

Who Are You: Discovering One's Identity in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Binti*

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Every novel's protagonist, whether human or animal, cyborg or magician, goes through a journey of self discovery as they make their way through their stories. Within the pages of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, we see Alice, a young girl from London, suddenly find herself in Wonderland, and she seeks to understand her new surroundings and live in accordance with the chaotic laws that have little to no reason. Throughout her journey, Alice must figure out who she is thanks to her ever-changing identity in the whimsical fairytale land. Similarly, in Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti*, the protagonist with the same name must figure out how she will cope with a shift in her identity after leaving her home on Earth to be the first of her people to attend the most revered university in all the cosmos. Her struggles are amplified when her ship is invaded by the hostile alien species, Meduse, and Binti must try to prevent the massacre that will happen once her ship docks on the planet. While these two novels have very different settings, one infused with magic and the other with aliens, their themes are nearly identical. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Binti*, chaos and perpetual change are perfect conditions to discover one's identity, presented in similar and contrasting ways through the protagonists' physical appearances, roles as outsiders, and coming of age journeys.

Throughout her adventures, Binti struggles with her identity due to her appearance. One of the largest pieces of Binti's identity is her belonging to the Himba people, a tribe that resides in the northern parts of Namibia, a country in South Africa. The Himba have a rich and historic culture, and the traditions they use to change their appearances are highlighted throughout *Binti*. From the beginning of the novel, Binti is ostracized and labeled as something other because of her appearance. She covers herself with *otjize*, a paste made from the red clay of her home, and her braids have deep significance to her, even though they appear strange to others. Many of the people she travels with are Khoush, the predominant faction of humans that differ from Binti due

to their paler skin. Because their peoples' definitions of beauty differ from each other, the Khoush view Binti's people's tradition of wearing *otjize* with scorn. Despite that, Binti remains proud of her culture, as shown when the boy she was beginning to have a crush on questioned her about her braids:

“You have exactly twenty-one,” he said. “And they’re braided in tessellating triangles. Is it some sort of code?”

I wanted to tell him that there *was* a code, that the pattern spoke my family's bloodline, culture, and history. That my father had designed the code and my mother and aunts had shown me how to braid it into my hair. (Okorafor 23)

Even though they are friendly, their different cultures make it difficult for Binti and the boy to fully understand one another. Later, Binti learns that she is able to communicate with the Meduse, and she is forced to act as their ambassador to the people of Oomza Uni. Despite originally having no say in her situation, Binti gradually begins to befriend a Meduse named Okwu, and she also gains more sympathy for Meduse as she learns about the reasons behind their ongoing feud with the Khoush. For her to truly be seen as an ambassador for the Meduse and not just a captive, something must be done to make this clear. She does not realize what has happened until after their negotiation is complete, and her soon-to-be professor asks her what she plans to do:

“What about your home? Will you ever return?”

“Of course,” I said. Eventually, I will visit and...”

“I have studied your people,” she said. “They don’t like outsiders.”

“I’m not an outsider,” I said, with a twinge of irritation. “I am...” And that’s when it caught my eye. [...] I slowly lifted up one of my locks and brought it forward I rubbed off

the *ojitze*. It glowed a strong deep blue like the sky back on earth on a clear day, like Oku and so many of the other Meduse, like the uniforms of the Oomza Uni soldiers. (Okorafor 80-81)

Binti's hair is a way that one can visualize how her identity has changed to include new aspects, which have come about thanks to the chaos she has lived through. It is blue "like Okwu and so many of the other Meduse," whom she has just helped, and she is the first in a long time to be accepted by them. It is blue "like the uniforms of the Oomza Uni soldiers," similar to how she will soon be an Oomza Uni student. Now that she has left her home, she is an outsider both to the people of Oomza Uni by being the first Himba, and she is an outsider to her own people because of the many differences between them now, but the presence of her *ojitze* still binds her to her people and the place of her birth. Through the many changes in Binti's appearance, she becomes more aware of who she is, and who she wants to be.

While Alice's hair does not change to allow her to communicate with alien species, she does also experience changes in her appearance that make her question her identity. Throughout her time in Wonderland, she changes shape many times, causing her to lose grasp of her sense of self. In some instances she becomes bigger and in others smaller, usually in situations where the opposite size would be much more convenient. There are also times where other characters in Wonderland do not believe Alice to be what she perceives herself. Once such instance occurs when Alice happens upon a pigeon, who believes Alice to be a serpent:

"I-I'm a little girl," said Alice, rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through that day.

"A likely story indeed!" said the Pigeon, in a tone of the deepest contempt. "I've seen a good many little girls in my time, but never *one* with such a neck as that! No, no! You're

a serpent, and there's no use denying it. I suppose you'll be telling me next that you never tasted an egg!"

"I *have* tasted eggs, certainly," said Alice, who was a very truthful child; "but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know."

"I don't believe it," said the Pigeon; "but if they do, why, then they're a kind of serpent: that's all I can say." (Carroll 41-42)

Alice has already started to have doubts about her identity thanks to all of her changes in appearance, and now she is being faced with the question of what she really is. There are many similarities between serpents and little girls that the pigeon mentions, and this encounter leaves Alice to wonder what makes the two different, as well as wondering which one she is. Unlike Binti, when Alice finally realizes her identity, she does not do so by finding a way for each of the separate pieces to become a whole. Instead, she realizes the truths behind the discord and the chaotic nature of the inhabitants of Wonderland:

"Who cares for *you*?" said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time). "You're nothing but a pack of cards!"

At this time the whole pack rose up into the air, and came flying down upon her [...] and found herself lying on the bank, with her head in the lap of her sister, who was gently brushing away some dead leaves that had fluttered down from the trees upon her face. (Carroll 95-96)

By waking up from her dream in Wonderland, Alice is able to see the truth behind the bizarreness of Wonderland, and consequently fully realize her identity. When she uncovers the truth, the deceitful appearances change, allowing her to recognize her identity once again. After all of the changes in her size, Alice is finally back to her "full size," signifying that she has found

the balance between the small size of her childhood and the large size of adulthood. She has also altered the appearances of Wonderland's inhabitants to reveal their identities as well, changing from the terrifying soldiers they seemed to be to their true identity as a "pack of cards."

Another way that both texts illustrate the protagonists finding their identity is through showing them to be outsiders. Binti's identity as a Himba is contradicted by her decision to leave her home to attend university. She is fully aware of this as she reflects, "my tribe is obsessed with innovation and technology, but it is small, private, and, as I said, we don't like to leave Earth. We prefer to explore the universe by traveling inward, as opposed to outward. No Himba has ever gone to Oomza Uni" (Okorafor 21). Binti chooses to be an outsider willingly, as she is already choosing to act on the piece of her identity that tells her to seek further education than to stay in her home and live the life already chosen for her. Throughout the novel, the differences between Binti and the rest of the ship's passengers are highlighted, mainly through the stark differences in their appearances. It is through this outsidership that Binti is forced to mainly rely on herself to navigate the perpetual changes she is thrown into, ultimately helping her to find her identity through the levels of introspection she uses. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, while Alice is an outsider also due to her appearance, as most of Wonderland's inhabitants are animals or inanimate objects, the largest difference between them is Alice's ignorance of the laws and rules of Wonderland. While Alice willingly chooses to enter Wonderland, she does not willingly choose to be an outsider once she is there, and the role is instead forced on her. While Binti's status as an outsider due to being Himba as well as being an outsider to the long war between the Meduse and the Khoush is one of the things that ultimately saves her, Alice's status as outsider frequently causes her scorn and gets her into trouble. Throughout her time at the tea party with the Mad Hatter, the March Hare, and the Dormouse, her confusion about the way Wonderland

works and the lack of logic in their remarks causes her to get insulted by the three. When she asks the Dormouse for clarification on a part of its story, the explanation she gets is “you can draw water out of a water-well,” said the Hatter; “so I should think you could draw treacle out of a treacle-well—eh, stupid?” ending with yet another quip at Alice for her lack of understanding (Carroll 57). In the end of both texts, their role as an outsider is the thing that helps them both fully realize their identities. In the case of Binti, she gains a piece of each of the parts of her identity by being Himba, the Meduse’s ambassador, and an Oomza Uni student, making her an outsider to all of them as none of them are the single thing that comprise herself, but still allowing herself to belong to all of them. In the case of Alice, she realizes her identity because she is an outsider to Wonderland, as her continuous struggle to understand and follow the chaos of Wonderland allows her to realize just how absurd it is by instead being forced to follow her own rules and think for herself. Instead of submitting to the nonsensical laws of Wonderland, Alice instead rejects and ignores them in the end, giving up on the fruitless task of trying to make sense of the logicless rules. Throughout the many changes that happen to and around Binti and Alice, their roles as outsiders and being unaware of the reasoning behind the chaos helps them to ultimately understand themselves.

Both *Binti* and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* are coming-of-age tales, and as a result, the two find their identities by growing into the roles as their journey proceeds. Throughout *Binti*, Binti is forced to take on roles that she originally wanted no part of, but gradually accepts and embraces as she comes to terms with them. She begins as terrified and apprehensive of the Meduse, but grows to understand them and ultimately accepts her role as their ambassador willingly. As she and Okwu begin to adapt and grow used to life as students at Oomza Uni, they reflect on all that has happened to bring them together. Okwu makes one of his tentacles vibrate,

and Binti is surprised to feel that her new Meduse-like hair responds in kind. “‘It means we are family through battle,’ it said. ‘You are the first to join our family in this way in a long time. We do not like humans’” (Okorafor 90). Binti is the person to end the long feud between the Khoush and the Meduse, giving her the role of a savior and hero. She was the only one who tried to understand the Meduse’s point of view, and as a result, she helped the rest of the galaxy understand them, going beyond the role of ambassador she was given to bring peace and change from the nonsensical hostility and killing the two sides had done before.

While Binti is assuming the roles of student and ambassador, Alice is assuming the role of an adult instead of a child. Her journey through Wonderland is symbolic of her traveling through and ultimately evolving past the thought processes of children, who have yet to grasp logic and think that anything is possible. Instead of lingering inside Wonderland, Alice wakes up in the real world, solidifying her shedding the immature way of thinking she previously had to mature and accept growing up. Alice’s journey begins because she is bored and idle, and throughout her journey in Wonderland, she is almost continuously in motion, whether by physical movement or thinking through certain things. In the very end, when Alice wakes up, she continues moving as when her sister tells her to have her tea, “Alice got up and ran off, thinking while she ran, as well she might, what a wonderful dream it had been” (Carroll 96). Because she takes her time in Wonderland as a dream, the impact it would have on her is lessened somewhat, as dreams are typically not taken as seriously as things that happen in reality. As a result, while she becomes more aware of her identity, Alice does not go through the immense growth that Binti does, but she instead begins it. While Alice does not adopt roles as monumental as Binti does, her journey in Wonderland causes her to assume the role of someone who actively thinks



and pursues knowledge instead of remaining idle, taking that with her as she changes from a child to an adult.

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Binti*, both protagonists go through journeys to find their identities that are similar and different at the same time, solidifying that identities can be discovered within ever-altering conditions. Both young women begin as outsiders in their respective journeys, and although Alice returns to reality and effectively ceases being an outsider, Binti finds a way to combine disparate parts of her reality that she previously struggled to reconcile. While Binti finds her identity by ending a massive war between the Meduse and the Khoush, Alice finds hers by tackling the chaos and absurdity of Wonderland and returning to the right size for her. Despite the circumstances not being identical, both womens' journeys take them through chaos and perpetual change, and as they adapt to discord, they discover and realize their identities because of these conditions.

### **Works Cited**

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