

A Space for Knowledge:
Diversity, Education, and Accessibility in *Binti*

“Tonight’s nominees are more diverse than the cover of a brochure for a liberal arts college, while the Oscar nominees are as diverse as the actual student body of a liberal arts college.” – Kumail Nanjiani in his opening monologue with Kate McKinnon for the 2016 Film Independent Spirit Awards

In her novella *Binti*, Nnedi Okorafor tells the story of a young woman leaving her home for the first time to attend an intergalactic university. Okorafor details Binti’s struggle in getting to Oomza University and her attempt to reconcile her heritage with the ideals and expectations of the institution she is entering. By dramatizing the conflict between academic culture and Binti’s cultural heritage, Okorafor interrogates the notion that academia is the only path to knowledge and points out the struggles of intercultural (and interspecies) communication within the confines of supposedly enlightened institutional structures. *Binti* shows that different ways of knowing are not lesser ways, as the titular character proves that the very things that set her apart from the dominant culture are the things that help her survive and save lives. In this essay, I will examine how Okorafor resituates knowledge outside of colonial, western assumptions; then I will explore the ways in which the university as an institution commodifies difference without valuing it; finally, I will discuss the end of the novel in which Okorafor situates Binti’s relationship with the university as one that is still in the process of being negotiated. Okorafor engages with the complexities of diversity within the University structure; in doing so, she refuses the simplistic narrative that progress will simply happen over time, unaided, and rejects the fiction that academia and enlightenment are one and the same. *Binti* is a novella that demands the re-evaluation of structures of power and knowledge, and the re-working of educational institutions so that they create a space for difference, rather than a space that commodifies visible differences while at the same time demanding cultural assimilation.