



BLACK IDENTITY, MOBILITY, AND AGENCY IN ONYEBUCHI'S RIOT BABY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of Black identity, restricted mobility, and emergent agency in Tochi Onyebuchi's Riot Baby through the lens of Afrofuturism. The narrative traces the lives of siblings Ella and Kev, whose experiences of racial violence, surveillance, and incarceration reflect the systemic oppression facing Black communities in the United States. By blending speculative elements with real historical trauma, Onyebuchi crafts a powerful commentary on how Black identity is shaped and resisted under carceral and racialized systems. Ella's psychic abilities allow her to transcend physical and temporal boundaries, offering a unique form of resistance and reparation, while Kev's journey through confinement and emotional awakening reflects a deeply embodied struggle for selfhood and autonomy. Employing nonlinear temporality, metaphysical mobility, and emotional intensity, Riot Baby subverts dominant narratives and imagines liberatory futures. The article argues that Onyebuchi's work exemplifies Afrofuturism's potential to reframe Black existence not through passive survival but through active reclamation of power, memory, and movement.

Keywords: Agency, Afrofuturism, Black Identity, Carceral system, Mobility, Psychic Resistance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Afrofuturism is a cultural, literary and intellectual movement which visualises Black people and their cultures as central to the digital progress, space exploration and alternative narratives and histories. The emergence of Afrofuturism as a critical and creative movement in the 21st century has offered Black writers, artists, and theorists a powerful tool to challenge dominant histories, expose systemic injustices, and imagine liberated futures. As a hybrid framework combining speculative fiction, African diasporic culture, and socio-political critique, Afrofuturism allows for new approaches to questions of race, technology, time, and memory. Writers such as Octavia Butler, Nnedi Okorafor, and Tochi Onyebuchi have deployed Afrofuturism not only to create alternate realities, but to confront the oppressive structures embedded in present-day society. Among these, Onyebuchi's Riot Baby stands out as a haunting, visionary novella that explores how Black identity is shaped under duress, how mobility is restricted by racialized systems, and how agency can emerge in psychic, emotional, and speculative dimensions.

Set against the backdrop of racial injustice, state surveillance, and mass incarceration, Riot Baby portrays the lives of two siblings, Ella and Kev, as they grapple with the aftershocks of structural violence. From the killing of Sean Bell to the dehumanization of Black youth through algorithmic policing, the novel blends real-world events with speculative interventions. Ella, gifted with psychic and telekinetic abilities, experiences the world through visions, flashbacks, and precognitive insights that transcend linear time. Her powers not only enable her to foresee tragedies before they occur, but also allow her to exist in multiple temporal planes simultaneously. Kev, on the other hand, becomes a victim of America's prison-industrial complex, subjected to constant monitoring, digital profiling, and carceral violence. Together,



their stories reflect the core tension at the heart of the text: the juxtaposition between immobility and freedom, erasure and visibility, despair and resistance.

This study approaches *Riot Baby* through the theoretical framework of Afrofuturism to examine how the novella portrays Black identity as historically burdened yet future-oriented, mobility as both denied and metaphysical, and agency as a force of personal and collective liberation. Ytasha Womack (2013) argues that Afrofuturism "challenges the limitations placed on the Black imagination" (p. 7) by offering tools to reconstruct not only histories but emotional and spiritual realities. Ella's character, as an embodiment of that imaginative and metaphysical freedom, demonstrates the possibility of escaping not only carceral institutions but also colonial ways of knowing. She phases through physical spaces, manipulates surveillance systems, and disrupts time itself acts which symbolize the rejection of Western epistemologies and the crafting of new Black ontologies.

Alondra Nelson (2002) emphasizes that Afrofuturism does not avoid technology but reclaims it, offering "technologies of the self" through which Black individuals can navigate and subvert oppressive regimes. In *Riot Baby*, technology especially in the form of predictive policing, prison algorithms, and digital surveillance becomes a mechanism of containment. Yet Ella's ability to manipulate these systems reframes them as sites of resistance. Her powers reappropriate the tools of control, turning them into instruments of liberation. Her refusal to be bound by physical or political constraints embodies the essence of Afrofuturist agency: the right to exist beyond the limits prescribed by racial capitalism.

Furthermore, the novella emphasizes the embodied nature of Black experience under systemic oppression. Ella's seizures and psychic pain reveal that trauma is not abstract; it is lived, felt, and carried in the body. This echoes Womack's assertion that Afrofuturism is deeply emotional, blending science fiction with ancestral memory and affective truth (Womack, 2013). Ella's visions are not simply supernatural; they are charged with historical grief echoes of past violence reverberating in the present. Through her, Onyebuchi portrays Blackness as multidimensional, where pain and power coexist, and where the future is haunted yet open to transformation.

Kodwo Eshun's (2003) concept of "chronopolitics" is also central to the narrative strategy of *Riot Baby*. Eshun describes how Afrofuturism engages in time-warping interventions that destabilize colonial timelines. The novel does this through Ella's non-linear visions, which blur the boundaries between past trauma and future resistance. The traditional Western narrative arc built on cause, effect, and linear progress is rejected in favor of a more fragmented, experiential model of time. In this Afrofuturist chronopolitics, resistance is not only external or physical, but internal and psychic, making room for healing and rebellion within the spiritual and emotional domains.

Kev's role in the novel deepens the examination of Black masculinity and the construction of identity within carceral systems. He is stripped of his physical autonomy, subjected to biometric monitoring and isolation, yet he slowly begins to reclaim a sense of self through introspection and his connection to Ella. His growth challenges the idea that prisons merely warehouse bodies; instead, *Riot Baby* insists that interior life and spiritual agency remain potent even in the most repressive circumstances. Ella's support telepathic, emotional, and protective enables Kev to access parts of himself denied by state control. This reinforces Anderson's (2015) view of Afrofuturism as a post-humanist aesthetic where Black survival is an act of insurgency.

Tochi Onyebuchi's *Riot Baby* is thus a rich site for examining the interplay of identity, movement, and autonomy under conditions of racialized violence. It fuses real and imagined



worlds, blurs genre boundaries, and refuses the victimhood narratives often imposed on Black subjects. Instead, it constructs a vision where psychic abilities, emotional truths, and ancestral resonance act as tools of survival and transformation. Through Ella and Kev, the novel tells a story not just of oppression, but of reawakening of Black identity that is mobile, sovereign, and uncontainable.

1.1 Research Questions

- i. How does *Riot Baby* portray the construction of Black identity through systemic violence, ancestral memory, and psychic inheritance within an Afrofuturist framework?
- ii. In what ways does the novel explore the contrast between physical confinement and metaphysical or psychic mobility, particularly as a form of resistance against racialized state control?
- iii. How does *Riot Baby* redefine Black agency through Afrofuturist elements, and what role do emotional intensity, supernatural ability, and visionary imagination play in reclaiming power?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature is presented on the key concepts of Black identity, mobility, and agency as explored through Afrofuturist narratives. The relationship between race, identity, and systemic marginalization has long been central to African American literary and cultural criticism. Scholars and cultural theorists have investigated the historical exclusion of Black voices from mainstream discourse, particularly in speculative genres such as science fiction. Mark Dery (1994) first identified this absence in his foundational essay “Black to the Future,” coining the term Afrofuturism to describe a growing body of Black speculative art and literature that interrogates and reimagines the role of Black identity in future contexts. Dery famously asked, “Can a community whose past has been deliberately erased imagine possible futures?” This critical question has since shaped a generation of scholarship on Black futurity and agency.

Afrofuturism, as a theoretical and aesthetic framework, emerged in response to the historical silencing of Black contributions to science fiction and futuristic discourse. The genre’s tendency to privilege whiteness and Western technological narratives has traditionally excluded Black identities, especially in depictions of future societies. In this context, the work of Black writers like Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, and later Nnedi Okorafor and Tochi Onyebuchi, has been pivotal in rewriting these narratives. Their stories reposition Black bodies not as peripheral or endangered but as central to futuristic imaginings, offering radical alternatives to mainstream depictions of racial hierarchies and technological progress.

One of the most important conceptual underpinnings of Black identity in literature is Orlando Patterson’s (1982) theory of social death. Patterson describes the enslaved person as someone who is not only physically dominated but stripped of identity, kinship ties, and civic recognition a condition he terms “natal alienation.” This framework becomes especially relevant in understanding the structural violence experienced by Black characters in *Riot Baby*, particularly Kev, who undergoes physical and psychological isolation within the prison-industrial complex. The continuation of social death into the post-slavery world has been explored by scholars such as Taylor (2022) argues that Hartman expands Patterson’s theory by illustrating the continued regulation of Black bodies through systems of control. Saidiya Hartman (1997), who expands Patterson’s theory in *Scenes of Subjection*. Hartman argues that even after formal emancipation, Black people remain embedded in systems of surveillance, control, and dehumanization. Her work provides critical insight into how racialized bodies continue to be subject to institutional power and erasure.



Hazel Carby (1999) similarly critiques the dominant discourses that frame Black identity within the bounds of pathology or social deviance. Carby emphasizes the need for alternative frameworks that recognize the emotional and psychic dimensions of Black life, particularly in response to racial violence. Her emphasis on the role of cultural memory and emotional interiority aligns with the Afrofuturist approach in *Riot Baby*, where Ella's psychic abilities symbolize a deeper, transhistorical form of witnessing and resistance. Carby's analysis of the intersections between race, gender, and nation helps situate Ella's experience as a Black woman navigating the legacies of oppression while embodying transformative power.

Theorists such as Michelle Wright (2015) have also contributed to the evolving discourse on Black temporality. Wright critiques the notion of linear historical time and proposes the concept of "epiphenomenal time" a nonlinear temporal structure shaped by diasporic memory and experience. This resonates with Kodwo Eshun's (2003) idea of chronopolitics, in which time is manipulated and disrupted to challenge dominant histories. In *Riot Baby*, time does not progress in a straight line but folds back on itself through Ella's visions. This rejection of linear time allows the text to explore how trauma, rage, and resistance circulate across generations, refusing to be confined by Western modes of chronology.

Paul Gilroy's (1993) notion of the Black Atlantic further expands the conversation on identity and mobility. Gilroy situates Black identity within the framework of transnational movement, memory, and hybridity. His work challenges essentialist conceptions of identity, emphasizing instead the fluid and diasporic nature of Black subjectivity. While *Riot Baby* is primarily situated in the United States, its characters are shaped by a collective history of forced displacement, inherited trauma, and the ongoing legacies of slavery and colonialism. The theme of constrained mobility especially in Kev's incarceration is countered by Ella's metaphysical freedom, illustrating the tension between physical containment and spiritual flight that Gilroy identifies in diasporic narratives.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988) discusses the need to recognize African American literature not just as protest but as a rich, complex tradition with its own forms, tropes, and intertextuality. His theory of "Signifying" the practice of revision, doubling, and irony provides a lens through which we can interpret the layered narrative techniques in *Riot Baby*. Onyebuchi's use of real-life events such as the killing of Sean Bell and his blending of speculative and realist genres function as acts of narrative Signifying, reclaiming Black stories from silence and distortion.

Alexander Weheliye (2014), in his study *Habeas Viscus*, adds another layer to the discussion by addressing how Black flesh, rather than the liberal subject, becomes the site of political formation. Weheliye critiques the legal-humanist tradition and instead locates agency in the very bodies that are marked by racial violence. This is particularly relevant to Ella's character, whose powers are rooted not only in psychic vision but in physical pain, nosebleeds, seizures, and exhaustion that manifest her connection to generational trauma. Her body becomes both a conduit of suffering and a weapon of resistance.

Lisa Yaszek (2006) situates Afrofuturism as a cultural strategy for "recovering the histories of counter-futures" in which Black experiences have been excluded. Yaszek's focus on narrative recovery and futuristic speculation aligns with the trajectory of *Riot Baby*, where Ella's and Kev's lives symbolize the effort to reclaim voice, time, and space from oppressive systems. Rather than offering utopia, Onyebuchi crafts a speculative realism in which resistance is emotional, psychic, and historical an embodiment of what Yaszek calls "Afrofuturist memory work."



3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of this study is built upon the framework of Afrofuturism, a critical lens that merges speculative fiction, African diasporic culture, and socio-political critique to interrogate the racialized past and reimagine liberated futures. In Tochi Onyebuchi's *Riot Baby*, Afrofuturism functions not only as an aesthetic mode but as a political and cultural methodology for addressing the complexities of Black identity, restricted mobility, and the reclamation of agency.

Afrofuturism, as articulated by scholars such as Ytasha Womack, Kodwo Eshun, and Alondra Nelson, seeks to reframe the experiences of Black people within the context of imagined futures, drawing upon histories of trauma while envisioning transformative possibilities. According to Womack (2013), Afrofuturism "challenges the limitations placed on the Black imagination" by creating spaces where Black people can exist outside the binaries of victimhood and invisibility. Within this context, *Riot Baby* can be read as a deeply Afrofuturist text—one that weaves together memory, magic, and futurity to explore how Black people navigate and resist systemic forms of racial control.

In the novella, the character of Ella embodies Afrofuturist resistance through her supernatural abilities, which enable her to transcend time and space, resist technological incarceration, and access ancestral memory. Her powers are not simply fantastical; they are symbolic extensions of generational trauma and revolutionary insight. This reflects Womack's notion of "soul retrieval," wherein Black speculative narratives recover buried histories and reposition the Black subject at the center of both historical and futuristic vision.

Kodwo Eshun's (2003) concept of chronopolitics is particularly useful in understanding the treatment of time in *Riot Baby*. Eshun argues that Afrofuturism "disrupts the linear time of colonial historicism" and engages in temporal insurgency. Ella's visions, which blur the boundaries between past, present, and future, illustrate this manipulation of time. Her ability to foresee events like Jelani's death or to relive historical atrocities positions her as a chronopolitical agent one who collapses Western constructs of time to expose the continuous nature of anti-Black violence. Eshun's framework illuminates how time is not neutral but political, and in the case of *Riot Baby*, temporal disruption becomes a key strategy of narrative resistance.

Alondra Nelson (2002) extends Afrofuturist theory into the realm of technology, surveillance, and digital control. She emphasizes that Afrofuturism does not merely react to technological marginalization but actively reclaims and rewrites technological narratives. In *Riot Baby*, the prison industrial complex is shown as a hyper-technological system of biometric tracking, predictive algorithms, and digital surveillance. Kev's confinement is not only physical but algorithmic his identity reduced to data points. Yet Ella, through her psychic interventions, disrupts this system. Her metaphysical access to surveillance infrastructure reconfigures Nelson's notion of Afrofuturism as a "critical technology" one that challenges the presumed neutrality of scientific and technological progress.

In this light, Ella's abilities function as both literal and symbolic tools of deconstruction. She can render prison guards unconscious, override digital systems, and even bend physical space. These moments of intervention suggest that Afrofuturist agency is not dependent on institutional permission but emerges from spiritual, emotional, and ancestral reservoirs of power. Ella is not just resisting; she is re-coding reality, which aligns with Nelson's idea that Black futurist protagonists often "re-script" the technological and political systems that seek to erase them.



Further, Reynaldo Anderson's idea of Afrofuturism 2.0 contributes to the understanding of the novella's post-humanist and digitally immersed world. Anderson (2015) frames Afrofuturism 2.0 as a strategic response to the age of surveillance capitalism, algorithmic governance, and data-driven dehumanization. *Riot Baby* exemplifies this phase through its depiction of prisons as highly digitized zones of predictive control. Kev's body and choices are mediated by machines and protocols designed to anticipate rebellion. Yet, Anderson's theory helps us recognize how Ella's speculative resistance represents a refusal of digital determinism. Her rebellion is not only about breaking out of a system but about exposing the flawed logics that sustain it.

Paul Gilroy's notion of the Black Atlantic (1993) provides a transhistorical perspective on identity and mobility. Gilroy emphasizes that Black identity is inherently diasporic, shaped by movement, dislocation, and cultural memory. While *Riot Baby* is rooted in urban American landscapes like Harlem and Rikers Island, it is haunted by global Black histories, colonialism, slavery, racial capitalism. Ella's and Kev's experiences resonate with Gilroy's idea that identity is not fixed but fluid, and that agency can be cultivated even amid systemic spatial restrictions. Kev's incarceration and Ella's psychic mobility highlight this paradox: one character is physically immobilized, the other metaphysically free yet both are engaged in a shared struggle to reclaim narrative sovereignty.

Moreover, the concept of social death, originally developed by Orlando Patterson (1982), is essential to this framework. Patterson describes the enslaved person as one rendered invisible within the political and social order, deprived of kinship, heritage, and autonomy. This condition of "natal alienation" persists in the novella's portrayal of carceral systems, which aim to sever Kev from any sense of lineage or future. However, Ella's abilities offer a counterpoint to social death: she remembers what institutions want to erase, and she channels that memory into action. Her resistance becomes a reclamation of both personal and collective identity.

Saidiya Hartman's extension of social death into the post-emancipation period deepens this analysis. Hartman (1997) argues that Black people remain ensnared in regimes of control and spectacle that reproduce forms of un-freedom. In *Riot Baby*, this is evidenced by the hyper-visibility of Kev within the prison system and the pathologization of his body from an early age. Yet, through Ella's powers and Kev's growing self-awareness, the text refuses to accept the inevitability of this death-in-life condition. Their connection becomes a conduit for survival, memory, and resistance a reclamation of Black life as livable, powerful, and possible. Finally, Ytasha Womack's idea that Afrofuturism blends "art, activism, and philosophy" becomes essential in understanding the emotional and psychic landscapes of *Riot Baby*. Ella's rage, exhaustion, and emotional volatility are not signs of instability but indicators of deep engagement with collective trauma. Womack (2013) argues that Afrofuturism grants legitimacy to these emotional truths, making space for what she calls "radical healing." In this way, Ella's suffering becomes meaningful, it is the cost of being a vessel for memory and change.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Tochi Onyebuchi's *Riot Baby* is a powerful literary meditation on what it means to be Black in a world designed to contain, police, and erase Black existence. Through an Afrofuturist lens, the novella explores the entanglement of identity, spatial and psychic mobility, and the assertion of agency amid systemic oppression. Afrofuturism, as Ytasha Womack (2013) explains, seeks to merge history, imagination, and technology to reimagine Black futures. Ella and Kev, the central characters, are constructed not simply as victims of racial violence but as



agents of disruption whose very existence challenges dominant power structures. This chapter analyzes how Onyebuchi's work dramatizes Black identity as dynamic and resistant, explores literal and metaphysical forms of mobility, and reclaims agency through both supernatural and emotional modes of power.

4.1 Constructing Black Identity through Trauma and Memory

In *Riot Baby*, Black identity is portrayed as both a site of cultural resilience and a target of systemic erasure. Onyebuchi grounds the narrative in lived realities shaped by racial violence, memorializing Black grief and affirming communal memory. Early in the novel, the narrator observes: "...a dozen more shootings produce a dozen more weeping families that have to struggle stoically through their black grief or... declare their black anger..." (Onyebuchi, 2020, p. 93)

This moment collapses personal loss into collective experience, echoing Rankine's (2015) description of Black life as a continual state of mourning. Under Afrofuturism, such grief is not merely an endpoint; it becomes a foundation for reimagining futures. Womack (2013) emphasizes that Afrofuturism engages with historical trauma not to remain trapped in it, but to transform it into visionary possibility.

The novel's depictions of public memorials "teddy bears, browning flowers, ribbons tied to telephone poles" function as what Gilroy terms "living archives." They reclaim space in a landscape of erasure, situating Black identity within both physical and emotional geographies. These scenes resonate with Afrofuturism's insistence on merging past and future; the act of memorialization is simultaneously a remembrance of what was lost and an assertion that those lives will inform what is yet to come.

Onyebuchi also centers Black women's voices as integral to identity-making. When a young man shouts "Listen to Black women!" (Onyebuchi, 2020, p. 92) The room erupts in affirmation. This reflects what Huggins (1987) argued about revolutionary change: that centering the most marginalized particularly Black women ensures liberation efforts challenge all forms of oppression. Ella embodies this vision; she is both the narrative's prophetic voice and the figure whose identity is not defined by white recognition but by her own power to see, to move, and to imagine.

Kev's early life is shaped by exposure to racialized violence, including the murder of Sean Bell, which marks the beginning of his psychic and social alienation. The narrator notes: "Kev was born with a riot burning inside him" (Onyebuchi, 2020, p. 6). This line reflects how Black identity in the novella is tied not only to pain but to a legacy of resistance. Kev is not simply traumatized by violence; he embodies the historical rage and sorrow of his community.

Ella's identity, meanwhile, is interwoven with ancestral memory and supernatural ability. Her powers allow her to experience past injustices alongside present ones, collapsing temporal boundaries. At one point, she remembers the ghosts of previous traumas: "She sees Jelani on the ground, staring up at the too-bright sun for the last, longest two minutes of his life" (p. 19). Through Ella, the novella constructs identity as multidimensional rooted in cultural memory, political awareness, and emotional inheritance. The psychic overload she experiences reflects the burden of witnessing generations of racial injustice.

Afrofuturism reframes Black identity in *Riot Baby* as temporally and spatially fluid. Ella's visions collapse the 1992 LA riots, the militarized streets of Ferguson, and possible liberated futures into a continuous present. Eshun's (2003) notion of "chronopolitics" helps explain this: Black identity in Afrofuturism resists the linear timelines of white supremacy, existing instead in multiple temporal registers that allow for the reclamation of histories and the projection of new futures. Afrofuturist theorists such as Ytasha Womack (2013) argue that Black identity in



speculative fiction is not confined to victimhood but instead grounded in creative, psychic, and cultural resilience. In *Riot Baby*, identity is not imposed but fought for shaped by the resistance of memory and the power of futurity. Ella's capacity to channel inherited rage, and Kev's interior reflections amid oppression, show that Black identity remains fluid, generative, and resistant.

4.2 Mobility: Physical Confinement vs. Psychic Liberation

Mobility in *Riot Baby* operates within the tension between systemic restriction and speculative liberation. For Kev, movement is constrained by the carceral state's surveillance apparatus. His parole conditions, dictated by algorithmic calculations, determine where he can live and travel "I told them I wanted to be out west, away from people, places, and things that'd bring me back to jail, and Watts was the best option that came up." (Onyebuchi, 2020, p. 79).

This reveals how contemporary mobility for many Black individuals is mediated by predictive policing and data-driven "risk assessments" technologies that Afrofuturist scholars like Ahmed (2021) identify as modern iterations of racial control. Even outside prison walls, Kev's movements are circumscribed, underscoring how systemic racism extends the carceral logic into so-called free spaces. In contrast, Ella's supernatural "Traveling" represents a radical, Afrofuturist mobility. Onyebuchi writes: "...She's getting better at Traveling... Out here with the rusted and abandoned military armament... she can pulverize and tear and shatter and not spill a drop of blood." (Onyebuchi, 2020, p. 33)

This is not only physical displacement but a metaphysical act of reclaiming movement outside the bounds of state surveillance. As Anderson (2016) argues in his framing of Afrofuturism 2.0, such speculative geographies operate as "fugitive spaces," sites inaccessible to oppressive power structures. Ella's ability to traverse miles in a few steps and move across time destabilizes the racialized boundaries of both geography and history.

Temporal mobility is particularly significant under Afrofuturism. Ella's visions allow her to bring moments from the past such as the chaos and resistance of the LA riots into her present reality, and to carry those memories into imagined futures like Budak. Robinson (2021) notes that Afrofuturist narratives collapse temporal divides to reclaim erased histories and imagine liberated futures; Ella's movement between times becomes a political act, ensuring that the memory of resistance is never severed from the struggle for liberation. Ella's mobility is radical and metaphysical. She can move across time and space, phase through walls, and see distant futures. Her ability to "enter" the prison mentally and affect the guards psychically transforms the prison from a fixed structure into a penetrable and unstable site. Ella's mobility defies the physical constraints imposed on Black people, particularly those like Kev, whose existence is deemed dangerous.

This contrast reveals how systemic power operates through confinement, while liberation emerges through disruption. Ella's psychic interventions symbolize what Kodwo Eshun (2003) describes as "chronopolitics" the manipulation of time as an act of rebellion. She bends time and space, traversing what Ytasha Womack calls the "realms of imagination and real life" to subvert carceral systems (Womack, 2013). Her metaphysical mobility also suggests that Black freedom cannot be confined to physical escape. Rather, liberation is enacted through mental autonomy, ancestral knowledge, and spiritual connectivity. As such, *Riot Baby* redefines mobility beyond geography, portraying it as a psychic and political tool to resist categorization and surveillance.

4.3 Agency and the Power of Psychic Resistance

Agency in *Riot Baby* is defined not by the ability to operate within existing systems, but by the capacity to reject and reconfigure those systems entirely. Ella's self-declaration "Permission. I



am the locusts... I am the locusts and the frogs and the rivers of blood. I'm here now." (Onyebuchi, 2020, p. 98). It signals a refusal to seek validation from oppressive power. This aligns with Patterson's (2020) framing of Black resistance as self-authorizing, bypassing the gatekeeping of state or institutional approval. Afrofuturism amplifies this by positioning imagination itself as a form of agency; in Womack's (2013) terms, it is an "imagination project" that inverts reality to envision alternatives free from racialized violence.

Kev's storyline exposes the limits of survival as an endpoint. Ella hesitates to tell him simply to "just survive," recognizing that survival without transformation risks perpetuating the very systems that oppress. Brewer (2012) warns against resistance that only maintains endurance without dismantling underlying structures; true agency must engage in building new conditions of life.

Ella's visions of Budak, a space without prisons or fear embody Afrofuturist agency as world-making. This is not utopia in the abstract, but a blueprint grounded in cultural memory and historical awareness. As Perez (2023) describes in the context of Afrofuturist performance, such speculative spaces are "fugitive futures," created through the active refusal of surveillance and fixed identity.

Kev's slower journey toward self-determination is equally significant. Unlike Ella, he is not empowered by supernatural abilities, yet his evolving consciousness and refusal to accept mere survival embody a distinct form of agency. Over time, Kev begins to envision freedom not only as a personal goal but as a collective one, extending to others trapped in the same oppressive structures. This shift is captured in his exchange with Ella when he confronts the unending nature of racial violence: "It will never stop... It will happen again. And again. And again. It already has". (Onyebuchi, 2020, p. 101). His questioning disrupts the silence imposed by systemic oppression, transforming despair into a critical awareness that is itself an act of reclamation and resistance.

In this framework, agency in *Riot Baby* moves beyond reactive resistance to proactive creation. Ella's powers are not merely destructive; they are tools for constructing spaces and times where Black life is central, safe, and self-determined. This is not simply rhetoric; it is an articulation of Afrofuturist agency. Ella's powers, which manifest as both psychic and emotional force, reframe agency as something that grows from inherited trauma but breaks forward into future possibility. Her seizures and nosebleeds are signs of the cost of this power but also its urgency. In her defiance of spatial, temporal, and technological limitations, Ella embodies what Alondra Nelson (2002) calls Afrofuturism's potential to "re-route systems of control."

4.4 Interconnection of Identity, Mobility, and Agency

In *Riot Baby*, the regulation of Black life extends beyond ideology into the realm of the body itself. Kev's body is monitored, tracked, and categorized by predictive algorithms, a constant reminder that in the eyes of the state he is not an autonomous subject but an object of risk. His existence is shaped by an infrastructure designed to limit not only his movement but also his humanity. This systemic surveillance reflects what Browne (2015) calls the "racializing surveillance" of Black bodies, in which the body becomes a permanent site of suspicion and control.

Ella, however, resists this objectification through her manipulation of space and energy, reclaiming the Black body as a source of power rather than pathology. In one striking moment, she stands amid the remnants of a military base an institutional space emblematic of state violence and uses her abilities to transform it: "Out here with the rusted and abandoned military armament, the detached members and wings of aerial mobile suits and crabtanks and Guardians tall as apartment buildings lying like bones bleaching in the sun, she can pulverize and tear and



shatter and not spill a drop of blood.” (Onyebuchi, 2020, p. 72). This act is more than destruction; it is reclamation. Spaces designed to contain or destroy Black life are bent and remade through her agency, embodying Womack’s (2013) assertion that Afrofuturism “kicks the box of normalcy and preconceived ideas of blackness out of the solar system.”

This rewriting of space is also a rewriting of identity. The same body that the state might reduce to a profile or a target becomes, in Ella’s hands, a vessel of divine power. She disrupts spatial boundaries physical, temporal, and psychic thereby asserting the interconnectedness of identity, mobility, and agency. Her movements across geographies and eras are not mere flight; they are purposeful acts of defiance, rooted in an identity forged through resistance.

Kev’s experience offers a counterpoint. His restricted mobility under parole conditions demonstrates how the state weaponizes space to control Black bodies. Yet it is precisely this spatial confinement that sharpens his political consciousness. His questioning “*It will never stop... It will happen again. And again. And again. It already has.*” (Onyebuchi, 2020, p. 101) marks a shift from passive endurance to critical awareness. In Afrofuturist terms, this is the moment where psychic mobility begins to open into agency, as consciousness becomes a tool for imagining new futures.

By weaving identity, mobility, and agency together, Onyebuchi illustrates that liberation cannot be achieved through one dimension alone. Black identity provides the grounding from which mobility emerges; mobility, whether physical or psychic, allows for the navigation and subversion of oppressive structures; and agency transforms both into acts of reclamation and creation. Ella’s manipulation of the military base is not only an act of bodily empowerment but also a restructuring of space into something ungovernable by the state. In her defiance of the limitations placed on both Black bodies and Black geographies, she exemplifies Afrofuturism’s capacity to imagine worlds where Black life is central, sovereign, and uncontainable.

5. CONCLUSION

Tochi Onyebuchi’s *Riot Baby* offers a searing and imaginative exploration of Black identity, constrained and liberated forms of mobility, and the reclamation of agency, all refracted through the speculative lens of Afrofuturism. The novel dismantles the idea of a singular, linear Black experience and instead constructs a layered temporal and spatial reality where the past, present, and future co-exist and contend with one another. Through Ella and Kev, the narrative interrogates how Black people survive, resist, and redefine themselves within a society that surveils, incarcerates, and objectifies their bodies. Black identity in this text is not static; it is adaptive, relational, and shaped as much by systemic violence as by communal memory, ancestral inheritance, and personal awakening. Kev’s awareness of his reduction to “just data” underscores the dehumanizing forces of racialized systems, yet his internal growth and emerging vision for collective freedom reveal an identity that transcends state definitions.

Mobility emerges as both a measure of oppression and a metaphor for liberation. Kev’s restricted movement, whether inside prison walls or under algorithmic parole surveillance demonstrates how the state weaponizes space to enforce subjugation. In sharp contrast, Ella’s supernatural ability to traverse vast geographies, shift through time, and enter the minds of others becomes a radical reconfiguration of movement itself. Her psychic travel collapses histories and futures into a living present, reclaiming space and time as tools for resistance. This juxtaposition between Kev’s physical stasis and Ella’s metaphysical dynamism emphasizes that mobility in *Riot Baby* is not only about movement through space but about access to possibility.

Agency in the novel operates on multiple levels, from Kev’s gradual political awakening to Ella’s unapologetic, self-authorized interventions. Kev’s quiet refusal to accept mere survival,



and his questioning of the cycles of violence, show that resistance can be rooted in awareness as much as in visible action. Ella's powers, painful, unpredictable, yet transformative embody a form of agency that seeks not reform but the complete reimagining of oppressive structures. Her visions of a future without prisons, and her capacity to manipulate even militarized landscapes, turn the Black body from a site of control into a vessel of creation.

By weaving identity, mobility, and agency into an inseparable triad, Onyebuchi presents a narrative where liberation is not the gift of the oppressor but the making of the oppressed. Black identity provides the foundation for self-definition; mobility, whether constrained or cosmic, becomes the terrain of contestation; and agency transforms both into acts of reclamation and world-building. Riot Baby does not offer easy resolutions. Instead, it insists that liberation will require both the slow work of consciousness and the disruptive force of visionary power, making it a powerful testament to Afrofuturism's capacity to resist, subvert, and reimagine the socio-political realities that seek to contain Black life.

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