of about the family and Zelu; it allows us to know where Zelu gets her most defining characteristics from, thereby suggesting that beneath the fractures apparent within the family, there are always layers of association that bind the family.

For instance, it was in the interview with Secret that we learn that Zelu inherits her love for swimming and adventure from her father. Of all Zelu's siblings, she is the only one who loves swimming like her father (103). In fact, one of the distinguishing traits of Zelu's character in the novel is her love for water. She spends a lot of time swimming, or close to vast bodies of water, especially Lake Michigan, to get a sense of solitude and regeneration. Swimming and the visit to Lake Michigan was therefore not just an activity for Zelu, it is part of her identity. Her choice to buy a house facing Lake Michigan further suggests how much she values both swimming and the sight of the Lake (190).

In Secret's interview chapter (chapter 5), he mentions his love for stories and swimming, thereby allowing us to see clear parallels between him and Zelu. Secret mentions how much he loves to swim and recalls the favorite story he tells his children. The story is about how he saw and swam with dolphins when he was still in Port-Harcourt, Nigeria. Zelu loves this story of her father's encounter with the dolphins so much that "she would always ask for more details—about the dolphins' eyes, what it felt like when one nipped at me [Secret], the sounds of their voices and how quickly they swam. She was fascinated by them, by their freedom" (43). Zelu's love of that particular story reveals how swimming and stories, two seemingly separate activities, are linked. Zelu does not only love stories and swimming, as a child, her favorite story to hear, which is also Secret's favorite story to tell, is about swimming.



The above image is that of Nnedi Okorafor at the Navy Pier, Chicago. Zelu spends a lot of time in front of the pier. A day before *Death of the Author* was released, *The New York Times* published an article about Nnedi Okorafor where they used this image. Okorafor shared the link to the article on her Instagram account, and she stated that the Navy Pier and the tower behind it, are very significant to the main character of *Death of the Author*. See the link to the article in *The New York Times* [here](#).

Another example of how the interview exposes kinship ties in the family is Amarachi's interview in chapter 10. Amarachi mentions how Zelu is very sensitive, while also being tough and prickly (83). Amarachi also acknowledges how the family and her were very hard on Zelu because she wanted "her [Zelu] to be good and behave so I wouldn't worry" (83). Amarachi's statement here about the need for Zelu to behave is infantilizing and assumes an overbearing responsibility over Zelu. Considering this overbearing position of Amarachi makes it easy to see why she and Zelu frequently disagree.

However, what Amarachi says after her infantilizing statement is salient: "I wish I'd have shut up more often with her. Let her talk more. Let her spill.... She's always had more to give than what she says, and speaking, no, *writing* may have been the only way for her to give it. I've read *Rusted Robots* several times now, and each time, I see more and more of my sister behind each word" (83). There is a tinge of regret and acceptance of a wrong in her statement here that is different from the more insensitive things she initially said about Zelu. The acceptance of her own excesses in their relationship shows the value Amarachi sees in Zelu and hints at the possibility of a more cordial relationship between them in the future.

There is no other part of the novel that we see Amarachi, or indeed, any of Zelu's relations who have been hard on her, express their own excesses in how they have treated her, at least not to Zelu directly. Again, it is in an interview section that we get a glimpse of how familial intimacy persists despite their differences. The interview chapters are almost like an interior monologue where the characters are processing their thoughts and are speaking directly to the readers in ways that they do not to other characters in a story. That the interviews allow the readers to assess the layers of the relationship in the family is one of the reasons why they are a crucial narrative technique throughout the novel.

Chapter 48, "Family Ties" is the last time we see the family together and it is the point when they all departed harmoniously. The harmonious time they shared in that chapter suggests that, like the title of the chapter, the novel ties the fractures that had been prevalent all through the narrative to show a moment of intimacy. The family might be distant, but they are still the closest. Ultimately, *Death of the Author* uses the representation of the family to explore individual autonomy, communal responsibility, and identity. The novel's representation of the family neither idealizes the African family nor does it totally dismiss it. Rather it presents a narrative that is nuanced in its reflection of the realities of African families in the diaspora who strive to follow cultural ideals about the family while also acknowledging the evolution of those ideals.

Suggested In-class activity

In this unit, we have identified how the interview chapters serve as a narrative technique that allows us to understand Zelu's life and the underlying ties she has with her family despite their differences. This activity invites students to identify and interpret literary techniques in any one chapter of *Death of the Author* and explore how the technique contributes to the meaning and understanding of the novel. For example, students can choose to explore the importance of water and swimming as a symbolism in the novel. They could also identify examples of metaphors, alliteration, imagery and others, and their significance in the novel.

1. Choose one chapter in the novel for your analysis. In doing your analysis of the chapter, consider the following questions:
 - a. What literary devices are present in this chapter?
 - b. How do they function in the development of the narrative?
 - c. How do the literary techniques shape your understanding of the chapter?
 - d. Is there a correlation between the structure of the chapter and the literary techniques
 - e. How does the literary technique affect your understanding of the characters in the chapter?
 - f. Overall, what is the significance of the technique to the chapter you have read?
2. Write an short essay to present your analysis (if this activity is used for final project, expand the length of the essay).

UNIT ACTIVITIES AND PROJECT IDEAS

Cover Art: In 2016, German illustrator Greg Ruth designed cover arts for the central female protagonists in some works by Nnedi Okorafor including, *Who Fears Death* and *Book of Phoenix*. Find the examples of the cover art designed by Greg Ruth [here](#). Zelu is the latest addition to the brilliant female protagonists, who despite different familial challenges, found ways to thrive and inspire. Drawing on the examples from Greg Ruth's covers of female protagonists in Okorafor's novels, ask students to produce a book cover art using Zelu's character. Follow these instructions for the project:

1. Design a book cover for *Death of the Author* using Zelu's character. Be creative and inventive with your design, but make sure what you produce matches with some of the descriptions of Zelu in the novel. For example, you can decide to focus on Zelu's choice of fashion, her love for swimming and water, her exos, or any point in the novel that you think describes her character the most for you.
2. Write an "Artist's Introduction" (500-750 words) describing what part of Zelu in the novel inspired your design. In addition, state the creative process you adopted, that is, what digital design tools you used, how many images you designed before settling with the final design.

Oral History Project: The interview chapters in *Death of the Author* allow readers to know some of Zelu's family's histories and experiences. For this project, students will design and conduct interviews with their family members or close community elders to uncover personal stories, cultural traditions, and historical experiences.

1. Interview Planning.
 - a. Students will choose two or three family members/elders to interview.
 - b. Develop a list of 10–15 open-ended questions (see sample below).
2. Sample Interview Questions.
 - a. Can you tell me about a tradition our family has and how it started?
 - b. What was your childhood like? What are some vivid memories?
 - c. How did your family celebrate holidays or special occasions?
 - d. Have you experienced any major historical events? What was that like?
 - e. What advice or values have been passed down in our family?
3. Conducting the Interview.
 - a. Record the interview (audio or video, with permission).
 - b. Take notes on key themes, emotions, and memorable quotes.
4. Reflection and Analysis: Students will write a reflection where they will consider the following:
 - a. Synthesize the interview and state what they learned about their family or culture.
 - b. Discuss how the interview changed or deepened their understanding of themselves and their family.

Family Fracture Collage: What does family fracture look like in *Death of the Author*? Show us! Create a collage, an animation, a painting, or another form of visual representation inspired by a scene in the novel. Write an “Artist’s Introduction” to explain your choices, including the scene you have used from the novel.

UNIT 6. LITERATURE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

ABOUT THIS UNIT

Over the past two decades, social media has changed how people present themselves and participate in public life. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, and TikTok began as tools for sharing updates or staying in touch, but they have since become spaces where identity, culture, politics, and emotion are negotiated in real time. From viral content to online activism, from influencers to digital surveillance, social media now informs much of what we see, feel, and understand about the world around us.

In *Death of the Author*, Nnedi Okorafor engages with this digital landscape to explore how visibility creates new conditions of self-fashioning, creativity, and power. The novel examines how social media affects not only what people share with the world but also how they are perceived or even erased. Understanding social media as both a cultural force and a narrative framework helps us see how the novel builds its world, dramatizes conflict, and reveals the emotional and political stakes of digital life. This unit invites students to think critically about social media as a lens through which literature reframes contemporary life.

In the first subsection, “Social Media and Self-construction,” we will look at the evolution of social media platforms and how they have changed the ways people curate and construct their identities. Identity construction on social media is often based on people’s interaction with many users, friends, and followers on these platforms. Because of the web of interactions that social media makes possible, it can lead to a mobilization of social capital and valuation of self in ways that can be productive or destructive. We will examine this valuation of self in *Death of Author* while also explaining how it furthers our interpretation of characters in the novel.

The second subsection titled, “Social Media and the Viral Moments of Disability,” will return to the question of visibility and hypervisibility of disability that we looked at in unit 2. Specifically, we will examine the way virality leads to the hypervisibility of people with disabilities and how such moments can either reinforce ableist perspectives or lead to disability alliances.

The last subsection, “The Social Media life of *Death of the Author*” will show the social media presence of the novel and Okorafor prior to its publication and release. Tracking this social media presence of the novel will provide insights into the public discourse and reception of the novel in ways that mirror the discourse about *Rusted Robots* in the novel itself.

PREPARATORY AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Edoro, Ainehi. “Unruly Archives: Literary Form and the Social Media Imaginary.” *English Literary History*, vol. 89, no. 2, pp. 523-546.
- Gillooly, Patrick. “Don’t Quit Social Media. Put It to Work for Your Career.” *The New York Times*, 3, December, 2016
- Newport, Cal. “Quit Social Media. Your Career May Depend on It.” *The New York Times*, 19 November, 2016.
- Nikolinakou, Angeliki and Karen Whitehill King. “Viral Video ads: Emotional Triggers and Social Media Virality.” *Psychology and Marketing*, vol. 35, no. 10, pp. 715-726.
- Schalk, Sami. “Black Disability Gone Viral: A Critical Race Approach to Inspiration Porn.” *College Language Association*, vol. 64, no. 1, pp. 100-120.
- Schultze, Ulrike. “How Social Media Shapes Identity.” *TED TALKS*, 23 April, 2015.
- Young, Stella. “I Am Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much.” *TED TALKS*, 9 June, 2014.

OPENING ACTIVITY

One of the influences of social media on literature is the rising popularity of online reading groups. In addition to several online blogs, websites and applications like BookBrowse, The StoryGraph, and Goodreads, which catalogue, publish reviews, and provide platforms for book reading communities to dialogue and interact. “Bookstagram” and “BookTok” are content streams that provide avenues for even more engagement with literary works.

1. Divide the class into small groups
2. Provide each group with public-facing content found by searching #BookTok or #Bookstagram ahead of time (e.g., photos of shelfies, review posts, TikTok captions, user comments, creative video summaries).
3. Each group should analyze 3–4 examples. Then discuss the following questions:
 - a. What did you notice about how people talk about books on social media?
 - b. What kind of tone or aesthetic do they use (funny, emotional, serious, critical, etc.)?
 - c. What do you think these platforms add—or take away—from the way people read and share literature?
 - d. Would anything from these online communities be helpful or distracting in a school setting?

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SELF-CONSTRUCTION

Social media platforms have become an integral part of our contemporary existence as billions of people across the world have multiple social media accounts which they use to communicate, follow news and events, advertise goods and services, and generally, provide an endless cycle of information and entertainment. The number of users of some of the major social media platforms indicates the immense influence of social media on contemporary culture. Facebook was founded in 2004, and it now has above three billion users; Twitter started in 2006, and it has an estimate of five hundred million users; Instagram was founded in 2010, and it has over two billion users; TikTok was launched globally in 2017, and it now has close to two billion users (See Kristi Hines, “[The History of Social Media](#)”). The sheer number of users that the most dominant social media platforms have today, compared to their relatively short years of existence, is testament to their influence on both global communication and culture.

We cannot ignore how social media is changing the way we tell stories. Literature doesn’t exist in a vacuum. It is always in conversation with the world around it. So, it only makes sense that as social media becomes more woven into daily life, writers reflect these changes in the ways they write and structure their stories. Here’s a bit of context: The 2010s were a key moment when digital life started to show up in fiction in a more direct way. Facebook and Twitter were no longer new or experimental. They had become central to how people interacted publicly. When Instagram launched in 2010, smartphones were everywhere, and being on social media felt less optional than it used be. That shift showed up in books too. Characters stopped using the internet just as background. Instead, things like going viral, managing an online identity, and performing for an audience became central to storytelling. Publishers also started paying attention. Stories about digital life were not just showing up in YA fiction. They were being taken seriously in literary fiction too. Books like Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*, Dave Eggers *The Circle*, Helen Fieldings’ *About a Boy*, and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* explore how digital culture was conditioning the way we understand our individual selves and how we relate to each other. Before this, you might see technology show up in the form of emails, even in romantic comedies with chatrooms (*You’ve Got Mail*, 1998). But the idea of social media actually changing the emotional and narrative structure of a story really took off in the early 2010s.

Death of the Author falls into this lineage of stories that develop characters along the arc of their journey to going viral and after. Thus, it is a useful text for examining how social media constructs both identity and visibility. Identity formation and construction on social media happens in two interrelated ways: we construct ourselves (self-construction) through our engagement, and we are also constructed by the platforms through our daily interactions with them. Self-construction occurs through the posts people write, the pictures they share, and all the things they make available to the public that show aspects of their social, political, religious, and other worldviews. Essentially, self-construction is just the curation of how people want others to perceive them. At the same time, the algorithms of these platforms share content—news, posts, images—that people interact with, which in turn also influence their sense of identity. In other words, people influence social media and digital technologies as much as they influence

them. This two-way interaction between social media platforms and their users is known as a co-constitutive relationship (See Ulrike Schultze, “How Social Media Shapes Identity”).

Social media has become one of the ways people express themselves and measure influence in everyday life. As sociologist Steffen Mau points out, more and more of our lives are defined by numbers (or metrics). On social media, power and influence are directly tied to things like follower counts and post-performance. How many people follow you? How well are your posts doing? Being seen and heard is a matter of numbers. Just swipe through your TikTok feed and you’ll notice how the algorithm favors content with high engagement. Writers have picked up on this trend and used it to explore what it means to be a person in the age of social media. Many are asking: what happens to our sense of self when visibility becomes the main source of value? When attention, tracked in likes, views, and shares, becomes a measure of worth? In *Death of the Author*, Zelu’s journey follows this arc too. Her rise and fall as a public figure is tied to how visible she is online and how that visibility translates into social capital or the possibility of its loss.

In *Death of the Author*, Zelu experiences the social construction of her value following the publication of her book (Chapter 11). The early positive reviews of her book coincide with her increased popularity on social media where, unlike before, people are willing to like, comment, and share anything she says, even the most mundane. One can state that what catapults her fame on social media is the success of her book; this is true. But at the same time, the engagements on social media validated and increased her visibility as a writer, placing an even bigger valuation on her:

She’d always been active on social media, getting into heated arguments with Nigerians in Nigeria over issues of politics, gender, and disability.... But what was happening now was on a whole different level. And the most beautiful thing was that people were *listening* to her now more than ever (85).

When Yebo, her mobile assistant app, saw her popularity on social media, it asks if it could filter the engagement, but Zelu declined affirmatively, “‘Most definitely not,’ she muttered, clicking it away.... Filled with the glorious positivity from her social media, Zelu gazed at the words she’d written. They practically glowed” (86–87). The likes, posts, and comments she receives on social media are the processes of constructing value, and for someone who has been invisible for a long time, people “*listening*” to her made Zelu both more visible and valuable. It is therefore unsurprising that she revels in the attention and visibility she gets on social media.

Similarly, social media added depth to our understanding of her character. The valuation of Zelu of social media in the novel means we understand her through what she said about herself, what other characters say about her, and the social media discourses about her. One aspect of Zelu we have seen in the novel is the invisibility she largely endures among her relations and her response to this invisibility. In some of her encounters with her family, she appears obstinate and resentful. Conversely, her social media valuation and visibility shows that Zelu is someone capable of excitement and positivity. Her internalization of the

positivity she gets from social media engagements and her interaction with a broader community of audience, especially those who read her work and like her, runs parallel to the invisibility she gets from her immediate family. Part of our understanding of her character in the novel therefore oscillates between her relationship with her family and the value she has received on social media. There is a depth to her character that her interactions on social media shows, interactions that we do not see her having with her own family but that she takes up on social media.

Suggested In-class Activity and Discussion Questions

Students will analyze the elements that make social media content go viral, paying attention to language, audio, visuals, hashtags, and other features.

1. Divide the class into small groups. Each group will choose a viral video or trend to analyze.
2. Identify and analyze key elements: audio, visuals, captions, hashtags, tone, and engagement tactics. In the analysis, consider the following questions.
 - a. What types of videos go viral on TikTok or Instagram? What makes content engaging or shareable?
 - b. What role does language (slang, captions, hashtags) play?
 - c. How do audio and visual trends influence popularity?
 - d. Why does framing (camera angles, lighting, editing) matter?
3. Each group will present a short summary of their findings to the class.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE VIRAL MOMENTS OF DISABILITY

Death of the Author presents two moments when discussions around Zelu's disability become a subject on social media and the reason where her value as an author is both contested and validated. The kind of response that the two viral moments garnered could not be more different. In the interview with Amanda in chapter 27, Zelu is accused of "rejecting the identity of a person with disabilities," (207) partly because of her use of high-tech prosthetics. Zelu's stern rejection of that accusation prompted significant backlash and abuse on social media. On the other hand, in chapter 40, after she escapes from a kidnap attempt with the help of the same prosthetic technology, Zelu is well praised and admired by many people online. The novel seems to counterpoint these two moments where disability goes viral to raise an interesting point of discussion about the positive and negative implications of social media visibility for discussions about disability.

In subsection 1 of this unit, we looked at how social media enhanced Zelu's visibility. Similarly, in Unit 2, we addressed the importance of visibility for disabled people while also pointing out the challenges and risks that come with that visibility. Social media amplifies two dimensions of visibility because while viral moments can provide needed visibility for people with disabilities, it can also quickly make them hypervisible and susceptible to public attacks. Similarly, social media can also easily make disabled people "Inspiration porn." The concept, "inspiration porn" was coined by Stella Young, a journalist, comedian, and disability activist from Australia. She describes inspiration porn as, "an image of a person with a disability, often a kid, doing something completely ordinary—like playing, or talking, or running,

or drawing a picture, or hitting a tennis ball—carrying a caption like ‘your excuse is invalid’ or ‘before you quit, try’” (See Stella Young, “We’re not here for your Inspiration”). Young further elaborates, that “the intent of this inspiration porn; it’s there so that non-disabled people can put their worries into perspective. So they can go, “Oh well if that kid who doesn’t have any legs can smile while he’s having an awesome time, I should never, EVER feel bad about my life.” It’s there so that non-disabled people can look at us and think ‘well, it could be worse... I could be that person’” Inspiration porn resulting from social media visibility reinscribes ableist ideologies and perceptions of body normativity instead of serving the purpose of showing the social and cultural prejudices that people with disabilities often confront.

At the same time, there may be moments when these “feel-good” stories about people with disabilities can serve purpose. This is especially the case for people of color for whom their disability has also been aggravated by racial oppression that causes them to consistently experience significant invisibility and precarity. For disabled people of color who only frequently see negative and traumatic stories about other disabled people of color, any positive story or example that surfaces online becomes an encouragement and trigger for them to keep agitating for disability rights and justice (See Villisa Thompson, “White Privilege and Inspiration Porn” and Sami Schalk, “Black Disability Gone Viral: A Critical Race Approach to Inspiration Porn”). When this racial dynamics of thinking about inspiration porn is considered, social media and viral circulation of disability becomes both important and necessary.

Considering these two contexts where disability can be used as inspiration might allow us to better understand the two viral moments about Zelu’s disability in the novel. Part of the backlash Zelu suffers in the first viral moment is racially charged:

Bitch!
Your book is AI-generated trash.
Dumbass Africans always sell out to white people the fastest
Even the ones with no legs.
We were so behind you!
I’m throwing my book away!
Stop lying to us. You’re actually a robot right? (209)

Moreover, the fact that Amanda, a white non-disabled woman accuses a black disabled woman about how she chooses to present her body to the world, suggests how racism and ableism align in creating a negative image and abuse for a person with disability. Zelu in this context is no inspiration, on the contrary, she represents the justification for a prejudiced racist and ableist narrative directed towards disabled people of color.

It is working against this negative viral moment and what Zelu has suffered from it, that the narrative presents a positive viral moment in chapter 40. Of course, part of the reason Zelu may have gotten a positive reaction online is that she survived a brutal and traumatic episode. For the many people watching her online feed, she becomes an inspiration, someone they love and want to be like:

We love you, Zelu!
Queen of Robots!
You're so COOL!
...
I wish I could be like you!
We were all watching!
I literally love you!
Never stop writing! (343)

Pairing some of the comments from the two viral moments show repetition of similar views but from opposite perspectives: “Bitch!/We love you, Zelu;” “Your book is AI-generated trash/Never stop writing;” “Dumbass Africans/I wish I could be like you;” “Stop lying to us. You’re actually a robot right?/Queen of Robots.” The way the comments echo one another shows how the comments in the second viral moment are a reversal of the first. However, despite the celebratory messages she gets on social media and people’s aspiration to be like her, a question remains, which part of the Zelu do they want to be like? The one that is celebrated online because she is disabled or the one that was dragged online for the same reason? Or maybe social media is the world where those distinctions blur, because whether the attention is negative or positive, virality always boils down to numbers. That blurring is important. From a storytelling perspective, it forces us to think differently about character. Zelu’s arc may look like it is about growth (how an unknown writer becomes a celebrity powerhouse). But what if the story is really about being made and unmade by digital attention?

From a disability perspective, the blurring reveals how hypervisibility can be both empowering and precarious. With social media’s cancel culture, we are all caught in a loop, uplifted one moment, attacked the next. But we often forget that this culture is built on the value we assign to metrics. The question isn’t just what people see in Zelu, but why visibility itself has become the measure of worth on social media. What underlies this aspiration to be like Zelu is a viral moment where the vulnerability and survival of a disabled person is seen by millions of people. However, on the other hand, in the immediate moment before her online abuse, Zelu appears less vulnerable and was at the height of fame and recognition as a writer. To be sure, Zelu did not ask to be an inspiration to anyone, she had gone live on Facebook in a desperate attempt to survive, and she makes me this point clearly: “Call me robot woman, whatever you want. I’m *alive*!” (340).

The point that *Death of the Author* appears to be making with these viral moments are the complexities involved in digital and social media visibility for anyone, but especially people with disability. Social media visibility can amplify the objectification of people with disabilities, while it can also be a powerful tool for visibility and survival of the same people. Perhaps, what the novel is signposting is an ethical and non-prejudiced way of engaging with content about disability when they surface online?

Suggested In-class Activity and Discussion Questions

1. Watch Stella Young's talk titled, "I Am Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much." In the talk, Young expands on the idea of inspiration porn and shows a bunch of images where disabled people are used as subjects of inspiration. Her criticism about inspiration porn raises questions about the hypervisibility of disabled people on social media while also prompting possible discussions regarding ethical and non-prejudiced engagements with contents about disability on social media.
2. Ask the students the following questions:
 - a. In your own words, summarize Young's arguments.
 - b. Have you seen images and videos of inspiration porn on social media? If you have, how do the images you saw compare with the ones Young showed in the talk? In other words, is there a stylistic pattern that you can deduce from these kinds of images?
 - c. Do you think there can be representations of disability on social media that will be positive alternatives to inspiration porn? If you think so, discuss some of these possible alternatives.

THE SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE OF *DEATH OF THE AUTHOR*

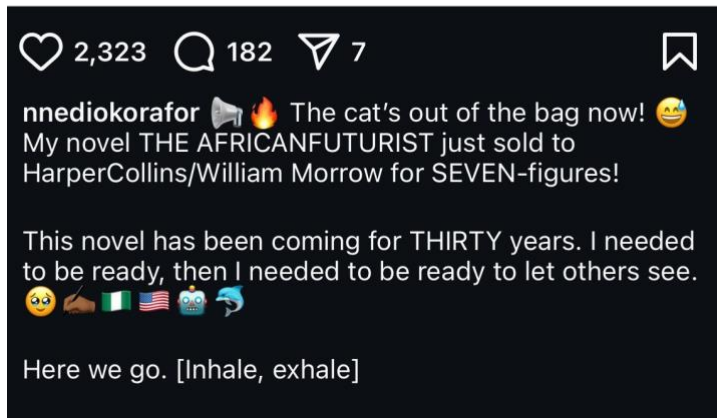
So far in this unit, we have examined how social media shapes literature, and the viral moments of disability in the novel. To fully understand how *Death of the Author* engages with the world of social media, it helps to look beyond the novel's pages at the role social media played in the production and marketing of this book, as well as the discussions it created. Studying that history gives us another lens for thinking about authorship, visibility, and literary value in the platform age. In other words, there are certain things that we cannot know about the book and its significance without looking to social media. In this subsection, we will look at the social media content surrounding *Death of Author*, from its many phases: book contract announcement, editing, title reveal, book cover reveal, eventual release, and first official book review. In each of these phases, the author, Nnedi Okorafor, presents interesting insights about her investment in the book and some of the editorial and artistic choices that have been made. What many readers see and interact with is the final production of a book, but because of the active social media engagement of Okorafor, we can have a sneak peek into the developmental stages of the book and glean some insights from it.

The social media appearances around the novel started with Okorafor's announcement about the million-dollar contract she signed with publishers, HarperCollins/William Morrow, for the North American rights to the novel. This announcement was both publicized on Okorafor's Instagram page on July 10, 2023, and at this point, the novel was titled, *The Africanfuturist*.



Morrow Lands Okorafor

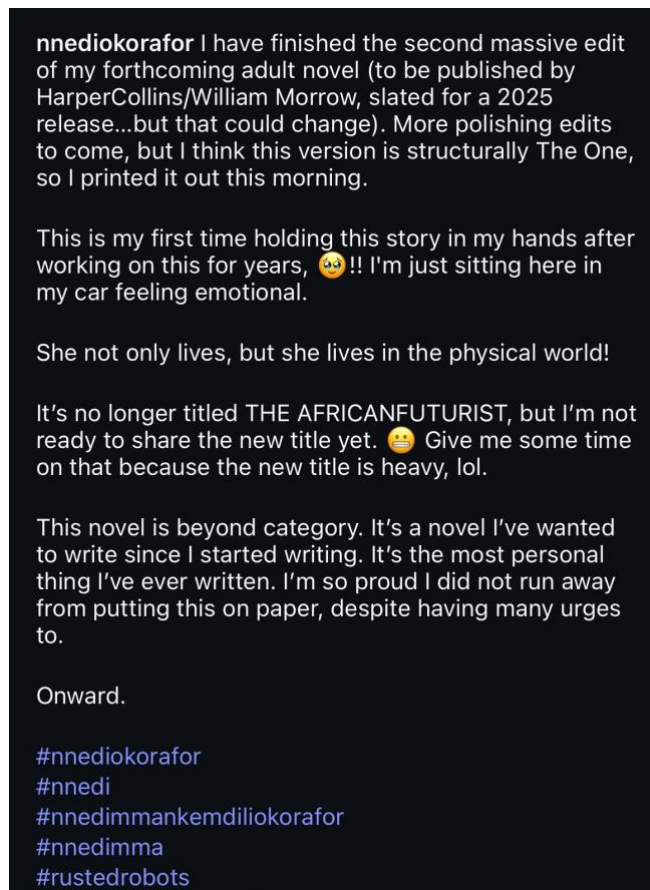
In a seven-figure deal, William Morrow's **Julia Elliott** bought North American rights to **Nnedi Okorafor's** novel *The Africanfuturist*. Okorafor is a bestselling science fiction/fantasy author and winner of the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy awards, and her 2010 novel *Who Fears Death* is currently in series development at HBO. She was represented by **Angeline Rodriguez and Eric Simonoff** at William Morris Endeavor. *The Africanfuturist*, which Morrow compared to *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*, is about a disabled Nigerian American woman who writes a science fiction novel that brings her success at a steep personal cost. The publisher added that the work is "a multi-threaded meta drama examining the relationship between a story and its teller, the labyrinth of African diasporic identity, family, and what makes us human." *The Africanfuturist* is scheduled for winter 2025.



A screenshot of the book contract announcement by Nnedi Okorafor on her Instagram account on July 10, 2023.

This was a big deal for two reasons. First, the seven-figure advance was for North American rights only, and for a single book! In many cases, deals of this size are tied to multiple books or include world rights, allowing the publisher to recoup their investment through global sales. The fact that this was a one-book, single-territory deal helps us understand the nature of Okorafor's influence in the global literary market. What is also important in the announcement, is Okorafor's comment that the novel "has been coming for thirty years, I needed to be ready..." which suggests the length of time she has been thinking and working on the novel. In those thirty years, Okorafor has written many other accomplished novels, won or have been a finalist on pretty much every major sci-fi/fantasy award, and yet her comments suggest she has a special investment in *Death of the Author*, perhaps because the novel provides many references to her own personal life and experience. What is clear and absolute from the social media post is that Okorafor wants her readers to know that she has a lot of personal interest and investment in this novel.

After Okorafor finished the second stage of editing, she announced that the novel's title has changed. Okorafor shared this development on her Instagram page:



A screenshot of the first physical copy of the novel by Nnedi Okorafor on her Instagram account on December 4, 2023.

In this December 4, 2023, post Okorafor again mentions how she has been working on the novel for a long time. Her emphasis on how long she has been working on the novel should be seen as a part of the so-called “story” of the novel itself. Okorafor is inviting her readers to appreciate the incubation period of the novel, and how she draws on her personal experience. Okorafor says that “the novel is beyond category”—a loaded hint which suggests its multiple forms. One of the things this post suggests is the autobiographical component. Without any doubt, *Death of the Author* is not an outright autobiography. But Okorafor’s acknowledgement about how the novel is personal will allow readers to draw inferences about the author’s life (which is shared on social media) from the characters. With this post, whether deliberately or not, Okorafor shapes the interpretation of the novel at least two years before it is published.

In a series of posts between May and June 2024, Okorafor announces the new title of the novel, the precise date it is going to be released, and reveals the two covers. In these posts, Okorafor continues to state how long she has wanted to write the novel and the many themes that it illuminates.



A screenshot of the new title of the novel by Nnedi Okorafor on her Instagram account on May 30, 2024.

Okorafor indicates the source of the title of her novel, a 1967 essay by French literary theorist and philosopher, Roland Barthes. The reference to Barthes is another move by Okorafor to intimate her readers about the reference to literary criticism that her novel evokes. By stating this intertextual reference, Okorafor is adding an intellectual layer that can be used to view the novel. Furthermore, reading this post alongside her December 4, 2023, post where Okorafor hints at the autobiographical background of the novel and its resistance to categories, the novelist is showing the different interpretative lenses that her readers can use to approach the novel when it is finally released.

She provides even further insights about the novel's form, subjects, and themes, and how they inform the creative choices that were made for its cover designs. The hashtags that she includes in the posts reflect more details about the novel. #RustedRobots, #nigerianamerican, #africandiaspora, #africanfuturism are hashtags that are consistent with the two posts, with only a few variations. However, on the June 17 post, she adds a few more new hashtags which add specific details about the text. These hashtags include #disabilitylit, #Zelu, and #posthuman. With these new hashtags, Okorafor introduces the name of the novel's protagonist, the posthuman robot narrative, and the focus on disability. Essentially, Okorafor's posts about the different stages of the novel's development are calculated and geared towards gradually exposing different aspects of the novel online to create anticipation among reading publics for the work.



A screenshot of the novel's cover reveal by Nnedi Okorafor on her Instagram account on June 17, 2024.

And there is probably no better way to ramp up this anticipation than the release of the novel's official blurb and first review. Okorafor posts this blurb on October 3, 2024, and the first official review on November 29, 2024. Posting the blurb and first official review just a few months away from the novel's release provides even more details about what readers can expect from it and garners more publicity for the work. Furthermore, the social media posts and online presence of the novel reveal the intentionality that goes into the writing, editing, and designing of a cultural text. Far less circumstantial, literary works, like *Death of the Author*, are carefully curated pieces of a puzzle, and it is this intentionality behind their production that we mirror when we critically examine and interpret them.

Suggested In-class Activity and Discussion

This activity is a debate about the initial title of the book. Now that you know the initial title of the book, assuming that *The Africanfuturist* is the final title of the novel, argue for and against the relevance of the title to the narrative. In your argument, consider the following:

1. Define Africanfuturism clearly.
2. State how that definition fits the novel by citing examples from specific aspects of the narrative.
3. What aspects of the novel do not fit the title?

UNIT ACTIVITIES AND PROJECT IDEAS

Online Reading Group: In this assignment, you will create an online reading community for *Death of the Author* using the following steps:

1. Choose a platform: TikTok or Instagram.
2. Using the hashtag of the novel that Okorafor mentions in her posts, #deathoftheauthor, complete a short review of the book. The review should not be more than one minute. For the review, simply focus on the aspect of the novel that you like the most, and use that as the basis for your review.
3. Post the review online. In addition, comment on a review of your classmate or another creator and draft a second, shorter post in response to their commentary.

OR

4. Submit your review without posting it. (We recognize that some students may not want to post their reviews online, such people can download the review they did and submit it directly).

Social Media Campaign for *Rusted Robots*: Drawing from the examples of how Okorafor created a social media campaign for *Death of the Author*; using a fake social media account, create a social media campaign for *Rusted Robots* that will include announcement about the book contract, new book covers, and blurb. Consider the following steps for project:

1. Choose the online platform you prefer for the media campaign
2. Create a hashtag for the book
3. Using the hashtag, create a series of posts focusing on the announcement of the book contract, editing of the book, book covers, and blurb of the book.
4. Create a digital collage from the posts you have made for the social media campaign

Create Your Own “Fake TikTok”: For this project students will be working in groups. Each group will create a fake TikTok account and conceptualize a short video that could go viral.

1. Conceptualize a short video idea that could go viral.
2. Storyboard the video (no filming required unless desired).
3. Include: title, script/dialogue, camera angles, audio choice, hashtags, and visual style.
4. Explain why they made certain choices (e.g., “We used this sound because it’s trending,” or “We framed it this way to mimic popular POV videos”).

UNIT 7. PREPARING TO MEET THE AUTHOR

ABOUT THIS UNIT

This unit aims to prepare students to fully engage in the Annual Student Conference by fostering active participation and involvement. It focuses on equipping students with strategies to build their confidence, address any concerns they may have, and set clear expectations for their conference experience. Through this unit, students will be better prepared to contribute meaningfully to the conference and take full advantage of the opportunities it offers.

Keynote Speaker: Nnedi Okorafor

This year, the Great World Texts program will welcome Nnedi Okorafor, author of *Death of the Author* to the Annual Student Conference. Students from across the state will have the opportunity to converse with her about the novel. This interaction is the core component of the Annual Student Conference.

On Meeting a Writer

Meeting the writer will be a thrilling experience for some of your students, but it might also prove nerve-racking for others. To prepare students for this event, consider the following in advance of the conference:

- What are the expectations for students' behavior?
- Considering that Nnedi Okorafor will only be on campus for one day, what are the ground rules for interacting with the writer in a respectful and efficient way?
- What kind of questions should they ask, and how will they present their work?
- How can they best prepare for the poster sessions and speaking about their projects to viewers?
- What should teachers do if students are nervous, disruptive, or unprepared?

The preparatory materials listed below will help you and your students develop a deeper sense of Nnedi Okorafor, what to expect at the Annual Student Conference and how to prepare for it.

Prepare your students for meeting Nnedi Okorafor

Emphasize that, like all people, our keynote speaker could be nervous, excited, happy, sad, shy, in a good or bad mood, etc. Show clips or articles of the writer doing interviews and show the class their photograph so they can think of them as individuals from the start.

Emphasize being courteous and respectful

Those students designated to ask questions during the keynote should always greet and thank Nnedi Okorafor, introduce themselves by name and school affiliation, and then ask a question. Encourage students to make eye contact and to be polite and confident!

Help students avoid feelings of anxiety

Focus on the experience, not the “performance” or act of talking to Okorafor. Emphasize that they are coming to the conference, travelling long distance from overseas, precisely because they are interested in and excited about the ideas that students have developed as they’ve read *Death of the Author*. Know that they think students have something to say that is worth hearing. Emphasize that this is a dialogue, meaning that student voices matter. Okorafor wants to hear from students as much as they want to hear from them.

Encourage them to be specific

Ask students to avoid being superficial and say things like “I love this book!” or “I hate this book!” Students should be prepared to articulate what they loved most about the novel and *why*. In preparation, ask your class to consider what was most inspiring, thought-provoking, or challenging about the text.

Tips for asking questions

Avoid yes or no questions. Instead, ask questions that allow room for thought and interpretation. Consider, too, the “lead in” to the question. Students should give a little context to let the author know where they’re coming from.

Be prepared

Ask students to think about how Nnedi Okorafor might react to a given question. Once you’ve chosen which questions to ask the keynote speaker, role-play possible answers as a class. Prepare a list of follow-up questions, too.

On Decorum

This conference will be a serious academic affair and a lot of planning has gone into this event by teachers, students, UW faculty, staff, etc. The people in attendance have spent months preparing for this event. Disruptive, discourteous, or disrespectful behavior is unacceptable. Teachers whose students do not follow the decorum guidelines are expected to remove them from the room immediately.

Suggested Questions for Discussion

- What questions do you most want to be answered? What do you want to know about *Death of the Author*? Hold a conference dress rehearsal. If your group of participating students is small, this might consist of each student giving a brief but formal presentation of her project, followed by a question-and-answer session. If your participating students are large, split them into two groups. Have one group present their projects first and the other second. Students will alternate between presenting and viewing, just as they will on the official conference day.
- Role-play meeting Okorafor. Have students prepared with questions, and practice asking and answering them. What questions got the best (or worst) answers? Why?
- Brainstorm productive questions. In small groups, students should write down as many questions as they can think of to ask the author. Then switch questions with other groups and select those which seem best and those which seem least effective. Use this as the basis for a discussion about how we decide if a question is “good” or “bad.” Hint: the least effective questions are too easy to answer, produce obvious answers, or could easily be answered by anyone reading the book. You might have students revise with this discussion in mind, practicing how to construct clear, direct, and interesting questions.