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BLACKNESS AND DIS/ABILITY IN THE AFROFUTURIST CHRISTMAS NOVELLA *SYNCHRONICITY* (2015) BY SHARON DODUA OTOO*

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ABSTRACT

Charlie, the main character in Sharon Dodua Otoo's Afrofuturist Christmas novella *Synchronicity*, is a Black single mother of Ghanaian heritage working as a graphic designer in Berlin who has spent her whole life feeling the constraints of her ancestral traditions. When one day she starts losing her ability to see colours, she cannot disclose that family-specific dis/ability since it would have professional and material consequences. Charlie embarks on a journey of self-reflection, in the course of which she will realise that something that at first seemed to be a loss could, in fact, be a blessing in disguise. My essay analyses the intersection of Blackness and dis/ability in *Synchronicity* through the lens of DisCrit: a theoretical approach associating Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory, and argues that Otoo's novella manages to effectively depict the intersections regarding the onset of an invisible dis/ability as well as Blackness and diasporic experiences, while an Afrofuturist reading of the novella allows us to consider it as a story based on hope, self-acceptance and the need for community.

Charlie ist die Hauptfigur in Sharon Dodua Otoos afrofuturistischer Weihnachtsnovelle *Synchronicity*. Es handelt sich um eine Schwarze alleinerziehende Mutter ghanaischer Herkunft, die als Grafikdesignerin in Berlin arbeitet und sich mit den Folgen der Traditionen ihrer Ahnen schwertut. Als sie eines Tages die Fähigkeit verliert, Farben zu sehen, kann sie diese familienspezifische Behinderung(en) nicht offenlegen, weil daraus berufliche und materielle Konsequenzen resultieren könnten. So begibt sich Charlie auf eine Reise der Selbstreflexion, bei der sie erkennen wird, dass was anfangs als Verlust erschien, sich als Segen herausstellen könnte. In meinem Beitrag wird die Intersektion von Schwarzsein und Behinderung(en) in *Synchronicity* mit einem DisCrit-Ansatz untersucht. Es wird zudem argumentiert, dass eine afrofuturistische Lesart der Erzählung ermöglicht, sie als eine Geschichte zu betrachten, die auf Hoffnung, Selbstakzeptanz und dem Bedürfnis nach Gemeinschaft beruht.

This essay analyses Sharon Dodua Otoo's novella *Synchronicity* (2015), written over twenty-four days like an advent calendar. It features a Black woman of Ghanaian heritage: a single mother living in Berlin whose name is Charlie Mensah, who among other things has to deal with dis/ability¹ – something I will address here as a social construct. Using a

*Dedicated to Diana Bonnelamé and Bethan Daultrey. The author wishes to thank Professor Sarah Colvin and Dr Tara Talwar Windsor as well as Ruth Durbridge. Thanks are also due to Nzâme e yô and Bimvemvam.

¹ I have chosen to use the term put forward by Subini Ancy Annamma, David J. Connor and Beth A. Ferri, where 'dis/ability' signals the potential to 'counter the emphasis on having a whole person be

DisCrit lens, where DisCrit can be summed up as ‘a dynamic framework through which to engage simultaneously with Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory’,² I will argue that Otoo’s novella effectively depicts the material consequences of the onset of a temporary invisible dis/ability for a Black mother from a West African background living in Germany. I will also suggest that *Synchronicity* indirectly highlights one of the shortcomings of Disability Studies in Europe, namely that the intersection between dis/ability and race is still under-researched. The relationship between dis/ability and whiteness is constructed as implicit because whiteness is seldom acknowledged in analyses focused on dis/ability.

Synchronicity also has Afrofuturist elements, as Priscilla Layne has argued.³ There is some difficulty in defining what is understood as Afrofuturism; as Isaiah Lavender explains, to date there is no consensus in higher education institutions:

Some people see it as an aesthetic genre unto itself: SF written by black people for black people. [...] Still others understand Afrofuturism as a cultural phenomenon emerging from the relationship between African Americans and Western technology, and they appreciate SF’s themes of abduction, displacement, and alienation as fitting symbols for black experience. Yet others see it as a mode of aesthetic production that merges myth and history to imagine new black cultures and futures.⁴

My Afrofuturist reading of the novella will focus on how it imagines, in Lavender’s terms, ‘new black cultures and futures’, and on its portrayal of hope, self-acceptance and the need for community.

DisCrit and Afrofuturism complement each other, even though they have not previously been used together. Both concern themselves with the lives of historically marginalised people and both reject assimilationism. Afrofuturism has notably been influenced by Black Nationalism,⁵ and DisCrit (as Annamma, Connor and Ferri explain) ‘requires activism and supports all forms of resistance’; moreover, ‘[it] values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or

represented by what he or she cannot do, rather than what he or she can’ and to ‘disrupt notions of the fixity and permanency of the concept of disability, seeking rather to analyze the entire context in which a person functions’. Subini Ancy Annamma, David J. Connor and Beth A. Ferri, ‘A Truncated Genealogy of DisCrit’, in *DisCrit: Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory in Education*, ed. David J. Connor, Beth A. Ferri and Subini Ancy Annamma, New York 2016, pp. 1–8 (p. 1).

² *Ibid.*

³ See Priscilla Layne, *White Rebels in Black: German appropriation of Black popular culture*, Ann Arbor 2018, p. 186.

⁴ Isaiah Lavender, *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement*, Columbus, OH 2019, p. 1. ‘SF’ refers to science-fiction.

⁵ See Alex Zamalin, *Black Utopia: The History of an idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*, New York 2019.

dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on'.⁶ Both can therefore be described as counter-hegemonic.

Since June 2020, when the worldwide protests against racial discrimination and police violence also reached Germany, awareness has been developing of Germany's colonial legacies of racism.⁷ Even in post-colonial Germany, however, Blackness has been persistently pathologised and constructed as inferior to whiteness. Fatima El-Tayeb traces the systematic legal exclusion of Black Germans – in European Germany – under National Socialism: 'Der Entzug der deutschen Pässe, der Ausschluß aus Schulen, Hochschulen und Berufen, das Eheverbot und die zwangsweisen Sterilisationen hatten den Außenseiterstatus, den Afro-Deutsche schon vor 1933 besaßen, in den einer verfolgten Minderheit gewandelt'.⁸ And German anti-Blackness persisted even after the fall of National Socialism: in 1952 a racist study was conducted in West Berlin with the blessing of the mayor, Ernst Reuter (SPD): 'Die Absicht dieser Studie war die Suche nach anthropologischen Beweisen, ob [biracial children with Black parents] als Weiße eingestuft werden könnten, sobald sie psychische und intellektuelle Leistungsfähigkeiten, Merkmale der Weißen "Rasse" aufwiesen'.⁹ German anti-Blackness has remained constant, and Blackness has been constructed as inherently inferior, deficient, antinomic to whiteness and out of place.¹⁰ Black victims of German institutional violence continue to be pathologised: for example, suicidal ideation was attested to Mohamed Dramé, a Black teenager who was fatally shot in 2022 by a police officer in Dortmund who used a machine gun.¹¹ Other examples include Johanna De Souza, a Black female patient in forced treatment who, after numerous complaints about her medical treatment,

⁶ Subini Ancy Annamma, David J. Connor and Beth A. Ferri, 'Touchstone Text: Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the Intersections of Race and Dis/ability', in *DisCrit: Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory in Education*, ed. Connor *et al.* (note 1), pp. 9–32 (p. 19).

⁷ See Jelena Malkowski, 'Rassismus zieht sich durch die Stadt', *taz am Wochenende*, 20 June 2020, 56–7.

⁸ Fatima El-Tayeb, *Schwarze Deutsche: der Diskurs um "Rasse" und nationale Identität 1890–1933*, Frankfurt a. M. and New York 2001, p. 197.

⁹ Hugues Blaise Feret Muanza Pokos, *Schwarzsein im "Deutschsein"? Zur Vorstellung vom Monovolk in bundesdeutschen Geschichtsschulbüchern am Beispiel der Darstellung von Menschen mit schwarzer Hautfarbe*, Oldenburg 2019, p. 114.

¹⁰ See e.g. Robbie Aitken and Eve Rosenhaft, *Black Germany: The Making and Unmaking of a Diaspora Community 1884–1960*, Cambridge 2013; Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah (eds), *Eure Heimat ist unser Altraum*, Berlin 2019; Fatima El-Tayeb, 'Blood is a very special juice: Racialized Bodies and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century Germany', in *International Review of Social History*, 44/supplement 7 (1999), 166–7; Sander L. Gilman, *Blackness without Blacks: Essays on the Image of the Black in Germany*, Boston 1992; Leroy T. Hopkins (ed.), *Who Is a German? Historical and Modern Perspectives on Africans in Germany*, Washington, DC 1999; May Ayim, 'Die afro-deutsche Minderheit', in *AfrikaBilder: Studien zu Rassismus in Deutschland*, ed. Susan Arndt, Münster 2006, pp. 46–56; Noah Sow, *Deutschland Schwarz Weiß: Der alltägliche Rassismus*, Norderstedt 2018.

¹¹ David Bieber, 'Das Vertrauen in die deutsche Polizei schwindet', *Neues Deutschland*, 5 September 2022; <https://www.nd-aktuell.de/artikel/1166679.polizeigewalt-das-vertrauen-in-die-deutsche-polizei-schwindet.html> (accessed 14 October 2022).

died in mysterious circumstances in 2022;¹² William Tonou-Mboda, who died in troubling circumstances in 2018;¹³ and Kupa Ilunga Medard Mutombo, a Black man diagnosed with schizophrenia, who died following his encounter with the Berlin police in September 2022 in circumstances that have been compared to the death of George Floyd.¹⁴ Indeed, Black people living with a dis/ability tend to be more often discriminated against by the police than non-dis/abled Black people.¹⁵

There is, in fact, a long history of reading Blackness as a kind of impairment in itself. At the same time there has been little acknowledgement of Black people dealing with actual legally and medically defined impairments, be they visible or non-visible. In humanities scholarship, social constructs such as race, gender or social class are regularly taken into account, but we still have a long way to go regarding dis/ability. Disability Studies themselves have long been criticised for their lack of diversity: Christopher Bell, for example, has called the scholarship ‘White Disability Studies’ because it ‘by and large focuses on the work of white individuals and is itself largely produced by a corps of white scholars and activists’.¹⁶ The same applies to popular discourse: for instance, while Harriet Tubman’s race and *genre*¹⁷ are well known, her dis/ability is seldom mentioned. There has, therefore, been regular narrative erasure of the dis/abilities Black people have had to live with and the role these dis/abilities have played in their lives.¹⁸ Seen as social constructs originally created to justify oppression, Blackness and disability share similarities.

If we accept Sharon Dodua Otoo’s argument that “‘Literatur wird nicht ohne gesellschaftlichen Kontext geschrieben und auch nicht ohne einen solchen rezipiert’”,¹⁹ then it is hardly surprising that Black characters

¹² See Black Community Hamburg, ‘Justice for Johanna De Souza’, *Black Community Hamburg*, 11 June 2022; <https://blackcommunityhamburg.blackblogs.org/2022/06/11/justice-for-johanna-de-souza> (accessed 7 October 2022).

¹³ ‘Fast acht Monate ist es her, dass William Tonou-Mboda am UKE starb, nachdem drei Securitys auf ihn losgegangen waren (taz berichtet)’. Marthe Ruddat, ‘Unbeantwortete Fragen’, *taz am Wochenende*, 12106 (2019), 60.

¹⁴ Philipp Siebert, ‘Tod nach Polizeieinsatz: Vergleich mit Fall George Floyd’, *Berliner Morgenpost*, 10 October 2022; <https://www.morgenpost.de/berlin/article236641007/Tod-nach-Polizeieinsatz-Vergleich-mit-Fall-George-Floyd.html> (accessed 14 October 2022).

¹⁵ Black people also tend to be more discriminated against in healthcare. See Muna AnNisa Aikins, Teresa Bremberger, Joshua Kwesi Aikins, Daniel Gyamerah and Deniz Yıldırım-Calıman, *Afrozensus 2020: Perspektiven, Anti-Schwarze Rassismuserfahrungen und Engagement Schwarzer, afrikanischer und afrodiasporischer Menschen in Deutschland*, Berlin 2021, pp. 122, 136.

¹⁶ Chris Bell, ‘Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal’, in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2nd edn, ed. Lennard J. Davis, New York 2006, pp. 275–82 (p. 275).

¹⁷ See Chris Bell, *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*, East Lansing 2012, p. 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁹ These words are part of Otoo’s speech ‘Dürfen Schwarze Blumen malen?’ The Klagenfurter Rede is delivered annually, often by a previous winner of the Ingeborg-Bachmann Prize, which Otoo won in 2016. See Sharon Dodua Otoo, ‘Dürfen Schwarze Blumen Malen?’, in Otoo, *Herr Grötrup setzt sich hin. Drei Texte*, Frankfurt a. M. 2022, pp. 29–47 (p. 37).

living with dis/ability are few and far between in works of literature. In the German context, Blackness is socially both extremely visible and invisible: on the one hand, Blackness has been associated with Otherness and constructed as the antithesis of Germanness at least since the Third Reich; on the other hand, the existence of Black people on German soil in the twenty-first century was barely acknowledged in the political sphere until extremely recently.²⁰ That double problem of perception contributes simultaneously to the homogenisation of Blackness and to the erasure of Black people with dis/abilities, even though the latter are on the receiving end of anti-Black oppression too.

Layne has argued that Black liberation is a vital component of Afrofuturism:²¹ freedom from the shackles of white supremacy and the self-defeating survival strategies sometimes made necessary because the downtrodden live in a world in which they are constantly reminded how little they matter. I will first focus on the challenges Charlie has to face, which can be viewed as obstacles to Black liberation. I will then discuss how Otoo's novella relates to hope, highlighting the role of community and self-acceptance, and how a temporary impairment benefits Charlie Mensah.

THE INFLUENCE OF TRADITION

Philip Khabo Koepsell has observed that Afrofuturism 'hat nichts mit Raumfahrt zu tun. Afrofuturismus bedeutet, das vorherrschende Bild Schwarzer Lebensrealität zu hinterfragen, es auf den Kopf zu stellen [...] um positive und alternative Zukunftsvisionen zu schaffen'.²²

Despite the absence of flashy technologies in the story, *Synchronicity* can be read as an Afrofuturist novella because it tackles myth and history as a step in imagining a new future. The protagonist deals with 'dislocation and disorientation' and the alienation of Blackness, which are recurring elements in Afrofuturism.²³ Charlie Mensah (also called Cee) comes from Ghana and is an *Ejis* (a fictional group invented by Otoo). Tellingly, the name *Ejis* is inspired by the Queen Mother Yaa Asantewaa of the Ejisu, who led the Ashanti uprising against British colonial rule in 1900.²⁴ According to Ashanti mythology, 'in the beginning, people could not

²⁰ See Pokos, *Schwarzsein im "Deutschein"?* (note 9), p. 81; and BUNDESREGIERUNG, 'Kanzlerin Merkel zur Integration in Deutschland', 2 March 2020; <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv/archiv-mediathek/kanzlerin-zu-integration-1727222> (accessed 14 October 2022).

²¹ See Priscilla Layne, 'Space Is the Place: Afrofuturism in Olivia Wenzel's *Mais in Deutschland und anderen Galaxien*', *German Life and Letters*, 71 (2015), 511–28 (512).

²² Philipp Khabo Koepsell, 'Editorial', in Koepsell, *The Afropean Contemporary: Literatur- und Gesellschaftsmagazin*, Berlin 2015, pp. 5–7 (p. 5).

²³ See Lavender, *Afrofuturism Rising* (note 4), p. 2.

²⁴ Albert Adu Boahen, *Yaa Asantewaa and the Asante-British War of 1900–1*, Accra and Oxford 2003, p. 17.

reproduce'.²⁵ In the novella's universe, *Ejis* are exclusively women and possess a parthenogenic ability, which confers a mythological element on the story.²⁶ As the protagonist explains to her daughter, "[parthenogenic] means we have children alone – that our bodies are designed to become pregnant completely by themselves" (p. 55). Neither Charlie nor her daughter Sam can control that ability; but in the course of the novella it becomes clear that they can control how they live with it.

Being an *Ejis* links Charlie with her ancestors from pre-colonial West Africa. Initially she seems bound by historical constraints. She has learned that *Ejis* must abide by certain guidelines: "We don't get partners like other people. We don't even live with our mothers after we are old enough to have a daughter ourselves. This is what *Ejis* do" (p. 55). Charlie therefore evicts her daughter, Sam, even though Sam resists this and questions its rationale. Charlie explains: "*Ejis* who live together always end up hurting each other and doing bad things to those who are weaker than them" (p. 56). She is lying – 'I made that last bit up to bring the point home', her narrative voice admits to the reader (p. 56) – and the lie fails in its double intention to avoid hurt to Sam and to relieve Charlie of the need to coerce her daughter: 'The very last words she said to me were: "Why are you doing this?" And since that moment, every Tuesday morning for 52 weeks I have tried and failed to find a just answer to that question' (p. 69). The events depicted seem to have been traumatic for all parties involved. Charlie contributes to the dislocation of her daughter and has not, at this point in the narrative, come to terms with the actions her own socialisation has produced. Otoo portrays Charlie as in some sense the product of her upbringing: 'Like my mum had done to me, and no doubt like her mum had done to her, I had passed on certain wisdoms about our heritage to my daughter' (p. 54). This permits readers to engage empathically with the rationale behind her actions. Charlie was given the tools her mother thought she might need in the world in which they lived, including the ability to rely only on herself and come to terms with the isolation that entails. At the same time, she is disoriented and dislocated throughout the novella, as she lives by the traditions the women of her family have been brought up with.

While sleeping on a bridge after deciding not to commit suicide, Charlie has a mystical experience. The Afrofuturistic aspect of the scene lies in the fact that, while it is usual across the African diaspora to communicate with one's elders to gain guidance and support, Charlie does it in a dream and a supernatural encounter takes place between her mother and herself. She is angry at first because she feels that she has been robbed of agency: 'I had never felt I had a choice, having always been chained to tradition and

²⁵ Patricia Ann Lynch, *African mythology: A to Z*, 2nd edn, New York 2010, p. 100.

²⁶ Sharon Dodua Otoo, *Synchronicity: The Original Story*, Münster 2015, p. 55. Further references appear in the text.

custom' (p. 75). Disgruntled to learn from her mother that she always had a choice, Charlie observes:

Wave upon roaring wave then broke over my mum's shores: how empty and bruised my heart felt from lack of trust; how open and tender the gash still was, where I had been ripped from my mum's side; how hollow my purpose had become, since Sam was vacuumed out of my life; how cracked and seething my skin, dry from years of not being touched or barely even seen; no one to hold or have been held by, no one ... no body ... nothing ... Wave upon wave ... my mum simply caressed me until they eventually subsided, until I could cry no more Simple ripples of: 'I am not strong enough to do this alone' now tickled her toes over and over again I just wanted this – all of this – to end. I wanted to go with my mum. (p. 76, ellipses in original)

The dream is healing because it finally allows Charlie to reflect extensively on what she had to endure. From an Afrofuturist perspective, this seems to imply that there can be no future without a reckoning with the past ('[es] geht [...] nicht nur um das Morgen, sondern auch darum, das Gestern aus einem anderen Blickwinkel zu betrachten', writes Koepsell).²⁷

The protagonist has suffered by respecting her mother's guidelines. Charlie has had to survive in an anti-Black society without being able to confide in another Black person or reflect upon what anti-Blackness and isolation have done to her, and this has led to the deterioration of her mental health. Grada Kilomba has observed how 'invisibility and isolation', as well as 'racism', may contribute to suicidal ideation among Black women. This is exacerbated by the fact that Black women are expected to be mentally strong while suffering in silence.²⁸ In other words, the usual constructed frailty assigned to femininity in the German mainstream discourse is not afforded to them. All this applies to Charlie too: consequently, we have to discuss Blackness's perception in a somewhat dehumanising environment for people read as Black and why this makes Black liberation necessary in the first place.

SCIENCE-FICTIONAL BLACKNESS

Charlie initially follows in her mother's footsteps by sticking to the family traditions. Yet things have already changed: her mother and her ancestors lived in West Africa, whereas Charlie left for Germany and Sam was socialised there. Charlie Mensah can be described as what Mark Dery calls a 'stranger in a strange land'.²⁹ Charlie lives in Berlin.

²⁷ Koepsell, 'Editorial', in Koepsell, *The Afropean Contemporary* (note 22), p. 5.

²⁸ Grada Kilomba, *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism*, 2nd edn, Münster 2010, pp. 48, 118.

²⁹ Mark Dery, 'Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose', in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery, Durham, NC 1994, pp. 179–222 (p. 179).

While that choice of location might initially seem unimportant for a reading of the novella, Berlin and its surroundings are heavily linked with Africa and Blackness. Berlin was the city where the so-called Congo Conference took place in 1884–5, resulting in the partition of Africa, the dislocation of its indigenous nations and its underdevelopment.³⁰ Human zoos ('Völkerschaustellungen') were common in Berlin throughout the colonial period.³¹ It was in Berlin, too, that seven Black men – among them the pan-African Cameroonian activist Joseph Bilé (1892–1959) – created the League for the Defence of the [Black] Race in 1929.³² And it was in Berlin that Audre Lorde, an African-American same-gender-loving womanist and professor, would teach for a while and would inspire a community of Black German women in Berlin in ways that led to the publication of the landmark collection of essays and poems *Farbebekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (1986), one of the most important milestones in the history of Black German activism.³³ Berlin has historically been a site of oppression and resistance for the Black diaspora, thus making it a significant location for the protagonist in Otoo's novella.

Lavender has observed 'a science-fictional blackness' dating to the Enlightenment era,³⁴ which 'remains as part of the world in this contemporary age. Blackness is science-fictional in the sense that these flights of fancy have used science to create the fiction of race as it is applied to black people'.³⁵ In the context of Berlin, too, Blackness can be interpreted as being science-fictional. Ghana is a majority Black country, and there is no emphasis on the status of Blackness in Ghana in Otoo's novella; but Charlie's Blackness is highlighted in Germany. At the beginning of the story, we learn that she is sweating on her way to work one day because she has accidentally over-dressed for the weather (p. 7). Her white German fellow Berliners respond in a particular way:

All the way to work, white people stole sideways glances at me. On the bus, I think one of them muttered something authoritative like '... Africans

³⁰ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Washington, DC 1982, p. 135.

³¹ See Dagmar Seck, *Völkerschaustellungen in Deutschland und Frankreich von 1874 bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg*, Erlangen 2013, p. 34. Tellingly, given that *Ejis* can reproduce on their own, they would probably have been put on display in nineteenth century Berlin by the likes of Carl Hagenbeck to satisfy the white European gaze and curiosity.

³² Robbie Aitken, 'From Cameroon to Germany and Back via Moscow and Paris: The Political Career of Joseph Bilé (1892–1959), Performer, "N[–]arbeiter" and Comintern Activist', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 43 (2008), 597–616 (597).

³³ Gloria Wekker, 'Überlieferinnen: Portrait der Gruppe Sister Outsider', in *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte*, 5th edn, ed. May Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye and Dagmar Schultz, Hamburg und Berlin 2018, pp. 293–306 (p. 305).

³⁴ 'The numerous writings on race by Hume, Kant and Hegel played a strong role in articulating Europe's sense not only of its cultural but also racial superiority'; see Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *Race and Enlightenment: A Reader*, Malden, MA 1998, p. 5.

³⁵ Lavender, *Afrofuturism Rising* (note 4), p. 9.

need to dress like this in Europe because they miss the desert heat of their homeland...’ (p. 7)³⁶

This scene is noteworthy for several reasons. Firstly, the centuries-old binary Europe-Africa is used again, making the two continents antonymous despite their proximity. Secondly, Europe here means cold, while Africa is associated with desert heat, and the culture/nature antagonism is reproduced when it is implied that Africans are irrational and therefore wear inappropriate clothing. Within all this, Africa is viewed as a monolith and its diversity is negated. Assumptions about who is African reflect a power dynamic that enables a white German person in Berlin to make irrational, generalising judgments about unknown Others in the confident belief that they are being rational and without having their prejudices and reputation questioned.³⁷ Charlie is not only scrutinised in ways which cannot be dissociated from her Blackness, but irrational assumptions are made by the unnamed white person. Except for her dark skin and Afrocentric hairstyle – Charlie wears locks – nothing indicates to a person who does not know her that she is African. This scene implies that any Black person in Berlin might be perceived by white Berliners as African, and therefore as not belonging to Germany; even Black Germans whose families have been there for several generations. That resonates with what Hugues Pokos has observed regarding the concept of Germanness since its inception: ‘Im “Deutschsein” hat die Schwarze Hautfarbe keinen Platz, da “Schwarze Deutsche” [...] eine ontologische Selbstdestruktion des Konzepts “Deutschsein” wären’.³⁸ Since there is no mention of citizenship in the novella, readers cannot know who is German and who is not.

In Otoo’s narrative Charlie has put on too many clothes not because she is African and therefore misses the heat of her native country, but because she has lost the ability to perceive the colour light-blue. She is therefore not able to gauge the weather conditions correctly. Tellingly, this indicates how seldom non-visible impairments are considered in social situations. But the apparently authoritative opinion expressed by Charlie’s fellow bus passenger also points to how common it is for white persons in Germany to assume a natural position of authority when discussing Black people, reinforcing the adult-child binary that racialised discourse creates. It also

³⁶ Interestingly, this echoes Luise Rehling’s (CDU) erroneous assumption that Black people are not suited for the German climate. *Deutscher Bundestag, 198. Sitzung*, 12 March 1952, p. 8507.

³⁷ This might explain why the contributions to anti-Blackness displayed in the writings of much-lauded philosophers such as Hannah Arendt have seldom been acknowledged in the German mainstream’s public discourse. For example, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt reproduces older revisionist tropes such as: ‘Moreover, the senseless massacre of native tribes on the Dark Continent was quite in keeping with the traditions of these tribes themselves. Extermination of hostile tribes had been the rule in all African native wars, and it was not abolished when a black leader happened to unite several tribes under his leadership’. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edn, New York 1973, p. 192.

³⁸ Pokos, *Schwarzsein im “Deutschsein”?* (note 9), p. 84.

functions as a reminder that concepts like Africanness and Blackness were initially European-made concepts which were homogenised and applied to masses of individuals with not much in common.

These challenges associated with being othered and racialised – practices which remind some people that they do not belong – are not limited to random encounters for Charlie. Trying to remember where she first encountered Hussein, a non-white policeman she becomes romantically interested in, Charlie makes the following observation: ‘He was one of many helmeted and / or aggressive looking police officers at an anti-Sarrazin demonstration just outside the *Berliner Ensemble*’ (p. 46). This is noteworthy for a few reasons: during one of her first interactions with Hussein, Charlie is suspicious: ‘Policeman – offering me help?’ (p. 20). Her scepticism echoes a lack of trust in the police force familiar to people of African descent living in Germany (almost 60% of the participants of the ‘Afrozensus 2020’ reported feeling distrustful of the police force and other security agencies).³⁹ Moreover, the demonstration she mentions is based on a real event in 2014: a response to the then-SPD politician Thilo Sarrazin, who garnered continent-wide attention with his essay *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (2010). In it, Sarrazin makes migrants from Muslim-majority countries and Africa responsible for what he saw as Germany’s ongoing decline. The book complained among other things about African women’s fertility rate and made the overtly racist claim ‘dass die fortgesetzte Einwanderung aus der Türkei, Afrika, Nah- und Mittelost das durchschnittliche intellektuelle Leistungsniveau in den Einwanderungsländern negativ beeinflusst’.⁴⁰ In spite of its clear echoes of racial science and eugenics, his essay became a bestseller in a country formerly often praised for its ability to deal with its own history.⁴¹ The success of that essay reflects the society in which Charlie and Sam live, in which diverse people get lumped together regardless of class and other dynamics. This applies to Charlie too, who, despite holding a job as a freelance graphic designer, cannot escape her Blackness.

Her situation is peculiar. As a graphic designer she has a potentially very lucrative contract offer from Herr Welker, a white German property manager and entrepreneur who also happens to be her landlord. Consequently, quite aside from their respective identities and their social implications, their relationship does not play out on an equal footing. At the novel’s beginning, Charlie receives an eviction notice from Welker & Welker, the property firm belonging to Herr Welker (p. 21). However, he simultaneously expects her to keep delivering impressive concepts as a graphic designer and to tolerate his one-sided familiarity with her.

³⁹ See Aikins *et al.*, *Afrozensus 2020* (note 15), p. 255.

⁴⁰ Thilo Sarrazin, *Deutschland schafft sich ab: wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen*, Munich 2010, pp. 333, 443.

⁴¹ The German state’s efforts to tackle its anti-Black past have been timid at best.

Charlie calls him Herr Welker but he calls her Boney (p. 21), a nickname inspired by the band Boney-M (p. 15),⁴² which is clearly belittling. A racial microaggression is being perpetrated via a nickname that implies not only the alienation but the de-individualisation of Black subjects in Germany. The social and historical consequences of such practices are well documented.⁴³ Tellingly, Herr Welker is unaware until Charlie tells him that his familiarity disturbs her. Herr Welker apparently has no impetus to reflect on his behaviour, or on racial relations in Germany more broadly. When he interacts with his sole Black colleague, who happens to be Charlie, his first association is with a German creation of fictional Blackness, produced to entertain a white German audience; in the words of Charles W. Mills, a Blackness ‘that never was’:

There will be white mythologies, invented Orients, invented Africas, invented Americas, with a correspondingly fabricated population, countries that never were, inhabited by people who never were – Calibans and Tontos, Man Fridays and Sambos – but who attain a virtual reality through their existence in travelers’ tales, folk myth, popular and highbrow fiction, colonial reports, scholarly theory, Hollywood cinema, living in the white imagination and determinedly imposed on their alarmed real-life counterparts.⁴⁴

Imaginatively hamstrung by the fake constructs that are part of his reality, Herr Welker is seemingly incapable of grasping what subtle anti-Blackness or racial prejudice might look like, despite living in a ‘guilt-ridden remembrance culture’ (p. 24).⁴⁵ Nonetheless, he does not want to be perceived as racist: ‘he, like most white Germans of his generation (or of any generation), would rather burn his “Lederhosen” than risk being called a racist’, Charlie comments drily (p. 12). Because we already know that Herr Welker is actually oblivious to anti-Blackness, we can assume that he wishes not to be perceived as racist because it is not socially acceptable in public – this is a society where being considered racist is somehow worse than having to deal with racism.

Readers must assume that Charlie’s daughter, Sam, faces similar challenges in her daily life. In light of this and of the fact that Sam does not have other family members with whom she can discuss the challenges associated with her Black womanhood, Charlie’s decision to cut her daughter off can again be read as problematic. In acting according

⁴² Boney-M was an Afro-Caribbean pop band active in Germany during the 1970s. See Knud Orsted, ‘Denmark’, *Billboard*, 9 June 1979, p. 26. It was created by Frank Farian (a German white man). See Yarden Arar, ‘Boney M – Europe’s Village People: Hard Luck for Import Band’, *Lawrence Journal World*, 10 August 1980, 88. The goal was therefore to appeal to the white German gaze.

⁴³ ‘This process of absolute identification – or essentialism – in which one is merely seen as a ‘race’ is only possible because within racism one is denied the right to subjectivity’; see Kilomba, *Plantation Memories* (note 28), p. 108.

⁴⁴ Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Ithaca, NY and London 1997, p. 18.

⁴⁵ This confirms Germany’s absence of reckoning with its anti-Black past and present.

to tradition she fails to take into account the peculiarities of a German society in which difficulties related to Blackness can be exacerbated without the right support system, and where Blackness's status seems precarious because scientific racism associated with an invented Blackness makes it science-fictional, resulting in Black people being oppressed. However, this does not negate the fact that Charlie has also benefited – in spite of her Blackness – from the oppression of others. Indeed, she contributed to the displacement of other marginalised people from a low-income community by gentrifying the area, which she did not realise at first (pp. 26–7). Nevertheless, a component of hope underlines the Afrofuturist aspect of Otoo's novella.

HOPE

Synchronicity is a story of hope. Hopefulness is a recurring trope in Afrofuturist material,⁴⁶ in a context where Afrofuturism imagines Black liberation.⁴⁷ The component of hope in relation to Black liberation might not at first seem apparent in Otoo's novella, where the protagonist is a middle-class Black person who seems removed from the Black community in Berlin since her daughter's departure. Charlie is in a specialist line of work in which Black people are portrayed as underrepresented: she is the sole Black graphic designer in the novella. Yet despite being seemingly more privileged than her Black counterparts, Charlie cannot escape her Blackness, nor does she try to. This might be viewed as a symbolic contribution to Black liberation, but it is a contribution, nonetheless.

For instance, we know that Charlie wears locks, which is noteworthy because Black women's hair is a highly political subject associated with material consequences. Tellingly, to navigate an historically classist and texturist society, some Black women resort to straightening their hair,⁴⁸ even though the procedure has long-term consequences.⁴⁹ Charlie, however, is constructed as a Black woman at ease with her Blackness, even in an anti-Black context. Living in a society that is often oblivious to the hair discrimination faced by Black people, Charlie still decides to keep her locks,

⁴⁶ See Lavender, *Afrofuturism Rising* (note 4), p. 8.

⁴⁷ See Layne, 'Space Is the Place' (note 21), p. 512.

⁴⁸ For instance, as Denise Bergold-Cadwell said: 'Viele Schwarze Frauen glätten sich die Haare, um im Beruf ernst genommen zu werden'; see Celia Parbey, 'Brauchen Schwarze Frauen ein bestimmtes Äußeres, um aufzusteigen?', *zeit*, 15 December 2020; <https://www.zeit.de/zett/politik/2020-12/rassismus-weiblichkeit-sexualisierung-gender-studies-denise-bergold-cadwell/komplettansicht> (accessed 24 November 2022).

⁴⁹ A Black woman living in Germany speaks about her experience: 'Ich hatte zuletzt dicke Schichten von Verbrennungen auf der Kopfhaut. [...] Dann war es auch so, dass meine Haare teilweise ausgefallen sind, also ich hatte vorne jahrelang kahle Stellen'; see Mithu Sanyal, 'Decolonize Your Body!', in *Sexualität, Gender und Religion in gegenwärtigen Diskursen: Theologie, Gesellschaft und Bildung*, ed. Fahimah Ulfat and Ali Ghandour, Wiesbaden 2021, pp. 17–33 (p. 29).

even though they might elicit unwanted attention or potentially hinder her rise in the working environment. Consequently, her hair choices can be interpreted as an act of resistance, since according to Grada Kilomba: '[d]readlocks, Rasta, Afro-hair and African hairstyles convey a political message of racial empowerment and a protest against racial oppression'.⁵⁰

Charlie's self-love regarding her dark skin is also noteworthy. As her capacity to see different colours gradually leaves her, she is particularly anxious about 'losing [her] brown' (p. 10). In other words, she embraces her skin tone even though colourism is a reality that has material consequences.⁵¹ Nor does Charlie bleach her skin, even though her skin tone marks her as the perpetual Other in Berlin. Her African features mean that she does not fit the Eurocentric beauty standards, in a context where, as Patricia Hill Collins has expressed it, 'valuations of [women's] self-worth do [...] depend [more] on their physical attractiveness' than is the case for their male counterparts.⁵² Charlie's self-love regarding her features therefore sends a positive message. That Charlie is attractive to Hussein, a non-white man, also gives hope since it shows that not all non-white persons have internalised Eurocentric beauty standards.

More importantly, Charlie herself loves her Blackness, even though Black people are seen either as providers of entertainment (by Herr Welker) or as contributing to Germany's demise (by Sarrazin and his admirers). She does not shrink from her Blackness, nor does she alienate herself to gain material advantages. This novella set in Berlin could thus be viewed as a reflection of a broader diasporic experience that might inspire others to start loving and accepting themselves. Otoo's story depicts a world in which Black people do not have colonised minds and in which they unapologetically embrace their Blackness. Even though she experiences the feelings of alienation common to Black people in white-dominated fields, Charlie Mensah rejects the Racial Contract: she does not embody 'non-white self-loathing and racial deference to white citizens'.⁵³ While racism is still present in the universe of *Synchronicity*, whiteness is not considered a yardstick, and there is no attempt to appeal to white acceptance. Decolonised minds are a prerequisite for Black liberation; this, I would argue, is a key element in the Afrofuturist tone of the story.

In addition, Charlie's experiences are relatable since deference to one's elders and dealing with racial microaggressions in a white-dominated workplace can speak to a range of diasporic people. The component of hope, then, is not only about the protagonist's embrace of her Blackness but about a Black person finding herself while dealing with difficulties

⁵⁰ Kilomba, *Plantation Memories* (note 28), p. 73.

⁵¹ See Trina Jones, 'Shades of Brown: The Law of Skin Color', *Duke Law Journal*, 49 (2001), 1487–557.

⁵² Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd edn, New York and London 1999, p. 89.

⁵³ Mills, *The Racial Contract* (note 44), p. 89.

and impairment(s), and about the importance of a support system and the need to repair family traumas. We should not overlook that during most of the story Charlie struggles to accept herself. She loves her Black skin, her Blackness, her family, yet she does not seem to love herself: she views herself as unfit and while longing for love, she is afraid of it (p. 64). Charlie becoming a grandmother and deciding not to hold back her love for her family and to trust others (p. 79) might, therefore, be seen as a new beginning; but this fresh start only becomes possible after she reaches out for help and shows vulnerability to people who mean her well. Without self-love, none of that would have been possible; Otoo thus creates an Afrofuturist world in which Black women can openly be vulnerable. It is also a world in which racialised and dis/abled persons are not kept in 'separate spheres', as is normally the case,⁵⁴ and in which Charlie's loss of her ability to see colour can be seen as a gain.

NEURODIVERSITY AS A GAIN

Unquestionably, oppression and resistance go hand-in-hand and this is also the case for Charlie Mensah. At the beginning of the story, she starts losing what her mother defines as her 'monosense' (p. 24): 'her ability to see colour by sight' alone, as opposed to via synesthesia. Charlie is experiencing what we commonly refer to as colour blindness, which is defined as follows: 'Colorblindness, or more accurately *color vision deficiency*, occurs when an individual has a restricted color spectrum that affects the perception of color'.⁵⁵ The material consequences of Charlie's loss are highlighted in the first part of the story. For example, when she loses her ability to see the colour red, she almost gets run over by a truck because she did not see the red 'Ampelmännchen' before crossing the street (p. 9). The sudden onset of her colour blindness makes it more difficult for her to participate in society. Not only does the loss of monosense put her physically at risk, it also threatens her livelihood because she is working as a freelance graphic designer and at risk of homelessness (p. 21) in a society in which almost seventy per cent of the participants of the 'Afrozensus 2020' reported 'aus rassistischen Gründen eine Wohnung nicht bekommen zu haben'.⁵⁶ Charlie cannot afford to disclose her difficulties to her customers or her colleagues, especially Herr Welker. Thus, these new difficulties make her even more different and vulnerable.

⁵⁴ See also Bell, *Blackness and Disability* (note 17), p. 3.

⁵⁵ Lisa M. Meeks, Neera R. Jain and Kurt R. Herzer, 'Universal Design: Supporting Students with Color Vision Deficiency (CVD) in Medical Education', in *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 29/3 (2016), 303–9 (304).

⁵⁶ See Aikins *et al.*, *Afrozensus 2020* (note 15), p. 206.

Not only is it well-documented that it is harder to find employment when living with a dis/ability,⁵⁷ but Charlie's status as a Black woman from Ghana and *Ejis* adds to that potential difficulty.⁵⁸ She has struggled to get to where she is now, even more so in the context of the marginalisation she has experienced throughout her life. Charlie describes being socialised '[i]n a place where I had been in danger of growing up as a series of "nots"' (p. 68); and despite being Herr Welker's 'hardest working colleague' (p. 80), on whose skills he relies for the success of his project (pp. 50–1), she still receives notice of eviction from him. It is somewhat understandable, therefore, that Charlie only discusses the ordeal that is the loss of her monosense with her mother and does not disclose her impairments to others because of 'the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms'.⁵⁹ Charlie is only valuable as long as she is able to do her job. On the one hand, she shows that non-white people can contribute positively to Germany. On the other hand, since there has not been a deep reckoning with anti-Blackness and dis/ability in Germany, Charlie's status as one of the so-called 'good ones' is precarious.

It is also implied that '[losing] [her] ability to distinguish between Black people, white people and people of colour' could get Charlie into trouble (p. 17); we can assume that it is a necessary survival skill for a Black person living in Germany to be aware of their surroundings and the racialised social hierarchy. This would not be necessary for a white person dealing with Charlie's difficulty, since whiteness seems to be constructed as the default in Germany. One's racialisation inflects one's social status as a disabled person, as Christopher Bell observes: 'At the very least, it should be understood that many white disabled people have cultural capital by virtue of their race and are, therefore, more on the inside than they are on the outside.'⁶⁰

Nonetheless, losing monosense and suffering the temporary dis/ability of colour blindness can also be viewed as a gain for Charlie. For one thing, it will make her reflect on her life and family relationships. At the story's beginning she is not close to her mother, but the difficulties associated with the changes in her capacity to perceive colours will make Charlie contact her. It turns out that monosense – the capacity to see colours – will be replaced by what her mother calls polysense, which is defined in the novella

⁵⁷ See Markus Ort, *Vermeidung einer Diskriminierung behinderter Arbeitnehmer ins besondere im Rahmen des Einstellungsverfahrens des öffentlichen Dienstes: Eine Darstellung der Rechtslage und kritische Analyse*, Norderstedt 2016.

⁵⁸ 'Civil society sources reported racial discrimination on the basis of foreign-sounding names, differential treatment faced by people of African descent, with disproportionately lower remuneration for work done in comparison with others'; see European Network Against Racism (ENAR), *Racism Discrimination in Employment & in Europe 2013–2017*, Brussels 2017, p. 26.

⁵⁹ Annamma *et al.*, 'A Truncated Genealogy of DisCrit' (note 1), p. 19.

⁶⁰ Bell, 'Introducing White Disability Studies' (note 17), p. 276.

as ‘an ability to experience colour physically’ (p. 24) and is supposed to be a gift. What the protagonist experiences is generally called synaesthesia. According to the psychologist Jamie Ward:

Synaesthesia is a remarkable way of perceiving the world. One attribute of a stimulus (e.g., its sound, shape, or meaning) may inevitably lead to the conscious experience of an additional attribute. For example, the word ‘Phillip’ may taste of sour oranges, the letter A may be luminous red, and a C# note on the violin may be a brown fuzzy line extending from left to right in the lower left part of space. The attributes do not always lie in different senses (e.g., a visually presented letter may trigger a color).⁶¹

Interestingly, in the middle of the eighteenth century, synaesthesia was considered the antipode of colour blindness.⁶² Nowadays synaesthesia is not legally understood as a dis/ability since it does not prevent someone from actively participating in society (classing conditions as disabilities is a legal, not a medical matter). Because the onset of polysense takes time, Charlie starts gaining new computer skills in order to be able to accomplish her contractual obligations even when she has no perception at all of certain colours (p. 24). When polysense sets in, it is clearly synaesthetic: when she regains the capacity to perceive yellow, for example, she experiences it as having ‘melted butter in [her] mouth and a waft of citronella accompanying [her]’ (p. 29). And it goes even further. While watching Frau Bahir’s exhibition, Charlie makes the following observation:

While I had been working on the project, I had not noticed before how beautiful the people were nor how well-composed the pictures were. With monosense, it had simply been yet another job. With polysense, I now had access to a whole range of additional and fascinating information. The individuals portrayed could roughly be divided into two groups: ‘people who live completely in the present’ and ‘people who can see into the future’ – these groups do not correspond exactly to ‘white’ and ‘of colour or Black’, but the overlap is pretty close. (p. 45)

This indicates that Charlie, as a neurodiverse character, has gained a supernatural ability allowing her to see what is invisible to the naked eye. This scene is noteworthy since it reveals that the protagonist is not the only person with a shared special ability. As a result, that shared ability is community-building. It is hardly surprising that those able to see into the future are mostly those living at the margins; we can assume that they must dare to think of better days as a means not to lose hope, since they can grasp what others cannot fathom. It reminds us of Charles Mills’s observation that ‘hegemonic groups characteristically have experiences that foster illusory perceptions about society’s functioning, while subordinate groups

⁶¹ Jamie Ward, ‘Synaesthesia’, *Annual Review of Psychology*, 64/1 (2013), 49–75 (50).

⁶² *Ibid.*, 52.

characteristically have experiences that (at least potentially) give rise to more adequate conceptualizations'.⁶³

Interestingly, some of the defining moments in the story happen thanks to Frau Bahir, a woman of colour who most probably belongs to the group of 'people who can see into the future' (p. 45). Frau Bahir is a family person, mother, grandmother, elder living in a tight-knit community who, despite being disabled – she is suffering from sickle cell disease – created a photo exhibition celebrating the local community titled: 'komm – UNITY' (p. 45). Interestingly, she is not defined by her dis/ability. Instead, her multiple identity is highlighted. She knows how it feels to be unfortunate, and both she and Charlie are 'strangers in a strange land'. However, unlike Charlie, Frau Bahir is able to shed tears (of joy) in front of others and is strong enough to acknowledge that she does need her loved ones (p. 47). Tellingly, Frau Bahir is the only person in Berlin Charlie can open up to (p. 70). She is able to decipher that Charlie is suffering in silence, even though the latter tries to downplay it at first (p. 71). Frau Bahir then adds: "The point is to manage the negative stuff in a way that makes space for the positive stuff. And to keep bearing in mind, that the pendulum swings both ways. Everything passes in time" (pp. 71–2). Her words are so convincing that Charlie muses: "The more I pondered Frau Bahir's words, the more it seemed that the fate I had made an appointment with, was the wrong one..." (p. 72). At the end of the conversation, she tells Charlie: 'Whatever you do, Cee, [...] forgive yourself. Everyone makes mistakes' (p. 74). The words come at the right moment: they help Charlie realise she does not have to throw her life away. What she needs is expressed in the title of Frau Bahir's exhibition: 'komm – UNITY'.

Charlie's temporary experience of impairment can be viewed as a blessing in disguise. In that context she asserts herself and starts standing up to Herr Welker, telling him that her name is not 'Boney' but 'Frau Mensah' and confronting him about the eviction notice she has received from Welker & Welker (p. 21). This can be interpreted as an act of resistance, since a Black person standing up for themselves against racial prejudice risks being pathologised.⁶⁴ Moreover, she starts reflecting upon *Ejis* traditions. *Ejis* are supposed to spend their lives alone; in the context of her loss of monosense, however, Charlie meets and starts feeling attracted to Hussein, a policeman from Berlin, who eventually rings her doorbell (p. 33). By the end of the story Charlie and Hussein seem to matter to each other. Charlie does not want to rush things, but it is clear that she has realised that she needs human affection and does not have to spend her life alone.

⁶³ Charles W. Mills, 'Alternative Epistemologies', *Social Theory and Practice*, 14/3 (1988), 237–63 (246).

⁶⁴ See David Gillborn, Nicola Rollock, Carol Vincent and Stephen J. Ball, 'The Black Middle Classes, Education, Racism, and Dis/ability: An Intersectional Analysis', in *DisCrit: Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory in Education*, ed. Connor *et al.* (note 1), pp. 35–54 (pp. 52–3).

The process also enables Charlie to rekindle her relationship with her mother, with whom she had not spoken for several months prior to the story's beginning (p. 14). That shift does not take place effortlessly, but is supported by Frau Bahir (p. 45). Feeling overwhelmed by her situation and the associated difficulties, Charlie contemplates taking her own life for a brief moment, and then ends up spending the night on a bridge, where she has a dream in which she has a dialogue with her mother's spirit (pp. 74–7). The dream and the aforementioned conversation with Frau Bahir advising her to forgive herself prompt Charlie to write a letter to Sam in the hope of seeing her daughter as well as 'her new-born baby'. As in Otoo's *Adas Raum* (2021), 'the child who is born signifies hope and futurity'.⁶⁵

CONCLUSION

You can't live in this world all by yourself
 No, no-no, you can't make it alone
 And just as sure as you try to make it by yourself
 You're gonna wake up and find you're gonna need somebody else
 Dennis Brown – *No Man Is an Island*

The novella clearly shows that a community – regardless of man-made differences – can be an effective support system. Reading *Synchronicity* as an Advent novella incorporating Afrofuturist elements – stranger in a strange land, new future on the basis of a re-perceived past, Black liberation – we can consider it a story of hope. My essay has synergised an Afrofuturist with a DisCrit approach to try to do justice to the complexities of Otoo's novella. *Synchronicity* manages to depict the emotional distress usually associated with the sudden onset of a non-visible dis/ability and its social implications. At the same time, readers are allowed to dream about Black liberation in an inclusive form in which the social and self-worth of a person living with an impairment is not tied to their ability to contribute to the creation of capital.

Moreover, it helps us to reflect on the traditions diasporic people have to navigate. While Charlie at first seems constrained by her ancestral traditions and the reality she has to deal with, the ordeal of her temporary impairment allows her to experience tremendous growth that culminates in her becoming a grandmother. It can therefore be interpreted in hindsight as a blessing in disguise.

⁶⁵ Sarah Colvin, 'Freedom Time: Temporal Insurrections in Olivia Wenzel's *1000 Serpentina Angst* and Sharon Dodua Otoo's *Adas Raum*', *German Life and Letters*, 75/1 (2022), 138–65 (139).