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Cyborgs Write Back with an Accent: Stories and Storytelling in Nnedi Okorafor's *Death of the Author*

Abstract: The article examines Nnedi Okorafor's *Death of the Author* (2025) through the intersecting lenses of postcolonialism, posthumanism, and literary theory. Drawing on the landmark formula "the Empire writes back", it argues that in Okorafor's novel the act of "writing back with an accent" (Zabus) is reconfigured through Africanfuturist cyborg figures: hybrid entities do not only contest colonial legacies, but also displace human-centered models of authorship and storytelling. The analysis focuses on Zelu, a transhuman prosthetic-wearing woman, and Ankara, a posthuman android, split among their roles of fictional characters, fictive authors, avatars and algorithms. Their shifting identities expand Barthes's notion of the "death of the author" into a post-diasporic and Afropolitan logic of distributed authorship. Situating the text within Africanfuturism, the article reads *Death of the Author* as a cyborg laboratory where human, technological and cultural accents intersect, clash and co-create.

Keywords: Africanfuturism; Authorship and Narrative Authority; "Writing Back with an Accent"; Transhuman and Posthuman Cyborgs; Afropolitanism; Post-diaspora.

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Introduction

The Empire Strikes Back – the iconic title of the *Star Wars* sequel released in May 1980 – inspired Salman Rushdie to launch, during an interview with *The Times* Literary Supplement, the catchphrase "The Empire Writes Back"; this was destined to become a hallmark formula in postcolonial studies. Rushdie played on the cinema reference to describe the intellectual retaliation of postcolonial writers like himself, who challenged the European literary canon, by reshaping it from the margins: "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance"[1]. Witty as it is, the phrase would have not attained full popularity if Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin had not used it as a title for their 1989 co-authored book: *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*[2], one of the first comprehensive mappings of the way colonial legacies are challenged through literature.

The present approach to Nnedi Okorafor's 2025 novel draws less on this seminal source of postcolonial "writing back" theory, as on Chantal Zabus's reinterpretation

of the popular phrase: "writing back with an accent"[3], which foregrounds the way language appropriation ("indigenization"[4]) challenges authority from inside its own linguistic frame. Thus, the idea of writing back "with a vengeance" shifts toward writing back "with an accent". As will be argued below, Okorafor's *Death of the Author* recasts the "accent" from a linguistic inflection into an ontological condition; it is not only linguistic choices, but speech itself embedded in culture that bears the imprint of hybridity – human, cyborg and algorithmic. On the crossroads of postcolonialism, posthumanism and literary theory, the present study traces Africanfuturist writing back "accents" in Nnedi Okorafor's *Death of the Author*, centering the questions of literary authority, story, and storytelling.

Nnedi Okorafor has pioneered this unique branch of speculative fiction known as Africanfuturism – a term she coined to set it apart from the well-established Afrofuturist tradition. Whereas Afrofuturism typically refers to science fiction rooted in African American cultural and historical experiences, Africanfuturism centers on imagined futures within Africa. In these stories, the decolonized continent emerges as a hub of cultural and technological advancement, where ancestral traditions, futurist innovations, myth, and magic intertwine. The Africanfuturist trend is thus hybrid by design, as it bridges oral tradition, indigenous cosmologies, speculative technologies, and global discourses. It emerges as a rhizomatic constellation of indigenism, postcolonialism, trans- & posthumanism and feminism, and remains open to linguistic, narrative, and thematic experiment.

Also, Africanfuturism, in Nnedi Okorafor's conception and practice, relies heavily on lived experience. Her writing is shaped by at least two major biographical forces: her bicultural Nigerian-American heritage (she was born in Chicago to Igbo parents) and a life-altering adolescent trauma (an unsuccessful surgery that left her temporarily disabled). The ordeal propelled her into the world of literature and fueled a fascination with advanced prosthetics, imagined futures, and the possibilities of the trans- and posthuman: "It took years, but battling through my paralysis was the very thing that ignited my passion for storytelling and the transformative power of the imagination"[5]. Through the repeated refashioning of lived experience into story – *Death of the Author*, *Noor*, *Akata Witch*, the *Binti* trilogy… – Nnedi Okorafor molds her writing into a biocultural palimpsest that grows with each work.

On this basis, the writer's decision to retitle the book under analysis *Death of the Author* (from its original *The Africanfuturist*) carries significant meaning. Through this change, she challenges Barthes's canonical 1967 essay while simultaneously reframing the novel's thematic priorities – shifting from explorations of diasporic identity and cultural hybridity to a more self-conscious, metafictional interrogation of authorship and of narrative authority in a posthuman era.

In an interview with Miwa Messer, Nnedi Okorafor underscores her latest novel's privileged place in her body of work and its deeply personal inflection. She presents *Death of the Author* as both a corollary and a matured literary work: "It was the story I wanted to write when I started writing, but I wasn't ready", she admits, while also calling it "the most personal" and "emotional" of her books, one that

finally allows her to be "on stage" rather than "the director backstage"[6]. This disclosure positions Okorafor as an author within the tale, in deliberate polemical tension with the book's title. The author's stepping into her own narrative while evoking the author's symbolic demise signals a theoretical provocation. Nnedi Okorafor does not simply rewrite Barthes, but relocates his thesis into a twenty-first century, African-futurist context, where authorship becomes a contested, posthuman space.

Within this framework, *Death of the Author* mobilizes transhumanist and posthumanist motifs not to celebrate machinic transcendence in a techno-progressive key, but to rethink narrative agency under conditions of technological and cultural mutation. Okorafor's posthuman figures do not evolve by abandoning the human; they evolve by returning to story. Storytelling becomes the space where AI code meets human memory and creativity, triggering an evolutionary shift – a post-anthropological "great leap forward" – and renegotiating the power to author the future.

Stories and Storytelling in *Death of the Author*

Death of the Author unfolds along two interlaced narrative strands. The first follows Zelu (Zelunjo Onyenezi-Onyedele), a disabled Nigerian American writer in her early thirties from a Chicago Igbo-Yoruba family. Zelu enters the story as a struggling novelist, recently removed from her teaching position in creative writing after a classroom dispute over Barthes's "death of the author". Shaken by the incident and stifled by her overprotective family, she longs to take a break from it all, a wish that materializes in the spontaneous writing of a science-fiction novel, named *Rusted Robots*.

The second narrative thread – *Rusted Robots* itself, the novel-within-the-novel – follows Ankara, an android protagonist set against a future, posthuman Nigeria. Masking its artifice, *Rusted Robots* unfolds along a recognizably science-fiction scaffolding: when Bodiless AIs (NoBodies or "Ghosts") threaten to erase the Humes (robots like Ankara herself who still carry traces of human legacy), a more ominous peril looms overhead: The Trailers, AIs from outer space herald the destruction of the Earth.

As Zelu navigates her physical, psychological, professional, and familial crises across Chicago, Lagos, and the Nigerian countryside, Ankara embarks on her own epic journey – Nigerian, but planetary in scope – from novice scholar-robot, tasked with collecting the remnants of human knowledge, to planetary redeemer through storytelling. Storytelling is the driving force in both strands, supplying resilience and purpose, while assuming, as the narratives unfold, mnemonic, artistic, therapeutic and ultimately salvific roles.

Posthuman robots are designed to narrate – linear coding governs their modes of communication and thought – but their relation to story is mechanical and algorithmic, not creative. They can reproduce narrative form, yet remain incapable of invention:

> Narrative is one of the key ways automation defines the world. We Humes have always been clear about this fact. Stories are what holds all things together. They make things matter, they

> make all things be, exist. Our codes are written in a linear fashion. Our protocols are meant to be carried out with beginnings, middles, ends. (…) But true storytelling has always been one of the few great things humanity could produce that no automation could. Stories were prizes to be collected, shared, protected, and experienced.[7]

This is deeply ironic for even as Ankara explains the storytelling limits of AI, she is *telling the story*[8]; what in theory cannot be – is, in her case, performed. The irony intensifies when Ankara's performance is seen through Barthes's notion of the book as a "book made of books": "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture"[9]. This is because her cyborg performance precisely enacts Barthes's principle of recombined authorship.

Gaining creativity – transcending the boundary between programmed narration and imaginative storytelling – constitutes a revolutionary update: a kind of "trans-robotism", transhumanism in reverse, where automation acquires human enhancement. Human stories feed the Humes, enriching their code and fueling their evolution. This reversal, along with the novel's references to "robot DNA" and to an evolutionary horizon, resonates with the Africanfuturist vision, which resists Western techno-futurist hierarchies and reimagines the boundary between the organic and the artificial in more reciprocal, fluid terms.

The Africanfuturist frame also enables the enactment of an African – specifically Igbo – theory of orature (via Isidore Okpewho[10] and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o[11]), in which storytelling is magic, an arcane connection to the invisible and a transmutation of spirit into word[12]. It is precisely the *magic* of storytelling that the Hume Scholar yearns after:

> We Humes had a profound love of storytelling. But 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*[13] that humanity could wield[14].

Though based on written code, the Humes make stories circulate in ways that recall human orality. Their social exchange of stories (reciting, sharing, tale trading) mimics the dynamics of oral tradition: circulation, performance, communal ownership, and transmission as living event rather than static artifact. These practices suggest that storytelling, while pertaining to the essence of the human, have migrated into the posthuman sphere as collective cultural memory: "We Humes reveled in stories. We recited to each other the greatest and the worst. (…) We all had our own libraries, and when we came across others of our kind, we exchanged them. Stories were the greatest currency to us, greater than power, greater than control"[15]; "With great enthusiasm, the Humes mined, coveted and shared stories. They savored them as ambrosia"[16].

The association of stories with food ("Stories were our food, nourishment, enrichment"[17]) or drink (Zelu "drinks"[18] her father's stories) – "consumed" by posthuman, non-organic entities – literalizes the human image of knowledge as spiritual nourishment, while the allusion to forbidden pleasure (ambrosia, "digital hallucinogens"[19]) introduces a transgressive dimension: storytelling becomes both sustenance and intoxication, a mode of feeding and exceeding the self. In this sense, the Humes' appetite for stories mirrors humanity's ancient hunger for meaning, recast in posthuman terms, where code replaces flesh and data stand for spirit.

Beyond and before this, the novel foregrounds its own *poiesis*: it turns the act of telling into the very subject of the tale, and accordingly teems with formal experimentation. Signs of narrative instability proliferate from the opening chapters. *Rusted Robots* unfolds through Ankara's first-person internal perspective, while Zelu's life is recounted by an external narrator, voice, style, and structure diverging sharply across the strands. The two narratives proceed in parallel through asymmetrical alternation of chapters, whose entwinement produces deliberate fragmentation and a heteroglossic interplay. Polyphony is further amplified by interspersed "interviews" with Zelu's entourage – one-sided inserts that efface the interviewer and adopt an urgent, oral register – thus thickening the work's multilayered temporality. At the same time, the interviews function as a narrative exoskeleton – much like Zelu's revolutionary MIT-designed prosthetic legs – reinforcing the credibility of her story.

The interplay of heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narration, together with the interview form, not only interrogates the methods and limits of storytelling, but also exerts pressure on the chronotope (in Bakhtin's sense[20]). The trans-local chronotope linking the United States and Nigeria situates the novel firmly within the Africanfuturist paradigm – Africa-centered, yet globally entangled. By synchronizing the human past (family history), the transhuman present (the twenty-first century), the posthuman future, and elements of West African mythology across its dual settings, the novel's compressed time-space performs an ideological function: it aligns Zelu's personal trauma with both the posthuman apocalyptic threat and the imminence of the 'death of the author', allowing the posthuman plot to allegorize both the human and the metatextual without collapsing their distinct dimensions. Zelu's disablement (body imperiled) becomes a micro-model of systemic collapse (knowledge lost) or, the other way round, Ankara's endangered world reflects allegorically Zelu's, foregrounding their common struggle over who gets the power to author the future.

Meanwhile, the asymmetrical alternation of chapters has its own rhetorical function. By repeating the consecutive immersion and extraction of the reader from the story it builds tension and expectation, raises narrative debt across strands, and forces the reader to supply the connective tissue and infer a third sense from two discrepant sequences. This way, by staging a novel (*Rusted Robots*) inside the novel, *Death of the Author* turns composition into *diegesis*. *Poiesis* is not merely paratext, but plot in its own right. This *mise en abyme* enacts Barthes's thesis by redistributing authorship from a solitary source to a

network of voices, and it turns craft (voice, rhythm, chapter alternation) into powerful signs. The embedded novel becomes a laboratory where questions about authorship, genre, and readership are run as narrative experiments.

Yet the novel's most powerful device is its mirror play. The frame narrative and the novel-within-the-novel mirror each other so closely that the line separating truth from illusion dissolves. Furthermore, through a quasi-palindromic design, the final (51st) chapter delivers a radical reversal that invites a "reading backwards", seemingly restoring "true" authors to their authority. If the preceding chapters encourage to read Ankara as Zelu's fictional double (and, by extension, as Okorafor's), the last chapter inverts the relation: Ankara is revealed as the "real" creator of *Death of the Author*, while Zelu is exposed as an author-avatar – a character generated by an elusive algorithm. The book thus stages the first "original" work authored by a posthuman agent; Zelu, the human narrator who seemed to speak in Okorafor's voice, is unmasked as a simulacrum.

This reversal both detonates the reader's expectations and discloses the machinery of the carefully engineered mirage. The interspersed "interviews" – initially perceived as an effective means of tracing the "real" author – ultimately prove deceptive, their documentary frame concealing a carefully constructed narrative artifice. The original narrative architecture of the book crumbles under the weight of this final epiphany, while its new architecture reveals itself instantaneously, thriving on paradox: the initial frame (*Death of the Author* story) becomes the new framed, the formerly embedded story (*Rusted Robots*) surfaces as the new frame, while this whole tectonic plate movement engenders a logical vortex – *Rusted Robots* and *Death of the Author* both embed and frame each other. Ankara and Zelu author each other – and what, if anything, is Okorafor's residual role?

Polyphony here is not merely a plurality of voices but the co-presence of incompatible author-functions: human author (Okorafor), posthuman author (Ankara), character-author (Zelu), while the interspersed "interviews" that punctuate the narrative resolve, in retrospect, into *prompts* addressing an impersonal algorithmic or platform author. Indeed, the novel's first line is prompt-like: "What's the story you want?"[21] – "What you think [Zelu] is – it's all made up"[22]; whether fabricated by human imagination or by AI, literary figures are, after all, "made up". What changes is the architecture of authorship: from vertical (singular, human-centered) to distributed (networked, multi-agent), fractal authorship, with humans and systems functioning as co-generators of the story.

Extending this reading, the prominence of the "Ankara motif" within the novel's narrative economy invites a new metatextual interpretation: Ankara emerges not only as android and later cyborg, as the paradoxical author authored by Zelu – her algorithmic avatar – but, in a further twist, as the *text* itself. Like the novel's narrative *textus*, Ankara is layered, coded, and meaningful:

> My name is Ankara. I gave the 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. My soul was information, communication. I was this body (…), but I was also a mind full of data[23].

As Ankara's creation and textual extension, Zelu bears the imprint of Ankara's authorship: "[Zelu] was wearing an Ankara pantsuit; West African wax-print cloth was her go-to when it came to fashion. She said she liked the colors and that Ankara cloth always looked like it was 'trying to go somewhere'"[24]. So too does the text, always in motion, mirroring Ankara's restless patterns.

The motif reaches full maturity when Zelu, dressed in an Ankara-inspired outfit, attends the premiere of the de-Africanized *Rusted Robots* film. In this scene – where visual image, identity, and textuality converge – the distorted Ankara patterns come to symbolize the very 'death of the author', at once through the film's "bleaching" of the book and as a powerful instance of cultural appropriation in action:

> Her novel was set in Nigeria after humanity had died off. The robots populating the 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*[25], 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. (…) 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[26].

Though now celebrated as a marker of West African identity, the history of Ankara fabric is deeply entangled with colonial trade, cultural appropriation, and commodification. In this light, Ankara comes to the fore as the novel's most resonant West African accent – a fabric that, like the text itself, is both cultural artifact and digital illusion.

By the end, as Ankara herself becomes a generator of stories, she simultaneously embraces her condition as something written: "My operating system is Ankara themed, my body etched with geometric designs. I'm the embodiment of a human story"[27]. Her authorship operates on multiple, overlapping planes. At the extradiegetic level, she is created by Nnedi Okorafor, the real-world author whose role the novel ironizes in its title. Within the *diegesis*, she is pseudo-authored, or perhaps post-authored, by Zelu, her algorithmic avatar and human double. At the same time, she is technologically authored – devised, programmed, and rewired by humans, including Ngozi (possibly Zelu's daughter and the last surviving human). Eventually, Ankara is culturally authored, her identity emanating from the Ankara fabric that lends her both name and symbolic lineage, a distinctly West African mark woven into

her synthetic being. In this intricate layering, the novel's textual fabric becomes at once cultural artifact and digital illusion, merging human creativity, technological mediation, and African aesthetics. When Ankara, the android, declares: "We are their [humans'] stories"[28], she affirms this composite genealogy – human, machinic, cultural, and collective – erasing the boundary between author and authored.

Authorship and Authority: From Okorafor back to Barthes

The metafictional storm in Nnedi Okorafor's novel is foreshadowed by a university classroom incident early in the book. Narrated from Zelu's perspective, the scene brings into focus a conceptual friction between her – then an adjunct professor – and a class "full of creative writing Ph.D. students who'd all convinced themselves and one another that the best type of storytelling was plotless, self-indulgent, and full of whiny characters who live mostly in their minds"[29]. What frustrates Zelu is not only the poor quality of their writing – "twenty-five pages in which none of the sentences related to one another. There was no system or logic to the sentences. Nothing. Just gibberish"[30] – but also, and apparently more, their lack of "confidence in the power of storytelling"[31] as a coherent meaning-making act.

Soon the classroom dispute escalates into a clash of authority, and ultimately into an open confrontation:

> On top of this, *the student was an entitled white boy who had been questioning her authority*[32] since the beginning of the semester (…). Zelu had tried her best to give him useful feedback. But when she finally just asked him what he believed the story meant, he'd said: 'Why don't *you* tell *me*? What I think of my own work doesn't matter. The reader decides what it's about, right? Isn't that what you said 'death of the author' meant?[33]

The "entitled" student invokes Barthes to counter Zelu's authority, revealing the academic space as one where authorship is not taught but contested. His rhetoric weaponizes literary theory, mistaking Barthes's liberation of the text for the author's erasure. For Zelu, this ideological collision marks the end of her institutional voice, while ironically initiating her birth as an author, reclaiming authorship on her own terms. At the same time, the incident exposes the core paradox of Barthes's "death of the author": if the author is stripped of authority, who inherits it? In this sense, the classroom dispute seeds the novel's central inquiry – who authorizes stories when human, institutional, and algorithmic voices collide?

Alongside its exploration of authorship and narrative authority, the novel elaborates Barthes's metaphor, bringing into sharp relief the author's many "ways of dying"[34]. Zelu loses control of her story repeatedly, each time anticipating the final *coup de grâce*. The world of *Rusted Robots*, which she believes she has created, remains under her power only for as long as she continues writing it. Month after month, *Rusted Robots* becomes her robot runaway: "her mind and soul lived in a story about robots: she wrote and wrote and wrote"[35]. Still haunted by the "death of the author" dispute, but sovereign within her fictional domain, Zelu denies her robots the power

she keeps as uniquely human: "But the one thing no robot could do was truly create stories. That was the ability Zelu *withheld from them*"[36].

With the story completed, the first signs of her authority slipping away become visible. She sends the freshly finished manuscript to Msizi, her boyfriend, seeking an external first reading, but the moment immediately triggers anxiety over loss of control: "The weird shit she'd spent more than two years writing (…) now existed in someone else's head"[37]! However, yielding authority to the reader – in Barthes's sense: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author"[38] – is but one of the several possible "deaths of the author" in the postmodern world, already marked by transhumanist logic.

Msizi himself stands as a rival to the traditional author figure: "I didn't read a lot of books, but I had a taste for Google and YouTube, studying whatever I developed an interest in. That's how I learned how to hack and *write*[39] software, develop apps, do all things digital"[40]. His stance embodies the rise of digital authorship – knowledge acquired not through literary tradition, but through networked platforms. The threat intensifies as this new digital writing is accompanied by the symbolic death of the traditional reader: chatbots and anonymous online presences become the new audience. When Zelu's social media followers (human or bot) try to undermine her authority, they accuse her of producing AI-written content – a claim that ironically anticipates the novel's ending. She must even repeatedly insist: "I'm not a robot"[41], as if compelled to perform a perpetual CAPTCHA test to prove her legitimacy as an author.

The film adaptation of *Rusted Robots* introduces yet another "way of dying" for the literary author. Present at the premiere, Zelu is caught off guard: "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"[42]. Gutting the book becomes a metonymic killing of its author, all the more so as Zelu watches her work being commodified and mystified. Here, the author consents to her own death under the triumph of derivative art:

> The Rusted Robots film was a massive box office hit, and it was accompanied by plenty of merchandise: Yankee [Ankara] and Dot [Ijele] mini robots that synched with an app on your phone; themed backpacks, wallets, and T-shirts; a Cross River video game; RoBoat action figures. (…) The capitalism machine had used her book, her attempt of shouting into the void, to make visual comfort food for drowsy minds[43].

Through the intermedial translation from book to film, the author experiences a new form of displacement as public reception becomes mediated by the commercial appropriation and distortion of her work:

> And the audience *loved* it.
> There was a standing ovation at the end of the film. When the lights came on, people were laughing, completely enchanted, congratulating each other. Strangers reached over the aisles to pat her on the shoulder. They were taking up all the air in the room; there was none left for her.

> She was sinking inside her seat. She was falling[44].

The next stage of her symbolic erasure takes place when Zelu delays the writing of the sequel to her *Rusted Robots* novel – as the contract with her editor sets out (another form of authorship constraint and loss of authority) – and, as a consequence, *Rusted Robots* fans on the platform take the initiative to author her future book:

> (…) she picked up her phone and doomscrolled for a while. (…) she didn't know how she got there, but she wound up on a website full of Rusted Robots fan fiction. There were hundreds of works written by people frustrated that there was no book two, who'd taken it upon themselves to produce one. There were chapters, short stories, novellas, and even thirty full novels! All posted for everyone to read and comment on[45].

Cyberspace apparently grants writing a form of liberation from both authorial and editorial control. But once released from the "tyranny" of official authorship, writing proliferates, becoming anarchic and maliciously subversive, revealing itself as a distorted afterlife of Barthes's precepts: "(…) the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins"[46], and also: "(…) writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing"[47]. In this sense, cyberspace writing literalizes Barthes's theory and, by doing so, destabilizes it.

What happens with the original author here goes beyond her dissolution into the plural impersonal cyberspace voices; she is not only decentered, but also substituted. Besides, the model used by these mimic-authors to write these "sequels" is not Zelu's book, but the Rusted Robots film: "Only one short story she saw called her characters Ankara and Ijele. Everyone else was using the film as the foundation. How was this possible? These were readers, right? If they were writers, weren't they usually also readers?"[48]. Like in the case of the film adaptation, authorship undergoes a double induced demise, and again, no reader emerges authorized by this process.

In Roland Barthes's view, the death of the author is a necessary step toward the reader's empowerment: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author"[49]. The reader becomes the new meaning-making authority: "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination"[50]. Nnedi Okorafor's novel, however, brings to the fore, once more, a scenario in which the reader too is "dead". The *Rusted Robots II* episode shows how both author and reader are dispersed, diluted, dissolved in the cacophonic plurality of online voices – human or algorithmic – leaving meaning undetermined and un*author*ized. Meaning is absorbed by a noisy, unbridled form of collective digital authorship comparable to the NoBodies/ "Ghosts" in *Rusted Robots*, a presence constituted by absence, replacing Barthes's empowered reader with mimic-readers for mimic-authors. In this manner, Barthes's argument is not rejected, but resettled, expanded, and radicalized.

In the same gesture, the recent quote from Okorafor's novel exposes another contradictory mechanism: the original

author (Zelu) of the book (*Rusted Robots*) becomes the reader of her yet un-authored (hence unauthorized) book sequel (*Rusted Robots II*). Authorship recedes into spectatorship and absence, as Zelu is de-authorized by the newly installed agency of digital platforms that mediate reception. Concurrently, the mutually constitutive dyad author-reader is itself imperiled, as the two concepts collapse into heterogeneous digital content sharing.

To fully activate the mirror effect and heighten the irony of its outcome, Okorafor stages a hybrid scene – part thriller, part SF – in which an attempt is made on Zelu's life. While in Nigeria to visit her father's grave with her friends from MIT, Zelu is kidnapped and almost shot by her kidnappers. The author's not dying in the Barthesian sense – both author and authored resisting the cutting of the umbilical cord – ironically brings about literal death danger upon the author. Authorship is no longer authority, control, but exposure – modern media make it so. The episode materializes Barthes's metaphor, with a grotesque twist. "Death of the Author" is no longer a philosophical idea, but an existential reality. It is no longer a symbolic death through the dispersal of meaning into the text, but the menace of literal death; Zelu nearly dies because of her authorship. Her narrative power is also her vulnerability:

> But isn't that 'love' what made all this [kidnap attempt] happen in the first place?, she thought darkly. She'd shared herself in her writing and many had enjoyed, learned from, been entertained by, and even grown and been healed by it. This was a beautiful thing. But in doing all this, she'd also made herself vulnerable. And being vulnerable could translate to being in terrible danger[51].

Extending this line of thought, authorship acquires in Nnedi Okorafor's *Death of the Author* an ontic dimension, becoming a metaphor for creation, gestation, and birth. In the *Rusted Robots* novel-within-the-novel, humans are portrayed as AI's "authors" – description consistent with the AIs' depiction as "human stories": "Humanity hung on for as long as it could. They created us, sent us all over the planet. But they left us behind. Our creators, our masters, our parents, our authors… gone"[52]. With the disappearance of humans, nature is first decentered and then recentered by the robots: the created – those once authored – having outlasted their creators, reset the planet and assume authorship themselves, taking the place of their authors.

In the meantime, the overlapping of the creator, master, parent and author functions brings the authorship-authority nexus back into focus, now inflected with an organic dimension. This organic turn – organicism and ecology being constitutive of Okorafor's Africanfuturist imaginary – prepares the ground for a further symbolic development of the authorship-authority interlocking pair. This organic logic crystallizes in Okorafor's use of the father figure, who becomes part of the novel's metafictional architecture. Zelu's father, himself a gifted storyteller, stands as one of the many faces of the "author" in *Death of the Author*. Her rhetorical question "What am I without my father?"[53] suggests a biological bond persisting beyond death and finds its mirror in the contemplation of the organic

fusion between author and authored: "Zelu lay on her bed, flipping though her own novel. She'd open to a random page and read a passage, and the scene would flood through her memory like water. When you wrote and edited and polished something so many times, it became branded into your brain"[54]. Here, detaching the text from its author would not be a minor operation, but a messy, painful surgical extraction.

Death of the father is a powerful motif in postcolonial and diasporic fiction, and authors have long mined it for its symbolic charge – roots, identity, patriarchal and political authority – as seen in Jhumpa Lahiri (*The Nickname*), Nuruddin Farah (the *Blood in the Sun* trilogy), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Purple Hibiscus*), Taiye Selasi (*Ghana Must Go*), and others. Within this larger symbolic genealogy, the death of the father is palimpsestically overwritten onto Okorafor's *Death of the Author*. By giving their patients prosthetic legs – Allen (to Zelu) and Ngozi (to Ankara) – the two intervene in their patients' bodies, but also in their stories. Ngozi "writes" Ankara into being through repair and modification, the same way Hugo "writes" Zelu's new identity by enhancing her body. In that sense, Allen and Ngozi are not just healers or helpers, but agents who rewrite Zelu's and Ankara's futures, co-authoring and parenting their subjectivities. This way, embodiment itself becomes a text inscribed by others, where agency is distributed. "Authoring" is no longer just textual, but biocultural and prosthetic.

The pregnancy motif is another key narrative device aligned with this organic turn, symbolically linking gestation to authorship and creation. At the end of the novel, Zelu boards a shuttle to the International Space Station (a scene that cleverly overlays *outer space* and *cyberspace*). She is pregnant with a girl she dreams to call Ngozi (the last human on earth in Ankara's story), but she confesses she is also carrying another form of life – the unwritten sequel to *Rusted Robots*. Suspended in its virtual state, the story becomes an eternal pregnancy, like authorship itself. Ankara, in parallel, carries Ijele, a NoBody/Ghost AI, within her system, a kind of robotic gestation. As authorship becomes an over-arching practice that links human and posthuman creation, the pregnancy motif is rendered gender-blind: Oji, the hubristic cosmic robot whose madness threatens the planet, carries solar plasma in his belly, "like a human pregnancy"[55]. Ultimately, the pregnancy motive figures the story-within-the-story logic of the novel: Zelu's and Ankara's strands mirror and frame one another in mutual gestation.

This leads to the last instance of authorial "death" in Okorafor's novel – the *coup de grâce*. Zelu loses control of the story to Ankara, who finally reveals herself to be the author behind the author, thus turning Zelu into a "paper" (digital) author. The author's final postion is paradoxical, but highly symbolic: the author keeps control of the story while losing it, proclaiming a new narrative age on Earth. When early in the novel Zelu labels her students' writing as "self-indulgent" and "robot"-like because it lacks creativity and the awareness of what it means to author – "Like *a robot attempting to be creative*[56] and getting the very concept of what that means all wrong"[57] – she implicitly draws the line between programmed narration and genuine authorship, quietly setting the stage for the novel's broader posthuman struggle over

creative agency and narrative control. The AI author both replaces and continues human authorship.

In this process, the human-authored robot acquires a voice. That voice does not simply tell the teller's tale; by reversing the roles of agent and object, it claims the right to tell the human story from the other side, effectively authoring it. Zelu's loss of institutional voice and Ankara's resistance against annihilating systems stage the same question – how narrative authority is seized, shared, or erased. Ankara breaks away, gains agency, and "writes back" to her author; in turn, Zelu's agency diminishes as Ankara becomes authorially empowered. In this imagined future, with the disappearance of its human origin, literature finds a new life: recursive, regenerative and, above all, autonomous.

Meanwhile, what *Death of the Author* stages is not simply a transfer of power – no mere repetition of Barthes's aphorism with a smart twist: "The author is dead. Long live the author!". What it proposes, in the end, is a third way beyond the posthuman paradox of the authored author. The novel's closing line – "creation flows both ways" – evokes not only the communicating vessel logic of authority: as one part gains agency, the other recedes, but also and above it, the idea of agency as not claimed, but co-authored. This conclusion reframes Barthes: authorship doesn't die; it diffuses. Behind the AI-generated story lingers the trace of human design and cultural memory. Echoing Achebe's semantic loop "People create stories create people; or rather, stories create people create stories"[58], the novel's conclusion evokes a vision of continuity rooted in postcolonial and diasporic hybridity as much as in the deeply ingrained African reverence for storytelling. Thriving on hybridity, this robot with a craving for human imagination is not simply an unconscious, man-mimicking machine. It is a new kind of cyborg – revolutionary not because it transcends the human ("transhuman"), but because it reconfigures the human from a posthuman position.

From Postcolonial to Posthuman: Cyborgs Write Back with an Accent

In the wake of the postcolonial theory, the diasporic literary author remains a politically charged figure; to silence the author is to perform a political act of symbolic domination[59]. Okorafor stages this directly in her novel: indeed, arguing "the death of the author" in class, then being punished for it becomes the very blow that catalyzes Zelu's compulsion to "write back"– to the academic authority, to the kinship apparatus (parents, siblings, kin in Nigeria), to the normative expectations around gender, race, professional legitimacy and (dis)ability.

The martial connotation of the phrase "to write back" evokes the idea that discourse itself is a battleground, recalling the postcolonial appropriation and transformation of Foucault's *pouvoir/savoir* paradigm[60]. Through Said's critique of Orientalism[61], Spivak's theory of "epistemic violence"[62] and Bhabha's notions of "counter-narrative"[63] and "hybridity"[64], not only literary discourse, but discourse analysis itself becomes an ideological weapon of resistance. In this framework, Nnedi Okorafor orchestrates an entire "writing back" performance: both Zelu's and Ankara's storytelling acts are forms of insurgent authorship, but more radically, *Death*

of the Author is literature writing back to literary theory, thus reversing the canonical hierarchy. At the same time, presenting itself as posthuman AI-authored, *Death of the Author* is post-literary theory literature "writing back" – both chronologically and ideologically – to the human literary institution.

Meanwhile, as a writer situated at the crossroads of Afropolitanism – with its aesthetic of mobile African cosmopolitanism – and what diaspora studies theorize as post-diasporic narration, a mode that no longer speaks from exile or loss, but from a position of hybrid agency, Nnedi Okorafor makes hybridity, alongside a reclaimed and fluid sense of authenticity, the cornerstone of her narrative poetics. Her novels carry the imprint of this post-diasporic Afropolitan sensibility: they are structured by motifs of urban transnational life, futurist imagination, digital culture, and ecological consciousness, with no lingering nostalgia for a singular point of origin, but rather a generative movement between worlds.

Echoing Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*[65], the two storytelling cyborgs in *Death of the Author* – Zelu, a transhuman techno-prosthetic cyborg, and Ankara, a posthuman narrative cyborg born from AI code and imagination – are figures of empowerment through mixture; they do not seek to restore an "original" self, but to inhabit hybridity as a site of agency. With its Africanfuturist inflection, *Death of the Author* is threaded by hybridity, which functions as a strategy of survival, resilience and self-fulfilment.

Within a post-diasporic horizon, "writing back with an accent" – in Zabus's critical sense – becomes an Africanfuturist mark of cyborg authorship. For Chantal Zabus, the "accent" names the way African writers in English or French inscribe into the colonizer's language the rhythms of indigenous orality, mythologies and cultural logics, a process she theorizes as "indigenization"[66]. In *Death of the Author*, Okorafor radicalizes this gesture: the "*Naija*[67]" that indigenizes American English is doubled by a second, speculative accent – "robotization", the machinic inflection of human language in a post-apocalyptic algorithm-governed future. Chinyere's opening moves – "What story do you want?"[68] and "Let me tell you a story…"[69] – establish, from the very beginning, the novel's two Africanfuturist accentual registers: the tonal shift of robotic posthumanism and the incipit formula of oral storytelling.

At the same time, within the horizon of Nnedi Okorafor's ambivalent, paradoxical narrative, the robotic "accent" may be defined in reverse, following the logic of the *Death of the Author*, a novel that ultimately invites a backward reading. Automation has its own "language" – the binary code – and, from this speculative angle, storytelling becomes its "indigenized accent": "I [Ankara] spoke in a blend of Efik, Igbo, and old binary. The Humes of Cross River City had created the blended language as a way to make their tribe more individual, and I adored it. Speaking it made me feel powerful. It made me feel like I had a home"[70]. In turn, Zelu is repeatedly "erased", "canceled", "deleted", as "robotic" language begins to imprint her transhuman figuration. In this way, the mirroring mechanism through which the story-authors (Zelu and Ankara) generate each other is reflected at the level of language, in the mutually accenting idioms of Africanfuturism.

When Zelu loses control of her *Rusted Robots* story – which is taken over and re-authored by the film production and its social media follow-ups – what she seems to fear most is not simply misinterpretation, but the loss of its Afrofuturist accents: "She had (…) been kicking ideas and notes around again. The problem was, a nagging thought kept blocking her. Would readers bring the sentiment of 'Yankee and Dot' to her work now? Would she have to actively write against the assumption that her characters were Americans with American accents?"[71]. Losing authority over the story – the symbolic "death of the author" – means the flattening of accent, and consequently, the annihilation of the "writing back" gesture.

"*Naija*" itself is stylized in its plurality of accents, converging in a shared Afropolitan experience. Exceeding language, the Nigerian identity articulates itself through behavioral and even sensorial accents, projected against the American host environment: "Almost everyone on the plane was black and most likely Nigerian. You could see it in the style of dress and body language; you could hear it in the accents and languages spoken. You could smell it in the choices of perfumes and colognes. And, of course, you could tell by the hectic way people lined up to board the plane"[72]. Here, accent becomes multisensory: not just phonetic, but sartorial, olfactory, kinetic – a full Afropolitan semiotics of presence.

Nnedi Okorafor significantly avoids using italics to mark the Nigerian accent inscribed into English, because words drawn from Nigerian languages are not treated as xenisms, but as organically integrated elements of a hybrid diasporic identity: "People had gasped, stepped aside, stared, pointed, loudly commented (…). One young guy had turned to his friend and laughed, saying, 'Na that writer who is a robot!'"[73]. Later, at Lagos airport, Zelu is addressed in a similarly unmarked Nigerian-English accent: "Robot ma!"[74]. The same absence of typographic marking appears much earlier in the book, when Secret, in his "interview", speaks about his daughter's relationship to stories: "My daughter and stories, sha. Na special relationship"[75].

The effect is amplified upon Zelu's arrival in Nigeria, a "homecoming" that is accordingly greeted in an exuberantly performative accent: "Afreeeeekaaaaaaaaaaah! Deh mothah*land* where eet all *began*"[76]. Notably, italics are now applied not to the *Naija*-coded speech, but to the English words "*land*" and "*began*", marking a reversal of perspective. In this Africanfuturist, post-diasporic register, it is English that becomes accented. Post-diasporic hybridity no longer sustains a stratified hierarchy of accents; therefore, Igbo-English can just easily become English-Igbo, within the mobile Afropolitan frame of reference and in keeping with the fluid logic of Okorafor's novel. In this reversal, what reads as "naturalized" accent in Lagos becomes immediately marked, once displaced into the rural Igbo setting. Accent, in Okorafor's Africanfuturist cartography, is never an essence, but a relational position. Thus, in the Igbo village, children mock Zelu and Bola for their accented bilingualism – an index of their "*Naijamerican*"[77] identity – which is perceived as a form of inadequacy: "They made fun of our accents when we spoke to each other in English and any attempt we made at speaking Igbo"[78].

When Igbo ritual performance – integrating music, dance, masquerade and talking drums – is translated from Nigeria

into the American context, it no longer appears as pure tradition, but as an accented form of Nigerian-American culture:

> A man wearing a white kaftan, a colorful blue-and white wrapper, and a red-and white Igbo cap entered carrying a talking drum, playing an aggressive beat that was so loud it hurt Zelu's ears. He was followed by a flute player wearing the same outfit. Then a man carrying a metal staff with a cowbell attached to the top, who stabbed the staff at the floor, clanging the bell with every other step. The music was haunting (…).
> It was so tall that it nearly touched the high ceiling. It was wide as a carwash brush and looked like one, being made of stacked raffia and draped with an ornate red cloth. It danced into the viewing room, bouncing and swaying to the beat of the drums and the sound of the flute[79].

Moving with the Afropolitan tide, syncretic performance – carrying the accents of Nigerian orature – punctuates the key-moments of the novel, such as Amarachi's wedding and Secret's wake, generating the cultural and linguistic synthesis of *Naijamerican* ontology. Diaspora and post-diaspora actively work to produce their own summative accent: "They weren't in her father's Imo State village (…), but the spirits and ancestors were here. In the United States. (…) Her father was a man of multiple worlds, and in this moment, he was celebrated in one of them. '*Yaaaaaaaah*!'"[80].

Can these linguistic and cultural accents still be read as a form of "writing back" in the postcolonial sense – as earlier postcolonial literature once practiced it? Hybrid figures have long unsettled fixed taxonomies since times immemorial, and as a cyborg-centered novel, *Death of the Author* does engage in a form of writing back. Yet Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturism shifts the paradigm: instead of a one-directional response to empire, it articulates a dialogical logic of mutual accenting, in which both human and machine, Africa and America inscribe each other. In this Africanfuturist ontology, accent is no longer a mere mark of resistance, but a mode of co-authorship. Here is where the postcolonial gesture folds into the posthuman: not in erasing an accent, but in multiplying it. In the novel's own words: "creation works both ways"[81].

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Notes

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4. *Ibidem. Cf.* Chantal Zabus, *The African Palimpsest. Indigenization of Language in the West African Europhone Novel*, Amsterdam – New York, Rodopi, 2007.
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6. Miwa Messer, "Nnedi Okorafor on *Death of the Author*", Poured Over (B&N Podcast), January 14, 2025.
7. Nnedi Okorafor, *Death*…, p. 371-372.
8. Our italics.
9. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", in *Image – Music – Text*, Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath, London, Fontana Press, 1977, p. 146.
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12. Nnedi Okorafor, *Death*…, p. 278-279.
13. Our italics.
14. Nnedi Okorafor, *Death*…, p. 33-34.
15. *Ibidem*, p. 34.
16. *Ibidem*, p. 36.
17. *Ibidem*, p. 34.
18. *Ibidem*, p. 43.
19. *Ibidem*, p. 36.
20. *Cf.* M. M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel", in *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin, The University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 84-259.
21. Nnedi Okorafor, *Death*…, p. 8.
22. *Ibidem*.
23. *Ibidem*, p. 34.
24. *Ibidem*, p. 10. Also p. 14, 183, 271.
25. Our italics.
26. Nnedi Okorafor, *Death*…, p. 184-185.
27. *Ibidem*, p. 371.
28. *Ibidem*, p. 336.
29. *Ibidem*, p. 16.
30. *Ibidem*, p. 16.
31. *Ibidem*, p. 17.
32. Our italics.
33. Nnedi Okorafor, *Death*…, p. 16-17.
34. Invoking the title of Zakes Mda's novel: *Ways of Dying*, Picador, 2002.
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36. Nnedi Okorafor, *Death*…, p. 36, our italics.
37. *Ibidem*, p. 67.
38. Roland Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 148.
39. Our italics.
40. *Death*…, p. 343.
41. Nnedi Okorafor, *Death*…, p. 212.
42. *Ibidem*, p. 185.
43. *Ibidem*, p. 212.

44. *Ibidem*, p. 185.
45. *Ibidem*, p. 337.
46. Roland Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 142.
47. *Ibidem*.
48. Nnedi Okorafor, *Death…*, p. 337.
49. Roland Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 148.
50. *Ibidem*.
51. Nnedi Okorafor, *Death…*, p. 312.
52. *Ibidem*, p. 32.
53. *Ibidem*, p. 230.
54. *Ibidem*, p. 336.
55. *Ibidem*, p. 52.
56. Our italics.
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70. *Ibidem*, p. 258.
71. *Ibidem*, p. 213.
72. *Ibidem*, p. 262.
73. *Ibidem*, p. 262.
74. *Ibidem*, p. 264.
75. *Ibidem*, p. 46.
76. *Ibidem*, p. 267.
77. *Ibidem*, p. 275.
78. *Ibidem*, p. 276.
79. *Ibidem*, p. 238-239.
80. *Ibidem*, p. 239.
81. *Ibidem*, p. 392.