The Dark Fantastic

HUNGER GAMES

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TOWARD A THEORY OF THE DARK FANTASTIC

"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.
—Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 1973

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.
—Hazel Carby, *Race Men*, 1998

In Him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.
—John 1:4–5

The Dangers of Myth-Making: Why We Need to Examine the Dark Fantastic

In her landmark essay, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison explained that she could understand and theorize Whiteness in American literature only when she "stopped reading as a reader and began to read as a writer."[1] It was only when I began to read fantasy and fairy tales as an aspiring author that I began to understand the function of darkness in the fantastic. My first fanfiction was sparked by the Ron/Hermione versus Harry/Hermione shipping

wars in the Harry Potter fan communities of the early 2000s (discussed in chapter 5).[2] It was a crowdsourced story, with beta readers from England to Brazil, and fandom personalities showing up as characters—and lampooned caricatures—in every chapter. Although I conceded that Rowling would likely put Ron and Hermione together in the end, I shipped Harry and Hermione together for reasons that I wanted to show in my take on things. As a fan of color, I was also curious about what the wizarding world might be like outside England. Without colonialism or slavery; how on earth did Black children end up at Hogwarts with 'English names'? Adoption? Immigration? Or had witches and wizards of color been somehow subjugated—was their magic less powerful? As a young writer, I audaciously dreamed about someday creating and publishing my own fantasy stories that weren't based primarily on European folklore or myth.

Wanting to know more about the possibilities of characters that had been focalized only through Harry's point of view in the book series, I set my second fanfiction in the most magical place I could think of at the time—Brazil. Of course, I had never actually *visited* Brazil. As I was growing up, my parents had neither the money nor the desire to travel abroad. After college and graduate school, there were student loans and the financial realities of striking out on my own. Yet like many other African Americans, I was enthralled with the prospect of making my pilgrimage to Brazil—Salvador, Bahia, to be exact. It was thought that in Salvador the cultural loss and trauma of slavery had been far less severe than it had been in the United States, and that Brazilians of African descent had retained more of their memories from our Motherland. Just as my Irish American friends made pilgrimages to Dublin, and my Italian American friends regularly visited their relatives in Sicily, I hoped to someday travel to Brazil and then West Africa to reclaim a part of my heritage, perhaps experiencing a bit of what I believed was authentic magic along the way.[3]

While browsing the Brazzil.net forum in the early 2000s, I read a heated exchange between two participants. One was a Brazilian man, an anthropologist living in Rio de Janeiro and using the alias of Macunaíma. The other was a Black American woman who shared the same vision of Bahia as a racism-free Afrotopia that I had internalized. The more this woman posted her fantasies about visiting Brazil, the more of-

fended Macunaíma seemed to become. Finally, he wrote something on that thread that affected me so profoundly that I saved it to mull over:

> Myth-making is not a good cure for amnesia. In fact, given your original statement as to "stagnant" African culture, it seems that your amnesia has resulted in your unconscious incorporation of some incredibly racist opinions and beliefs. *This is why myth-making is dangerous for subordinate peoples: your imagination is more controlled by the dominant social formation than you're probably willing to admit.* Only by deep and wide engagement with history can we begin to reconstruct a reasonable notion as to what has happened and why.[4]

The idea that my imagination had been controlled in any way floored me. As a child and teen, I had been an omnivorous reader, seeking my own bliss without much concern about the politics of my reading. The cartography of my imagination had been inscribed by Tove Jansson's *Moominland Midwinter* as much as it had been by Julius Lester's *To Be a Slave*. I greatly enjoyed reading Virginia Hamilton's lyrical retellings of traditional Black American folktales but counted Lucy Maud Montgomery's idealized Edwardian-era Prince Edward Island story girls as my favorite characters of all. I dutifully read Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* series in order to learn about my ancestors' plight, but when it was time for imaginative escape, I turned to Michael Ende's *Neverending Story*. When it came to works that made the leap from page to screen, I watched the film adaptation of William Howard Armstrong's *Sounder* once while in school, but I have both watched *The Princess Bride* and *Labyrinth* so many times that I have both movies memorized. Although I grew up in the first generation after the classical phase of the Civil Rights movement, my literate imagination was quite segregated. Books and movies about children and teens who looked like me were read and viewed out of duty, in order to learn something about the past.[5] Books and movies that showcased the pleasures of dreaming, imagination, and escape were stories about people who did not look like me.

And yet I was most drawn to those magical stories, for I longed to dream. Macunaíma's online post was the first moment I began thinking deeply about the myth-making that all human beings engage in to make sense of an oft-nonsensical world. This myth-making process—which

fantasist Brian Attebery described as creating "stories *about* stories"—forms metanarratives that shape society, culture, and, ultimately, the imagination. For, as Attebery 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."[6] Literary historian Farah Mendlesohn further theorizes the relationships between the reader and the fantastic metanarrative as rhetorical.[7] A reader or viewer of the fantastic can enter a portal and go on a quest. He or she can be immediately immersed within the fantasy world from the first page, the first scene, or the first swell of the movie score. The fantastic can 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 of these paths into the fantastic is *belief*: one must *believe* the world that one is entering. This common thread, found in scholarship by Attebery and Mendlesohn, has its genesis in Todorov: "'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."[8] 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.

But not everyone is positioned the same way *in* or *by* the fantastic. As Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie so aptly noted in her popular TED Talk about the dangers of a single story:

I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I had been reading. All my characters were White and blue-eyed. They played in the snow. They ate apples and they talked a lot about the weather: how lovely it was that the sun had come out! Now, this despite the fact that I had never left Nigeria. . . . We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather because there was no need to. . . . What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children.[9]

The positioning of readers, viewers, and fans within the "stories about stories" of the fantastic is vital. While there has been some critical attention to the ways that women are positioned within fantasy, Adichie points to another problem: What happens when neither characters nor narrators in the fantastic seem to imagine *you* as a possible interlocutor?

Although it is generally assumed that audiences are positioned to identify with the heroes and heroines in "stories about stories," I began to wonder how the fantastic shapes the collective consciousness toward perceptions of difference. When might young readers experience moments of dissonance? Specifically, when might young readers of color realize that *the characters I am rooting for are not positioned like me in the real world, and the characters that are positioned like me are not the team to root for?* How do these readers respond to this absence? Do they assume an assimilationist stance? *People are people—I can relate to any character.* Do they assume a stance of resistance? *This story contains no one like me—therefore, it is not for me.* More research is needed on what happens when children and teens of color read texts where either they are not represented, or their representation is problematic.[10]

Recent conversations about diversity in publishing and the media advocate for greater inclusion of people of color within stories, especially stories written for young people. But the challenge of getting readers to voluntarily *choose* to identify with the Dark Other is a perennial one. For those of us who are always positioned as monsters, even current theories of the monstrous fall short. To demonstrate their limits, I provide the following counterstory from the monster's perspective.

Through a Looking Glass, Darkly:
Theorizing Fantasy from the Monster's Point of View

The traditional purpose of darkness in the fantastic is to disturb, to unsettle, 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,[11] 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.[12] 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 dark people in the present.[13]

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 its margins. "Darky," a colloquial term for people of African descent during the late eighteenth century, signals that in modern English, darkness has never been just a metaphor. Darkness is personified, embodied, and most assuredly racialized.

My quest for the origins of fantastic darkness within history, culture, and society is part of a long intellectual tradition. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Monster Theory* is but one of many influential texts that posits fantastic beasts, witches, zombies, vampires, dragons, manticores, shades, and the rest of a monstrous menagerie as analogous to those who are positioned as different in the real world. Cohen's seven theses of monster culture echo some of the observations that I began making as I read text after text. If monsters and people of color inhabit the same place in our stories, what would it be like to read monster theory from the monster's perspective? Thus, I offer the following call and response to Cohen's seven theses of monster culture:

1. *The monster's body is a cultural body.* Cohen notes that "the monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy . . . giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read."[14] From my experiences with the fantastic, this echoes my suspicion that the Dark Other is constructed through text primarily as a spectacle. The Dark Other occupies the same space in reality that the monster occupies in fantasy. Hazel Carby's observation that the Black body is the spectacle of the modern age and Toni Morrison's illustration of the Africanist Other as always already imagined by the dreamer seem to warrant this countertheorization.

2. *The monster always escapes.* "The monster's body is both corporeal and incorporeal; its threat is its propensity to shift."[15] From Henry

Louis Gates's groundbreaking critical text *The Signifying Monkey*, I knew that the role of the Dark Other in the West has been that of the Trickster—African American language, rhetoric, and culture has had this shapeshifting quality since its inception.[16] While this escapist tendency may be frustrating from the point of view of the heroic protagonist, from the point of view of the monster, it is an essential strategy for self-preservation.

3. *The monster is the harbinger of category crisis.* The monster's "refusal to participate in the classificatory 'order of things' is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threaten to smash distinctions."[17] From the monster's point of view, the language of this thesis is slanted toward the perspective of the gallant hero and the fair maiden, *not* the monster. The monster is said to refuse ordered participation, but the monster has already been excluded from the Great Chain of Being. The embodied hybridity that is positioned as disturbingly incoherent has been laminated into construction of the Other as monstrous.

4. *The monster dwells at the gates of difference.* "The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectal Other . . . the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond—of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within."[18] Although this thesis provides insight into the construction of the monster through identity difference, again, the monster is only different from the perspective of those who have labeled the monster as monstrous. Even as Cohen walks us through the construction of racial Otherness in the Western imagination, I find myself wondering how these monstrous Dark Others might have viewed the Westerners. (After all, in our world, it is not those positioned as monstrous in the fantastic who engaged in modern-era conquest or colonization.)

5. *The monster polices the borders of the possible.* "The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous

border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself."[19] The monster is policed whenever it leaves terra incognita—the liminal spaces monsters are allowed to inhabit. It is deemed unreasonable for the monster to defend her home, unseemly for her to travel outside her delimitations, or unthinkable for her to enjoy her own monstrous culture. From the hero's point of view, this policing makes sense. From the perspective of the monster, it is nonsense.

6. *Fear of the monster is really a kind of desire.* "The monster is continually linked to forbidden practices . . . the monster also attracts. The same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint."[20] From the heroic perspective, the monster provides an enticement, a poisonous lure that *makes* her deserving of destruction. But does the monster feel the same lure toward the hero? What the hero reads as simultaneous seduction and threat may not be what the monster is really communicating. Because we rarely receive the monster's point of view in fantastic narratives, the motives of the monstrous are a mystery.

7. *The monster stands at the threshold . . . of becoming.* "Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return."[21] This makes sense to the hero, center of the universe in his or her own mind, but just before this, the question, "Do monsters really exist? Surely they must, for if they did not, how could we?" raises a subsequent, unanswered question: Is the monster *truly* parent, child, neither, or both? For if the monster is a figment of the hero's imagination, then the imagination of the monster is truly unexplored terrain.[22]

I have found much value in considering monster theory, color theory, and the history of racial analogies in speculative fiction. However, when we read literary and cultural texts from the perspective of the monster, *not the protagonist,* we find ourselves in a completely different ballgame.[23] This is why taking a supposedly "neutral" or "objective" approach to theorizing the dark fantastic is problematic; the default posi-

tion is to allow those who are used to seeing themselves as heroic and desired the power and privilege of naming, defining, and delimiting the entire world and everything that is in it. We never notice that monsters, fantastic beasts, and various Dark Others are silenced because we have never been taught the language that they speak. Critical race counterstorytelling provides both translation and amplification for these subsumed narratives.

From this perspective, the central claim that I am making about the dark fantastic is this: in the Anglo-American fantastic tradition, the Dark Other is the spectacle, the monstrous Thing that is the root cause of *hesitation, ambivalence,* and the *uncanny.* 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. 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.* And most chilling of all, even in stories where all of the characters are "White and blue-eyed" (recalling Adichie's influential talk), *the Dark Other is always already there.*

When readers who are White, middle class, cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied enter the fantastic dream, they are empowered and afforded a sense of transcendence that can be elusive within the real world. If this is the case, then readers and hearers of fantastic tales who have been endarkened and Othered by the dominant culture can never be plausible conquering heroes nor prizes to be won in the fantastic. Unless the tale is meant to be comedic, tongue-in-cheek, a wink and a nod that breaks the fourth wall and assures audiences that this is a parody of the fantastic, not the *real story* . . .

. . . the implicit message that readers, hearers, and viewers of color receive as they read these texts is that *we are the villains. We are the horde.
We are the enemies.
We are the monsters.*

For many readers, viewers, and fans of color, I suspect that, at the level of consciousness, to participate in the fantastic is to watch *your-self* be slain—and justifiably so, as the story recounts. After all, in fairy tales, it was *you* who terrorized the hapless villagers, who kidnapped the

fair princess, who 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; rarely is the narrative focalized through your eyes, and you are rendered abject. 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 space-ships. Very often, when you appear on the page or on the screen, you are a slave, a servant, or a prostitute—your body is not your own. If you have words, your speech serves only to support the narrative, never to subvert it.

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. It is most often resolved by enacting symbolic and/or actual violence against the Dark Other. This is what readers and hearers of the fantastic expect, for it mirrors the spectacle of violence against the endarkened and the Othered in our own world. It is a familiar template, an archetype that comforts, especially when the position of the Other in the real world is uncertain.

When one is positioned as the Dark Other by the dominant culture, the fantastic presents a cipher, a puzzle that must be solved. Some people of color resolve this tension by rejecting the fantastic for the desert of the Real (to borrow a term from *The Matrix* trilogy). For many, a viable fantastic may be the dream of a world where they are not judged by the color of their skin, the language of their parents, the God they pray to (or not), or whom they choose to love, but rather by the kind of persons they are, or are becoming, or wish to be someday. For many, the long struggle for liberation in the world that we know is epic enough without imagining a completely different world, with different rules and different outcomes. However, it is because the fantastic is often positioned as universal in our culture that its deconstruction and transformation are essential.

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.

This 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 white-washing 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 becomes the Dark One, the subject, the focalizer, and the narrator of the *shadow book* that poet Kevin Young imagines as "a book that we don't have, but know of, a book that may haunt the very book we have in our hands."[24] The tales told by darkness, by the shadows, by the Dark Ones are never completely erased or removed, but are simply "hidden in plain sight." For it is not only history that has been irrevocably inscribed by its victors, 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. In digital fandom, 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. The Dark Other is the engine that drives the fantastic.

Sympathy for the Monster: How the Dark Fantastic Cycle Works

Observing the role of Dark Others in the fantastic, I have noticed a pattern—a cycle of the dark fantastic—in text after text. The cycle, which I revisit in subsequent chapters of this book, is as follows: (1) spectacle, (2) hesitation, (3) violence, (4) haunting, and (5) emancipation.

The first step of the dark fantastic cycle, *spectacle*, extends beyond the marble halls of the fantastic into the real world.[25] As Daphne Brooks and Qiana Whitted observe, audiences in the West have long marveled at the presence of the Dark Other in genres ranging from theater to comics.[26] Visual difference has fueled the Western fantastic imagination since medieval times, creating what Stuart Hall terms the "spectacle of the Other."[27] Hall argues, "What is visually produced, by the practices of representation, is only half the story. The other half—the deeper meaning—lies in *what is not being said, but is being fantasized, what is implied but cannot be shown*."[28] Even if we cannot see this awesome persona of the Dark Other, there is one certainty: she is dark.

In the second step, *hesitation*, the presence of the Dark Other interrupts the waking dream of the fantastic. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur posits that imagination alters our memories, because imagination is directed toward the fantastic, the fictional, the unreal, the possible, and the utopian.[29] Ricoeur further notes that imagination has to be uncoupled from memory, and I believe this uncoupling is the source of hesitation—there is no way of imagining our way out of the trauma and suffering of our fraught collective history. This creates a profound dilemma for writers and readers. Although the Dark Other is necessary for the fantastic, her presence is unsetting. 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.

This leads to the third phase of the cycle: the dilemma created by the presence of the Dark Other must be resolved with *violence*. Postcolonial theorists from Robert J. C. Young to Anne McClintock might say that this violence occurs because we cannot deal with the strong fear, desire, and longing that the Dark Other elicits.[30] Whether driven by desire, fear,

longing, or another impulse, darkness must be destroyed, or there is no story. Black feminist scholars from Hazel Carby to Michelle Alexander and Dorothy Roberts have noted the ways that the containment and destruction of Black bodies works in the real world.[31] 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.

Yet this death is not permanent. When the Dark Other is defeated, and catharsis is reached, their present-absence nonetheless haunts the story, which represents the fourth step in the cycle of the dark fantastic. Toni Morrison referred to this haunting as "Romancing the Shadow" in *Playing in the Dark*:

These speculations have led me to wonder whether the major and champi-oned characteristics of our national literature—individualism, mascu-linity; social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematics; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obses-sion with figurations of death and hell—are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence.[32]

This haunting presents another dilemma for the fantastic, which remains ambivalent toward the presence of darkness in the narrative. The Dark Other *must* die, but she *cannot* die. The Dark One haunts the text because she cannot escape. She is fettered to the story; without her, there is neither conflict nor climax, neither rising action nor resolu-tion. The Dark Other gives the story its excitement, its promise, its very meaning. Morrison once again provides insight into this pernicious fet-tering, which leads to the nonexistent existence of racialized characters:

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 lit-erature. . . . 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.[33]

Although the Dark Other elicits both fear and desire, her continuing presence is necessary for creating and sustaining these "playgrounds for the imagination." It is this dilemma that ultimately repositions the Dark Other as the spectacle that creates hesitation and elicits violence anew. Hence, the first four phases of this cycle repeat, spawning sequels, spinoffs, and authorial success.

The final step of the dark fantastic cycle is *emancipation*. It is reached only 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 is 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, when characters of color appear in atypical roles, they are often challenged, disliked, and rejected. The principles of the dark fantastic are so ingrained in our collective consciousness that when the expected pattern is subverted, most 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 regret that they *just cannot connect* with the characters. Television and movie studios, as well as publishing houses, tell writers that their stories are not *marketable*. Thus, whether the story in question is a novel, a television show, or a graphic novel, the Dark Other remains caged.

Everything in our culture, as well as in modern history and contemporary life of the West, demands the positioning of the Dark Other as an antagonist. As Edward Said observed, "Without empire . . . there is no European novel as we know it."[34] Within American literature, Morrison contends, "there is no romance (and no Gothic) free of what Herman Melville called 'the power of blackness.'"[35] Connecting Morrison's observations to Maria Nikolajeva's 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. Even when the Dark Other is not present, her present-absence nonetheless haunts the story. This goes beyond a mere cursory consideration of the lack of Black characters, characters of color, or characters who are different in the story. Even if darkness and light—or Black and White—seem to have exchanged places in the narrative, *the Dark Other is always already there.*

And so it is that any artist or writer who wishes to write an emancipatory fantastic faces an uphill journey if seeking mainstream readership and viewership. 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 postcolonial theorist Shaobo Xie 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]."[36] 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 his or her readers.

In contemporary culture, the project of emancipating the dark fantastic may be even more challenging than the myth-making project J. R. R. Tolkien assigned for himself. Liberating the fantastic from its fear and loathing of darkness and Dark Others not only requires new narratives for the sake of endarkened readers. It requires emancipating the imagination itself.

The Shadow with a Thousand Faces:
Locating the Dark Other in the Fantastic

How can one find the Dark Other in the fantastic, especially when many traditional fantasy novels, fairy tales, comics, and fantastic television shows and movies seem not to have any discernible characters of color? Again, Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* provides a good starting point:

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.[37]

in other words, the reason our culture does not often notice the ways that race, difference, and darkness are hailed in the fantastic is because 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 in the fantastic does *not* render Black bodies shadowless.[38] Quite the contrary. The shadow cast becomes darker and more ominous still for its very inspeakability.

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."[39] John Rieder observes 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 [science fiction]."[40] From H. G. Wells's radio play *The War of the Worlds* to the cinematic blockbuster *Star Trek* Kelvinverse movies, themes of invasion, conquest, and colonization are the bread and butter of science fiction. Fantasy and fairy tales are not exempt. Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint, drawing on José Monleón, find that fantasy emerges from dialectics of reason and unreason that arose with modernity, dividing the world into "us" and "them."[41]

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 identity groups. Bould and Vint also suggest that Mendlesohn's organization of the fantastic into four broad rhetorical types—portal-quest, intrusion, immersion, and liminal—may be useful for thinking about what kind of political work might be done in each.[42] Yet the Dark Other crosses all of these boundaries—generic, categorical, and rhetorical —with both thrill and threat, and can be found in some of the most popular books, television shows, and movies:

- In *Once Upon a Time*, an ABC postmodern fairy tale drama popular with teens and young adults, folkloric figure Rumpelstiltskin becomes the Dark One, entwined in a relationship with the lovely Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*.

- The main antagonists of vampires in the *Twilight* movie series as well as the CW television shows *The Vampire Diaries* and *The Originals* are were-wolves. In all of these mythologies, werewolves are directly connected to Native Americans and/or First Nations people.

- In the first few seasons of *The Vampire Diaries* television show, the majority of witches and warlocks had visible African ancestry. This was revised only with the introduction of *The Originals* characters, storylines, and spinoff series. (As I show in chapter 4, this is a departure from the books, where witch sidekick Bonnie McCullough is of Irish Celtic—and likely Druidic—heritage).

These are but a few of the locations of the Dark Other in the early twenty-first-century mainstream fantastic. In these examples, I focus on visual narratives (television shows and movies) because it seems that when the fantastic is transmediated from page to screen, conventions become that much more amplified, especially in the post–*Harry Potter* age. 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: when Morrison asked rhetorically about what happens as we imagine "an African-ist 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 but they would also use social media 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. While there are some affordances to this crowdsourcing of imagination, there may also be a greater tendency to affirm what is traditional. As media scholar Henry Jenkins said in an interview marking the twentieth anniversary of his landmark publication *Textual Poachers*, "Fandom is an imagined community, but if so, it is a community that is constructed through *the collective imagination*. Its utopian imagination often fuels fandom's resistances to corporate efforts to commodify its cultural productions and exchanges. If we downplay the utopian aspects of fandom, we may also lose some of its critical edge."[43]

Those who respond to the fantastic may be collectively shaping imagination and resisting the commodification of stories from a commitment to utopia. However, the pervasive belief that fandoms for the

imaginative genres represent postracial utopias also suppresses efforts to decolonize and emancipate the imagination. This presents a real challenge. Children's and young adult literature, particularly fairy tales, myths, and folklore, are powerful agents of social reproduction in our culture. I passionately believe that examining the dark fantastic through critical scholarship of books, films, magazines, websites, comics, and graphic novels intended for children and young adults is indeed one of the most effective postcolonial and critical projects in the long run, for as Xie reminds us, "The world ultimately belongs to children."[44]

Songs of Endarkened Girlhoods: Rue, Gwen, Bonnie, Hermione—and Beyond

I did not set out to focus on the intersectional roles of gender and race in the dark fantastic. However, as I surveyed speculative texts outside of comics, I quickly found that the vast majority of the Black protagonists I encountered were girls and women—#BlackGirlMagic.[45] In comics, perhaps the most famous Black character of the past quarter century is mutant heroine Ororo Munroe, best known as Storm from Marvel Comics' lucrative X-Men series. Clearly, there is something about endarkened girlhood and womanhood that especially anchors the fantastic, from H. Rider Haggard's colonialist boys' adventure novel She to the growing number of Black female protagonists in today's science fiction and horror television shows. Black Girls' Literacies Collective co-founder Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz writes:

The brutality against Black girls has a long and deep history in the United States. Dating back centuries to the sanctioned system of slavery that began in 1619, acts of violence against Black female bodies, including death at the hands of slave traders, were a common occurrence. The historical research of [Daina] Berry, [Deborah] Gray White, and [Saidiya] Hartman, among others, details the brutality Black girls and women experienced under the system of chattel slavery. Varying degrees of inhumane treatment experienced by Black girls have continued throughout history; however, in recent times, there has been a heightened attack on them, particularly in schools.[46]

Given this recent history in the era of #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, and other permutations of activism targeted toward the intersections of race and gender, inspired by the foundational research of scholars from Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins to Kyra Gaunt and Venus Evans-Winters, The Dark Fantastic takes up calls by the Black Girls' Literacies Collective in my field to "center Black girls in literacy research by speaking to the invisibility of girls in schools, classrooms, and research literature, the ways in which they are misrepresented and dehumanized in the public media. . . . Researchers have pointed to the intricacies of Black girlhood and how their literacies are deeply complex and the need to center their ways of knowing and being in the world."[47] While most research in this area rightly focuses on the experiences, needs, and outcomes of living Black girls, past and present, in this project, I have focused my critical lenses on the story-lives of Black girl characters. As a literacy scholar, I concur with the Black Girls' Literacies Collective, and contend that how Black girls show up on the page and on the screen matters for the ways that Black girls are treated in the world.

My choice not to focus on Black male characters, Black nonbinary characters, and Black trans characters in this project was solely due to their limited number in popular speculative transmedia during the period of research and writing (2013–2017). Until recently, the presence of Black male protagonists in the fantastic beyond the ubiquitous and safe Will Smith seemed too fearsome even for our storied nightmares. Audience reactions to Finn in the final Star Wars trilogy are worth tracking by researchers and critics, as are Black male protagonists emerging from the expanded Marvel cinematic universe, including T'Challa, King of Wakanda in Black Panther, his antagonist, fan favorite Erik "Killmonger" Stevens, and Luke Cage. Further criticism and research is warranted, especially given the phenomenal, record-breaking success of Black Panther. Similarly, I anticipate an explosion of critical work on non-Black and/or Indigenous characters, as well as queer characters of color in fantastic narratives for youth and young adults in the near future.

The balance of The Dark Fantastic explores the fantastic from the perspectives of four stories, four fantastic worlds, and four protagonists. I begin with the heartbreaking racial innocence of young tribute Rue from Suzanne Collins's The Hunger Games, whose very existence was

an affront to audiences when she emerged from the page to appear as dark skinned on the big screen. Moving from contemporary young adult literature rendered on screens large and small, I turn to Gwen in the BBC's *Merlin* to highlight some of the challenges inherent in locating an emancipatory dark fantastic in both time and space. Transmediation also reveals the plight of Bonnie Bennett, the heroine of Alloy, Inc.'s and the CW's *The Vampire Diaries*, whose incredible transformation from page to screen points to the trouble with heterosexual beauty and desirability politics in a late-capitalist, televised dark fantastic.

I conclude by revisiting my time in Harry Potter fandom when I chose as my avatar one of the most famous Black girls in a mainstream fantasy narrative, Angelina Johnson from J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series—incidentally, the first-viewpoint narrator whose perspective I tried to capture in my ill-fated fanfiction from long ago.

Angelina joins Gwen, Rue, and Bonnie in an exclusive club of dark girls in the shadows of our contemporary billion-dollar fantastic, sacrificing life, limb, and love for protagonists fair, fueling the lucrative franchises from which they hail. Yet they are also the harbingers of a new generation of Black girl protagonists who are emerging from the imaginations of writers from all over the world to become the center of their own stories, as diverse audiences immersed in today's participatory cultures begin to demand more from education, entertainment, and society.

Myth-making may be dangerous indeed for those of us who play in the dark.

But let's play anyway.