

Review

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*, New York: New York University Press, 2019. 225pp. ISBN: 9781479800650.

'Are the cartographies of dreams truly universal?' (2). Are the worlds and stories we imagine as free from cultural scripts and prejudices as we like to think? When a Black actress was cast as Hermione in *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, as Queen Guinevere in *Merlin*, or as Rue in *The Hunger Games*, what did the response to those casting decisions reveal about the way audiences imagine heroism, innocence and virtue? In *The Dark Fantastic*, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas aims to answer these questions, bringing the lens of critical race theory to the study of young adult literature and popular culture, emphasizing the connection between society and the stories people imagine, and illustrating the importance of representation.

Analogous to theories of achievement gaps between white and Black youth, *The Dark Fantastic* identifies an 'imagination gap' in young adult literature, referring to the failure of many narratives to represent characters of color in ways that overcome stereotypes. The imagination gap makes it difficult for dominant voices in the culture industry to imagine, let alone represent, Black people in non-stereotypical roles. This failure of the imagination forces many characters of color in fantastical narratives into the role of the Dark Other: 'the spectacle, the monstrous Thing' (23). The Dark Other is the villain that makes fantastical tales possible, the evil that is always already there because the presence of heroism requires a wicked counterpart. As Thomas' analysis shows, even characters of color that support the protagonist in their search for good are often associated with darkness, and those characters of color that remain virtuous and innocent throughout a narrative, such as Rue in *The Hunger Games*, encounter virulent and sometimes racist criticism from audiences because Black characters that are liberated from associations with darkness present a challenge to the assumptions and narratives that structure the popular imagination.

To explain how fictional characters are consistently relegated to the role of the Dark Other in fantastic narratives, Thomas theorizes the Dark Fantastic cycle. Analyzing characters from *The Hunger Games*, *Merlin*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *Harry Potter* as case studies, Thomas highlights different elements of this cycle and shows how it structures various narratives and constrains female characters of color.

The Dark Fantastic cycle consists of five steps. Queen Guinevere, also called Gwen, a secondary character from the TV series *Merlin* and the subject of Thomas' second case study, is perhaps the clearest example of the cycle. The first step, spectacle, is when the presence of the Dark Other is marveled at, both within and outside the storyworld. Gwen, a maidservant, generates spectacle in Camelot by disapproving of king Uther's tyranny and prince Arthur's arrogance. Simultaneously, the presence of a Black character in an Arthurian setting creates spectacle for audiences who falsely expect Medieval Britain to be white.

The second step is hesitation: the presence of the Dark Other disrupts the enchantment of the fantastical and the internal harmony of the storyworld. By questioning the behavior of prince Arthur and his father the king, Gwen generates hesitation. However, as the story progresses, Gwen and prince Arthur become romantically involved and eventually married. It seems like the hesitation has been resolved, like Gwen's darkness is incorporated into the kingdom, like she has broken free of the cycle.

Yet the cycle continues with its third step: violence. Gwen becomes associated with darkness again when she is abducted by the evil witch Morgana. According to the logic of the fantastical narrative, darkness must be destroyed. Gwen's abduction results in her 'social death after being compromised by darkness' (89). Her character loses its heroism.

The fourth step is haunting. The logic of the fantastic dictates that the Dark Other must be destroyed, but she can never disappear. Without darkness, fantastical stories lack tension, and so the Dark Other keeps haunting the narrative. Gwen is no longer central to the narrative. Her husband Arthur is more invested in his friendship with Merlin than his marriage, sidelining Gwen. Arthur eventually dies and Gwen lives unhappily ever after, morally compromised and alone.

The fifth and final step, emancipation, occurs when the Dark Other is liberated from the Dark Fantastic cycle. Thomas points out that 'narratives with liberated Dark Others are rare' (28) and rarely popular, because 'subverting the traditional positioning of the Dark Other in the fantastic requires radical rethinking of everything that we know' (Ibid.). When Gwen marries Arthur and becomes queen, it seems as though she might become a liberated Dark Other, but her unhappy, lonely, evil ending ultimately connects her inextricably to darkness.

By coining the concepts of the Dark Other and the Dark Fantastic cycle, Thomas pinpoints phenomena that recur in many popular texts but that previous scholarship has largely failed to identify. *The Dark Fantastic* presents cultural texts that many aca-fans, who navigate the combined identity of fan and academic, will be intimately familiar with in a new light. The book adds to their meaning and significance through sharp analysis and a convincing, refreshing theoretical framework. Thomas illustrates the importance of presenting characters of color in non-stereotypical, nuanced ways and shows how many of the existing narrative frameworks and cultural scripts that structure popular culture make this difficult.

Thomas employs an innovative and successful methodological mix of critical race theory, close readings and auto-ethnography. Emphasizing her identity as reader, writer,

fangirl, teacher, scholar and critic, Thomas shows the different and sometimes conflicting perspectives these roles give her. This way, *The Dark Fantastic* offers one possible answer to the question of how aca-fans can position themselves in relation to an object of study they both love as a fan and want to study as a scholar.

The book's focus on the intersections of blackness and girlhood, its clearly delineated scope and aims, make Thomas' analysis articulate, precise and convincing. However, this focus also leaves the reader with some questions: does the dark fantastic cycle constrain male characters of color as much as women? How does Thomas' theory relate to those characters othered and associated with darkness through physical or mental disability? As Thomas writes in her introduction, '*The Dark Fantastic* is intended to be the opening of a conversation, not the culmination of it' (13). I hope that the conversation Thomas has started will continue in academia for years to come, and that it will be conducted with as much eloquence, deliberation and knowledge as Thomas displays in this book.

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Biographical note:

Julia Neugarten is a Research MA student in Literary Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Her research interests include fandom, fanfiction, emotions, food studies and the digital humanities. She is currently working as a research assistant on the TRACE-project (Tracking Radio Archival Collections in Europe). Her work has recently been published in the *Digital Literature Review*. Contact: j.neugarten@gmail.com.