**Her Dark Materials: What Makes the Fantastic Dark**

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**Thomas, Ebony Elizabeth.** *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from* **Harry Potter** *to* **The Hunger Games. New York UP, 2020. 240 pages. ISBN 9781479806072. Pbk. $16.95.**

Contrary to what one might expect from a book titled *The Dark Fantastic*, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas does not focus on liberating speculative fiction in which presently marginalized people of color are imagined to have more potential in a fictive space than, for instance, in Afrofuturist works. Instead, she chooses to write about what happens when authors and readers fail to imagine characters of color in roles that are both powerful and positive, and thus rewarded with just fates. The dark fantastic, in this reading, then, is not only a term that successfully differentiates a group of fantastic fiction from what may be labeled as the Black fantastic, but a term that suggests a sinister quality regarding a part of fantasy works that demonstrates the "imagination gap" that Thomas identifies as the primary root of the representation crisis one witnesses in mainstream media.

Thomas's work begins with an Introduction that explains the most important items of her terminology, as well as her own position and method of reading, which well prepares us for the chapters to come. Her critical race counterstorytelling—a method explained by Daniella Cook and Adrienne Dixson (10)—aims at dissecting how race and racism function in mainstream narratives with white heroic protagonists and marginalized people of color, privileging the perspective of the "Africanist Others" (Toni Morrison's term, qtd. in Thomas 10). In using this method, she relies on her expertise as a scholar in reader response theory as

well as her experience as an active consumer of mainstream media and an active participant in fandoms, thus combining scholarship and autoethnography in her work. This rarely seen combination works in favor of the outcome, as Thomas does not simply aim to give a scholarly analysis of how representation choices in fictional narratives have serious implications about the political; she strives to educate people—within and outside academia and the circle of creators working in various media—and she knows that personalizing experience, making a story about the issue that she also academically presents will make her arguments more audible and accessible. The wide audience she targets defines her language as well: the book has clarity and lacks superfluous and pretentious special terminology but also, I might add, demonstrates some repetition.

Chapter 1, "Toward a Theory of the Dark Fantastic" outlines the theoretical background the discussions are rooted in. We receive a recap of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seven theses of monster theory, commented on "from the monster's perspective," as Thomas writes (20-22). The commentary reflects what this theorized monstrous experience means from a Black perspective and helps to see one of the great problems of the dark fantastic, the monsterization of the blackened Other in spaces of the fantastic, which cements the monsterization of Black people in the real world. This is the underlying idea in the forthcoming analyses, even though Thomas drops the terminology of Cohen's paper in the following chapters and does not link her discussions directly to Monster Studies. Therefore, this theory is more like a starting point for identifying the phases of representation in which one encounters the Darkened Others in the fantastic—a cycle that will indeed be an integral part of Thomas's analytical chapters. These phases are as follows: spectacle, in which what is visually apparent is emphasized, that is, darkness (26); hesitation, when "the presence of the Dark Other interrupts the waking dream of the fantastic" (26); violence, in which the issue of hesitation is resolved by brutality, and thus very often leads to the character's violent end (26-27); haunting, the result of violence, in which

"[t]he Dark Other *must* die but she *cannot* die" (emphasis added, 27), further generating hesitation and violence and hence a vicious circle; finally, if the circle is broken, the last phase is emancipation (28), which demands "emancipating imagination itself" (29).

In each of her next three chapters, Thomas focuses on one mainstream work on (cinematic or television) screen in which the examined Dark Other is female, and she foregrounds one major problem of the dark fantastic. Chapter 2, "Lamentations of Mockingjay: *The Hunger Games*' Rue and Racial Innocence in the Dark Fantastic," underlines how racial innocence, usually considered as part of the potential a fantastic narrative has, contributes to the entrapment of characters like Rue, keeping her in the *circulus vitiosus* of the dark fantastic. Thomas breaks down how race and class operate in the transmedia world of *The Hunger Games* series: she demonstrates how Rue's character may be linked to all the problematic phases of character representation in the dark fantastic, and investigates how this character construction reflects and generates audience expectations from the target audience, that is, a dominantly white and privileged readership and spectatorship. While Thomas recognizes Suzanne Collins's noble intent to create a color-blind white protagonist, who may naturally think of a Black character as a friend and a symbolic representation of her own, emphatically white(r) skinned sister, Prim, Thomas argues that "by not noticing race, writers and other creatives do the work of encoding it as taboo" (59). Although she is well aware of the positive potential of silencing and evading issues of race in science fiction, which may point to a postracial future, Thomas identifies Collins's subtle way of depicting Rue's race as a flaw in her writing, which does not allow many readers to recognize Rue as Black because this fact is not overemphasized (60; 62). While this observation is clearly valid, I think it raises questions concerning the relationship between the didactic and the aesthetic, as well as the extent to which reader's expectations should define authorial choices.

The next two chapters center on a Black female character who has the promise of breaking the dark fantastic cycle and entering the phase of emancipation to show the true potentials of the fantastic, yet at one point fails to fulfill these promises due to problematic story writing. The third chapter, "A Queen out of Place: Dark Fantastic Dreaming and the Spacetime Politics of Gwen in BBC's *Merlin*," discusses the audience's criticism of Gwen's character as an initially positive and powerful presence as well as the problematic trajectory the character is given. This study tackles the problematics of location, while the analysis in chapter 4, "The Curious Case of Bonnie Bennett: *The Vampire Diaries* and the Monstrous Contradiction of the Dark Fantastic," emphasizes the uniqueness of the violence determining the fate of Black girl characters in dark fantastic narratives. These chapters successfully complete the previous one in dissecting both storytelling and spectator responses to accentuate that what happens in the fantastic and in the real world are intertwined, and that the imagination gap today's creators and audiences demonstrate make it very difficult for Black people to find fantastic narratives that would be liberating for them, too.

Rightly, then, the fifth, and at the same time concluding chapter that bears the title "Hermione is Black: A Postscript to *Harry Potter* and the Crisis of Infinite Dark Fantastic Worlds," concentrates on the emancipation process, citing how Hermione became re-imagined as a Black girl with the help of transmedia storytelling. In this essay Rowling's subtleness concerning Hermione's racial features proves to be a merit, as it provides space for re-imagination—and even the author's approval of such a re-imagination. As Collins's understated indication of Rue's race was criticized in an earlier chapter, here I missed a reflection on what circumstances the judgment whether such a subtleness is a merit or a flaw may depend on. In addition to discussing the importance of casting Hermione as a Black Woman in the various stage adaptations of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, Thomas also emphasizes the inclusive casting strategy in the *Hamilton* musical, in which people of color play historical characters that

are known to have been white. This part would have needed some elaboration concerning the liberation process in which "previously White cisgender heterosexual characters . . . have begun to be imagined as Others" as a result of color-conscious casting (156). If the book is to educate people about the importance of representation, the discussion of this process of liberation, I think, would greatly benefit from an explanation that compares and contrasts this process with other—usually much condemned—forms of transracial representation. Such a clarification would be especially important because Thomas's solution to staying entrapped in the dark fantastic cycle relies on the idea of restorying time and space, perspective, identity, and imagination, together with and across modes; that is, via creating multiple worlds, which, as Thomas argues, has the potential of changing perspective and decolonizing the imagination.

*The Dark Fantastic* is an essential book for everyone who wants to understand the influence racial representation in media has on people's lives and the significance of diverse representation which should not stop at meeting requirements about quota but should consider also the type of roles characters of color may and should have. Creators and consumers of the most diverse cultural backgrounds will find this book eye-opening regarding some of the hidden reasons why racism is so difficult to fight on a daily basis. Therefore, this book should fill a gap on the bookshelves of educational institutions—because many of the problems noted in the analyses will not be solved merely by a reform in art with the help of restorying, but with the help of directly educating people about race.

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