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Toward a Theory of the Dark Fantastic: The Role of Racial Difference in Young Adult Speculative Fiction and Media

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Abstract: Humans read and listen to stories not only to be informed but also as a way to enter worlds that are not like our own. Stories provide mirrors, windows, and doors into other existences, both real and imagined. A sense of the infinite possibilities inherent in fairy tales, fantasy, science fiction, comics, and graphic novels draws children, teens, and adults from all backgrounds to speculative fiction – also known as the fantastic. However, when people of color seek passageways into the fantastic, we often discover that the doors are barred. Even the very act of dreaming of worlds-that-never-were can be challenging when the known world does not provide many liberatory spaces. The dark fantastic cycle posits that the presence of Black characters in mainstream speculative fiction creates a dilemma. The way that this dilemma is most often resolved is by enacting violence against the character, who then haunts the narrative. This is what readers of the fantastic expect, for it mirrors the spectacle of symbolic violence against the Dark Other in our own world. Moving through spectacle, hesitation, violence, and haunting, the dark fantastic cycle is only interrupted through emancipation – transforming objectified Dark Others into agentive Dark Ones. Yet the success of new narratives from *Black Panther* in the Marvel Cinematic universe, the recent Hugo Awards won by N.K. Jemisin and Nnedi Okorafor, and the blossoming of Afrofuturistic and Black fantastic tales prove that *all* people need new mythologies – new "stories about stories." In addition to amplifying diverse fantasy, liberating the *rest* of the fantastic from its fear and loathing of darkness and Dark Others is essential.

Keywords: Afrofuturism, fantasy, young adult literature, science fiction, critical media studies

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Introduction[1]

Humans tell stories to make sense of an oft-nonsensical world. This myth-making process forms metanarratives that shape society, culture, and the imagination. As Attebery (2014) notes, "fantasy is an arena—I believe the primary arena—in which competing claims about myth can be contested and different relationships with myth tried out" (p. 9). Mendlesohn (2008) further theorizes the relationships between the reader and fantasy as rhetorical. Readers can enter a portal and go on a quest. They can be immediately immersed within the fantastic world from the first page, the first television scene, or the first swell of the movie score. The fantastic can even intrude upon the world the reader knows, or the reader can choose to remain in the liminal space between the real and the unreal.

What unites all these paths into the fantastic is *belief*—one must *believe* the world being entered. This assumption provides a common thread found in both Attebery (2014) and Mendlesohn (2008), and has its genesis in Todorov (1973):

> I nearly reached the point of believing: that is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic. Either total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is *hesitation* which sustains its life. (p. 25; emphasis in original)

This point of hesitation—whether it is the first flutter of a dragon's wing, blood dripping from a fang, the shimmer of fairy dust, or an otherworldly glow in a character's eyes—is very familiar to readers, viewers, and fans of fantasy, fairy tales, and other imaginative works. From our earliest years, we are inclined toward finding that point of hesitation

that signals the fantastic. However, not everyone is positioned the same way *in* or *by* the fantastic. Although it is generally assumed that audiences are positioned to identify with the heroes and heroines in "stories about stories," the fantastic also shapes our collective consciousness toward perceptions of difference.

Within the fantastic, a primary locus of alterity is embodied darkness. The traditional purpose of darkness is to disturb, to unsettle, and to cause unrest. This primal fear of darkness and dark Others is so deeply rooted in Western myth that it is nearly impossible to find its origin. Some scholars have traced the fear of darkness to ancient Greece and the classical tradition (Christopoulos, Karakantza, & Levaniouk, 2010), while others locate a corresponding valuation of Whiteness and lighter-skinned peoples in the Christianization of the late Roman Empire and Dark Ages Europe, and in the emergence of the Islamic world (Painter, 2010). No matter what the reasons were for the way our culture came to view all things dark in the past, the consequences have been a nameless and lingering fear of darkness in the present.

In the West, the mysterious unknowability of darkness in nature was extended to a corresponding fear of unknown and unknowable dark things, including imaginary monsters beyond the boundaries of the known world during medieval times, and, in the modern period, conquered and enslaved people from beyond Europe's borders. This fear of dark people was written into the United States constitution, denoting for the ages a "three-fifths compromise" that at the time of the Founding and well beyond, enslaved African Americans were not fully human. The colloquial term by which people of African descent were often known during

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[1] I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that I can use when referring to individuals in my writing. Throughout this article I use pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

this late 18th century period—*darky*—signals that in modern English, darkness has never been just a metaphor. Even in language, darkness is personified, embodied, and most assuredly racialized.

My quest to seek the origins of fantastic darkness within history, culture, and society is part of a long intellectual tradition. Critical medievalist Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's (1996) frequently cited edited volume *Monster Theory* is but one of many influential texts that views fantastic beasts, witches, zombies, vampires, dragons, manticores, shades, and the rest of a monstrous menagerie as an analogy for those who are positioned as different in the real world. Cohen's seven theses of monster culture echoed some of the observations that I began making as I read text after text. Furthermore, Toni Morrison's (2010) *Playing in the Dark* provides an even better starting point for locating the Dark Other in the fantastic, especially when many traditional fantasy novels, fairy tales, comics, television shows, and movies seem not to have any discernible characters of color:

> The situation is aggravated by the tremor that breaks into discourse on race. It is further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body. According to this logic, every well-bred instinct argues *against noticing* and forecloses adult discourse. (pp. 9-10; emphasis in original)

In other words, the reason why our culture does not often notice the ways that race, difference, and darkness are hailed in the fantastic is that we have been carefully taught not to notice it. The supposedly raceless terrain of the fantastic thus becomes a means of escape from our raced, embodied existences, even for White readers and viewers. However, enforced invisibility through colormuteness (Pollock, 2004) in the fantastic does not render dark bodies shadowless. Quite the contrary. The shadow cast becomes darker and more ominous still for its very unspeakability.

Beyond the magical landscapes of fantasy, stories set in the future and on alien worlds seem to uncannily imagine alien Others subjugating the West in the same way that Europe did to the "rest." John Rieder (2008) observed in *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* that "scholars largely (though not universally) agree that the period of the most fervid imperialist expansion in the late nineteenth century is also the most crucial period for the emergence of the [science fiction]" (pp. 2-3). Science fiction, fantasy, and fairy tales for children and young adults are not exempt from colonial themes. Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint (2012), quoting José Monleón, find that fantasy emerges from dialectics of reason and unreason that arose with modernity, dividing the world into "us" and "them" (p. 103). In the fantastic, vampires and werewolves, witches and wizards, and seers and shifters often function as recognizable stand-ins for majorities and minorities, and the inevitable conflicts that emerge between and among identity groups. Dark Others cross all of these boundaries—generic, categorical, and rhetorical — as embodied material sites of accumulation and fungibility.

In my book manuscript in progress, I focus on textual narratives for young adults that have been turned into television shows and movies. It is one thing to read and imagine a character who is the site of difference; it is quite another to see that character on the small or large screen. Participatory culture also plays a role in this phenomenon. When Morrison asked rhetorically about what happens as we imagine "an Africanist Other," she might not have foreseen that twenty years later, not only

would fans run to social media to share their reactions after finishing a narrative, they would also use the Internet to discuss books and shows during readings and viewings. Thus reader, viewer, and fan responses are being shaped much more collectively than at any time in the recent past. And so is imagination.

When people read fantastic texts from the perspective of the monster, not the protagonist, they find themselves in completely different terrain. Thus, rooted in both critical race theory and Afropessimism, the central claim that I am making about the dark fantastic is this: In the Anglo-American fantastic tradition, the Dark Other is the monstrous Thing that is the root cause of hesitation, spectacle, and violence. The Dark Other is the present-absence that lingers at the edges of every fairy tale. She stalks the shadows of the futurist visions of science fiction, lurks along the margins of the imagined magical pasts of high fantasy, and renders the uchronia of alternate history into a nonsensical cipher. Perhaps what is most chilling is that *even when those who are endarkened and Othered dream in the fantastic, the Dark Other is **still** the obstacle to be overcome*. Even in stories where all of the characters are "White and blue-eyed" —recalling Adichie's (2009) influential talk, "The Danger of a Single Story"—*the Dark Other is always already there.*

When readers who are White, middle class, cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied enter the fantastic dream, they can be empowered and afforded a sense of transcendence that may be elusive within the real world. However, this perspective often means that the implicit message that readers, hearers, and viewers of color receive as we read these texts is that *we are the villains*.

> **"When people read fantastic texts from the perspective of the most, not the protagonist, they find themselves in completely different terrain."**

We are the horde.

We are the enemies.

We are the monster.

For many readers, viewers, and fans of color, I suspect that at the level of consciousness, to participate in the fantastic is to watch *yourself* be slain (and justifiably so, as the story recounts). In fairy tales, you terrorized the hapless villagers, kidnapped the fair princess, dared wage war against the dashing hero. You are the jealous darker sister who wishes to steal the fair maiden's pedestal for yourself. If you are present in the story at all, you are relegated to the margins. To watch a science fiction film is to learn that you have no future; there are only two or three people of color on most fictional spaceships. Very often, when you appear on the page or on the screen, you are a slave, a servant, or a prostitute— even your very body is not your own. If you have words, your speech serves only to support the narrative, never to subvert it. Rarely is the narrative focalized through your eyes. You are rendered abject. Fungible. Socially dead.

You are the alien Other. You are the Orc. You are the fell beast.

The very presence of the Dark Other in a text of speculative fiction (across genre and mode) creates a profound ontological dilemma. This dilemma is inescapable, for readers and for writers, and must be reconciled. This dilemma is most often resolved by enacting narrative violence against the Dark Other. This dilemma is what the readers and hearers of the fantastic expect, for it mirrors the unending spectacle of violence against the endarkened and the Othered in our own world. The fantastic has need of darkness, for these innocent "stories about stories"

require both heroes *and* villains, fair princesses *and* evil crones, valiant steeds *and* nightmarish beasts. The fantastic requires Medusas *and* Grendels, chimaeras *and* manticores, cunning tricksters *and* cowardly fools. It needs the Dark Other as its source of hesitation, the very spectacle that causes the heart to skip in fear. It desires the Dark Other's violent end in a form of ritual sacrifice, purging the very source of the darkness and righting the wrongs of the world before returning to haunt the happy ending.

As Hazel Carby (1998) noted in *Race Men*:

> If the *spectacle* of the lynched Black body haunts the modern age, then the slow disintegration of Black bodies and souls in jail, urban ghettos, and beleaguered schools *haunts* our postmodern times. (p. 2; emphasis in original)

This relentless cycle of spectacle, hesitation, violence, and haunting means that people of color are not incidental to the fantastic. Without Dark Others—either embodied or as shades—fairy tales, science fiction, high fantasy, superhero comics, and graphic novels as we know them simply would not exist. Any impetus toward whitewashing the imagination, memory, dreams, and magic is futile, for any work of the fantastic that is all White signals (if not *screams*) that darkness lingers just beyond the turn of a page, the flicker of a frame, or the click of a thumb.

To understand the work that the fantastic does in our world, the position of the Dark Other—and of the shadows cast by the presence of imagined darkness—must be centered. Reading fantastic narratives from a critical race counterstorytelling perspective, the Dark Other suddenly becomes the Dark One, the subject, the focalizer, and the narrator of the *shadow book* that poet Kevin Young (2012) imagines is "a book that we don't have, but

know of, a book that may haunt the very book we have in our hands" (p. 11). The tales told by darkness, by the shadows, by the Dark Ones are never completely erased or removed from speculative fiction, simply "hidden in plain sight." It is not only history that has been irrevocably inscribed by darkness, dark things, and dark peoples, but also memory and imagination itself.

Once upon a time, I believed that people of color were incidental to the English language fantasy tradition. I believed that for the most part, the speculative genres did not deal directly with race, which was why I liked them. I could shed my skin and just *be*. But when you begin to read the fantastic as a writer and a critic, you begin to notice the presence of dark shadows *everywhere*. Therefore, in contrast to readings of young adult literature, media, and culture that position human and nonhuman characters of color as marginal, I wish to position all endarkened characters and characterizations as central to both the fantastic and the construction of imagined Whiteness. For the Dark Other is the engine that drives the fantastic.

My observations about the role of Dark Others in the fantastic lead to five key principles. I have found this pattern in text after text, one I trace in the chapters of my book manuscript. These principles can be summarized as follows:

> *Spectacle*: The presence of the Dark Other in a text of speculative fiction (across genre and mode) creates a profound ontological dilemma for readers, hearers, and/or viewers.
>
> *Hesitation*: This dilemma is inescapable, for readers and for writers, and must be reconciled.
>
> *Violence*: This dilemma is most often resolved by enacting symbolic and/or actual violence against the Dark Other.

Haunting: When the Dark Other is defeated and catharsis is reached, their present-absence nonetheless haunts the story.

Emancipation: The Dark Other is usually subaltern, but when afforded speech and/or agency, powerful possibilities emerge, including the emancipatory transformation of darkness from an objectified Other to an agentive One.

The first principle of the dark fantastic is that of spectacle. In addition to the work of Carby, I have also been considering Afropessimist theories in light of the Movement for Black Lives in the United States, and similar movements around the world. From Jared Sexton (2012):

> In a world structured by the twin axioms of white superiority and black inferiority, of white existence and black nonexistence, a world structured by a negative categorical imperative— "above all, don't be black"—in this world, the zero degree of world transformation is the turn toward blackness, a turn toward the shame, as it were, that "resides in the idea that 'I am thought of as less than human.'" (n. p.)

The three girl characters that I focus on in *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination in Youth Literature, Media, and Culture* are Bonnie in *The Vampire Diaries*, Rue in *The Hunger Games*, and Gwen in Merlin. All three were popular transmedia narratives of the first two decades of the 21ˢᵗ century. While Bonnie and Rue both had their origins in popular young adult fiction novels, Gwen is a recent reimagining of young Queen Guinevere from the Arthurian legends. Although Bonnie and Gwen were originally White in their source texts, Rue was not, but was famously read that way by millions of readers. In my analyses, I am finding that once a text is transmediated—i.e., translated across symbol

systems (Suhor, 1984)—and colorblind casting results in a dark-skinned actress playing a fantastic role on screen, the result is visual spectacle, a signal that this is not like the usual narrative.

The second principle of the dark fantastic cycle is that of *hesitation*. The very presence of the Dark Other interrupts the waking dream of the fantastic (Ricoeur, 2004). This rupture creates a profound dilemma for writers and readers. Although the Dark Other is necessary for the fantastic, her presence is unsettling. She is not supposed to be there (although she *must* be), wreaking havoc on the order, harmony, and happiness of all that is right and light (and White). She must be contained, subjugated, and ultimately destroyed in order for the fantastic dream to work.

This confrontation leads to the third principle of the dark fantastic: The dilemmatic presence of the Dark Other must be resolved with *violence*. Whether driven by desire, fear, longing, or another impulse, darkness must be destroyed, or there is no story. Scholars from Hazel Carby (2009) to Michelle Alexander (2012) have noted the ways that the containment and destruction of Black bodies works in the real world. The fantastic is driven by similar imperatives at the symbolic level. Thus, the Dark Other is subject to textual violence, which often results in character death. From Robin Bernstein's (2011) *Racial Innocence*:

> Slavery had been legitimized in part by widespread claims that African Americans were impervious to pain. Thomas Jefferson, for example, wrote in 1781 in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that Negroes' 'griefs are transient… at stake in pain was not only justification for violence, but also eligibility for citizenship and humanity.' (p. 50)

Yet this death is not permanent. When the Dark Other is defeated and catharsis is reached, his or her

(or its) present-absence nonetheless haunts the story. Toni Morrison (1992) referred to this haunting as "romancing the shadow" in *Playing in the Dark*:

> These speculations have led me to wonder whether the major and championed characteristics of our national literature—individualism, masculinity, social engagement vs. historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematics; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell—are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence. (p. 6)

The Dark Other is necessary for the fantastic, but her presence is unsettling. She must be destroyed—but her shade must remain. This imperative presents another dilemma: The Dark Other must die but cannot die. The Dark One haunts the text because she cannot escape. Morrison (1992) once again provides insight into this fettering:

> The ways in which artists—and the society that bred them—transferred internal conflicts to a 'blank darkness' consisting of conveniently bound and violently silenced black bodies is a major theme in American literature.... Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities. For in that construction of Blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free, but also with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projected of the not-me. The result was a playground for the imagination. (p. 38)

Although the Dark Other elicits both fear and desire, her continuing presence is necessary for the creation and sustaining of these "playgrounds for

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the imagination." This dilemma ultimately repositions the Dark Other as the spectacle that creates hesitation and elicits violence anew before haunting the rest of the story. Hence, the first four principles of this cycle repeat, spawning sequels, spinoffs, and authorial success.

The final principle and step of the dark fantastic cycle is *emancipation,* which is only reached when the Dark Other is liberated from spectacle, embodied hesitation, violence, and haunting. Narratives with liberated Dark Others are rare, and are rarely as popular as those that feature trapped dark subjectivities. This positioning occurs because subverting the traditional positioning of the Dark Other in the fantastic requires radical rethinking of everything that we know. It is why I suspect there have been problems writing characters of color into atypical roles in literature, media, and culture, whether the story in question is a novel, a television show, or a comic book. The principles of the dark fantastic are so ingrained in our collective consciousness that when the expected pattern is subverted, audiences cannot suspend disbelief. Readers and viewers complain that dark heroic protagonists are not *likable*. Critics observe that the characters, settings, circumstances, and resolutions are *unbelievable*. Agents say that the characters are not *relatable*. Television and movie studios, as well as publishing houses, tell would-be authors that their stories are not *marketable*. Thus, the Dark Other remains forever locked into place.

Everything in our culture, as well as in modern history and contemporary life of the West, demands the positioning of the Dark Other as antagonist. Within American literature, Morrison contends "there is no romance... free of what Herman Melville

called 'the power of blackness'" (p. 9). Connecting Morrison's observations to Maria Nikolajeva's (2007) claims that fantasy's origins can be located in Romanticism, I believe there can be no fantastic without the Dark Other. The Dark Other is the counterbalance, the counterweight that makes the entire enterprise of the fantastic work.

And so it is that any artist or writer who wishes to write a decolonized fantastic faces a nearly impossible task. The template of the fantastic is our imperfect, messy, postmodern and postcolonial world. The charge of the fantastic is to bedazzle the landscapes of childhood. But, as Shaobo Xie (1999) observes, "If this is the truth of the postmodern moment, then children are perhaps the most victimized and most urgently need to be postcolonized... because they are most violently subjected to colonialist ideas of racial-ethnic Otherness at the most formative years of their [lives]" (p. 13). These colonialist ideas are inscribed in the generic conventions of the fantastic.

Therefore, would-be storytellers must somehow liberate the Dark Other from her imprisonment and impending doom, not only in the text itself, but *also in the imaginations of their readers*.

In contemporary YA literature and culture, the project of emancipating the dark fantastic may be even more challenging than the project Tolkien assigned for himself: to create a new mythology for the English people through fantasy. Yet the success of new narratives from *Black Panther* in the Marvel Cinematic universe, the recent Hugo Awards won by N.K. Jemisin and Nnedi Okorafor, and the blossoming of Afrofuturistic and Black fantastic tales prove that all people need new mythologies: new "stories about stories." In addition to amplifying diverse fantasy, liberating the *rest* of the fantastic from its fear and loathing of darkness and Dark Others is essential. For the current moment not only requires new narratives for the sake of young readers. It requires the emancipation of imagination itself.

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