

FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

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Vol 5 Issue 1

<https://fantastikajournal.com/volume-5-issue-1>

ISSN: 2514-8915

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THE DARK FANTASTIC: RACE AND THE IMAGINATION FROM HARRY POTTER TO THE HUNGER GAMES (2019) BY EBONY ELIZABETH THOMAS

Review by Alison Baker

Thomas, Ebony Elizabeth. *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to The Hunger Games*. New York University Press, 2019. 240 pp.

In the introduction to this timely and beautifully written book, "The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination Gap," Thomas describes her life as a young Black girl, being directed away from Fantasy fiction and the world of magic by her mother and the society she grew up in: "In order to survive, I had to face reality" (1).¹ She references Rudine Sims Bishop's "Reflections on the development of African American Children's Literature" (2012) and Bishop's coining of the phrase "mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors" to describe the importance of cultural diversity in children's literature (59). Bishop's phrase refers to the way that books can act as mirrors to reflect the reader's experiences back to them; windows to watch characters having different experiences; as well as sliding glass doors to step through and have experiences along with characters. The lack of diversity in children's books also results in white children not experiencing the lives of children of colour through literature. Bishop demonstrates that African American children rarely experience seeing themselves in stories; Thomas builds on this idea by discussing the experience of watching television and films and reading popular children's and Young Adult (YA) novels as a Black American woman; moving from the dark fantastic (that is, a fantastic that uses the body of the Black (anti)- heroine) as a foil for the white heroine, to working towards a theory of the Black Fantastic. This is achieved through demonstrating how marginalised people can engage with, critique and "re-story" texts through social media and fan fiction, and how this can be emancipatory for marginalised readers and viewers (158). Thomas's book is timely, and necessary, as nearly twenty years after Bishop made that argument, the Black Lives Matters movement is continuing to protest attacks on the human rights of People of Colour.

A significant innovation that Thomas brings to scholarship of Children's and YA Fantasy fiction is the intersectional and interdisciplinary nature of the development of her theory of the dark fantastic. As outlined in the introduction, Thomas uses an autoethnography of her own development of a reader of Fantasy, her consumption of Children and YA Fantasy novels, film, and television both as a child and as a teacher of young adults, her writing of fan fiction and her experiences in social media fan communities, alongside critical race theory and reader response theory. This is significant, as the consideration of social media critique as reader response ethnography (as outlined in Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984)) allows for otherwise marginalised voices to be foregrounded, as

Radway's suburban American housewives were in her ground-breaking interdisciplinary research, applying ethnography and reader response criticism to genre fiction.

In the first chapter of the book, "Toward a theory of the Dark Fantastic," Thomas summarises the theories of the Fantastic outlined by Brian Attebery and Farah Mendlesohn, through which she traces the thread of Tzvetan Todorov, contextualising her argument for a theory of the dark fantastic. Thomas' genre theory focus emphasises that, in order for Fantasy fiction to be successful, the reader must be willing and able to believe it. Thomas states that in the Anglo-American Fantasy tradition, the Dark Other is positioned as the "obstacle to be overcome" (23), and Fantasy readers of colour, having grown up in the Anglo-American Fantasy tradition, will receive the message that they, as the Dark Others, are the "villains... the horde.... the enemies... *We are the monsters*" (23, original emphasis). Thomas's argument echoes Ika Willis's (2009) that, 'resistant' reading has long been a necessity for marginalised readers, so that those readers can find their 'mirrors' in the text. Willis identifies fan fiction and transformative works as a locus of resistance for queer readers, focusing on minor characters, race- or gender-flipping characters. The monster is often the "Dark Other" in Fantasy fiction, whether it is the dark-haired but white anti-heroine or foil to the blonde heroine, such as Faith in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), or evil characters described in racialised terms, such as J. R. R. Tolkien's orcs. Thomas's argument for considering fan fiction and the process of re-storying as decolonialising Fantasy fiction for children and young adults. Having established her theory, Thomas applies it to characters from literature and media.

The second chapter, "Lamentations of a Mockingjay" continues to address the way that Black readers and viewers, particularly young Black women, get to see their 'mirrors' in fiction. Thomas discusses the racist response to the casting of actress of colour Amandla Stenberg as Rue in the 2012 film adaptation of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010). Some white fans of the novels were unable to see a Black child as innocent, or even child-like, echoing Epstein, Blake, and González's (2017) research into the "adultification" of Black girls; that is, that institutions routinely assume that Black girls are less vulnerable, less in need of protection and nurturing, and know more about adult topics and sex than white girls of the same age. Thomas quotes from journalist Dodai Stewart's 2012 article on feminist blog *Jezebel* which collected tweets from some *Hunger Games* readers, expressing disappointment and anger that Rue is being played by a Black actor:

Kk call me racist but when I found out that rue was black her death wasn't as sad #ihatemyself (Thomas 60)

This tweet demonstrates that even though Suzanne Collins describes Rue as having "bright, dark eyes" and "satiny brown skin", white readers cannot imagine an innocent girl as Black (Collins, *Hunger Games* 120); and that Hollywood representations of post-apocalyptic United States tend to be largely white and English speaking, as Sarah Hannah Gómez discusses in a *Lee and Low* blog. Thomas discusses the novels and the films and whiteness as innocence. Rue (who is named after the herb with a yellow flower) is linked by both physical stature and by her floral name to Katniss'

blonde, blue-eyed sister. The chapter goes on to discuss the meaning of race and colour in Science Fiction and Fantasy (SF/F): Blackness as evil, dark, and inhuman; whiteness as innocent, light, and human; themes from the fairy tale and mythic origins of Western Fantasy. However, the central image of this chapter, the death of a young Black girl at the hands of young white people killing each other for public entertainment, is an important one in the era of Black Lives Matter protests against extrajudicial violence upon Black bodies. Thomas addressing the narrative purpose of Rue's death, to create reader sympathy for Katniss and to heighten the inhumanity of the Capitol thereby dehumanising Rue, would be useful for scholars.

"A Queen out of time," the third chapter, discusses Gwen from the BBC television drama *Merlin* (2008-2012). Gwen, the future Queen Guinevere played by Angel Coulby, is a young woman of colour, working as a servant in King Uther Pendragon's court at the beginning of the show. David Tollerton in a 2015 paper discussed *Merlin* as Arthurian legend for early twenty-first century Britain. He argues that the country is, telling itself the story of a tolerant, multicultural (pre-Brexit) country; the BBC here acting as the sliding glass door of Bishop's analogy, allowing Britain to step through the door into the imaginary multicultural past, a past which David Olugosa among others has described. Thomas outlines the arc of Gwen from servant girl to powerful queen who unites and leads her country and deconstructs the reader/viewer questions of authenticity and historical accuracy in a Fantasy programme, where magic, witchcraft, and a dungeon-dwelling dragon are not questioned. Thomas' critique is not aimed at *Merlin* itself, but rather demonstrates how shallow the veneer of British pride in itself as a modern, culturally diverse country really was before the Brexit campaign.

Bonnie Bennett from *The Vampire Diaries* is the subject of the fourth chapter. *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017), adapted from the series of novels by L. J. Smith (1991-2014). The character of Bonnie Bennett is adapted from Bonnie McCullough, a red haired, green eyed witch of Irish descent. Thomas notes that, in the adaptation and casting actress of colour Kat Graham as Bonnie, the character loses agency and interiority. She serves as a foil for the (white) protagonist Elena, much as Rue does in *The Hunger Games*; the difference being that Rue did not have interiority in the source material. Thomas uses Bonnie as an example to explore the archetype of the Black Other which she introduces in Chapter 1: Spectacle, Hesitation, Violence, Haunting and Emancipation, a taxonomy that I expect to stand along with Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008) and John Clute's Lexicon of Horror in *The Darkening Garden* (2006), as a taxonomy of the dark fantastic. Via the application of these terms to the character of Bonnie, Thomas comprehensively unpacks this taxonomy. Unlike Mendelsohn, Thomas does not suggest that it is a tool for furthering analysis. It will be interesting to see other scholars applying it to other dark fantastic texts, whether books or visual media.

The fifth chapter, "Hermione is Black," focuses on fan reception, including fan fiction. In contrast to the second chapter, which discusses fan response to the casting of a Black actress as Rue, Thomas discusses the transformative power of fan fiction to reclaim marginalised characters, giving them the interiority and agency that Bonnie Bennet and Rue lacked in their original forms. Thomas was a fan fiction author but notes that she wrote Angelina Johnson (Black British Hogwarts pupil)

fan fic, rather than writing a Black Hermione. Thomas explains this choice as her desire to deepen the depiction of race and ethnicity within worldbuilding; why, for example, would Angelina have a surname? Would African witches and wizards have been enslaved? She used African Diaspora folklore and mythology to create a narrative explaining the backstory of Angelina and the arrival of Black witches and wizards in Western Europe. The discussion of transformative works is timely, given that *An Archive of Our Own* won a Hugo award at the Dublin WorldCon, Summer 2019. In a 2016 article written with Amy Stornaiuolo, Thomas uses Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2009 TED talk as a starting point to discuss power and story: who gets to be the focus of stories, who gets to tell stories, and whose storying traditions is privileged. Through the process of "re-storying," the technique seen in *Merlin* or Susan Cooper's work, marginalised readers and consumers of visual media can write themselves into the narrative, by foregrounding background characters or by race or gender-flipping them. Thus, Thomas foregrounding Angelina gives her interiority and agency, and the stage play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (2016) casting a Black actress to play Hermione gives validity to the race-flipped Hermione of online Black fandom. Thomas provides other examples of re-storying in a variety of modes: across time and space, changing locations of stories; across modes, through poetry, drama, fan art or digital storytelling; collaborating on retellings, or re-storying identities: race- or gender-flipping, or changing another aspect of identity such as sexuality. This way, Thomas argues, marginalised people can write themselves into narratives. The effect of these re-storyings are both emancipatory for their producers, but also seem to be having an effect on cultural professionals: social media gives fans access to professionals in a way that was never possible in the past.

As universities in many parts of the world seek to decolonialise their curricula, a work directly addressing race and ethnicity in literature and media is vital. Within SF/F fandom, this book powerfully addresses the imagination gap in white writers' use of Black characters as props to demonstrate aspects of white protagonists' character development, often through violence wrecked upon Black bodies. This book should be in the library of any university teaching Children's literature or Fantasy literature, and, I would hope, on the reading list of any courses in those two areas.

NOTES

1. Note that Thomas' preference throughout is to capitalise 'Black' and we have retained this formatting accordingly.

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BIONOTE

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