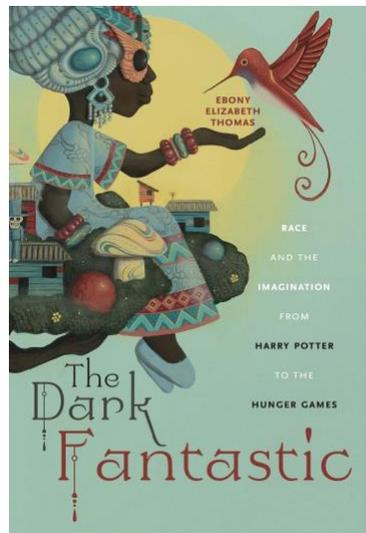


# JOLLE@UGA<sup>®</sup>

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

**Review of *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to The Hunger Games*  
By Ebony Elizabeth Thomas**

Reviewer: T. Hunter Strickland  
University of Georgia, Athens, GA



Thomas, E. E. (2019). *The dark fantastic: Race and the imagination from Harry Potter to The Hunger Games*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

ISBN: 9781479806072

## Overview

*The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to The Hunger Games* by Ebony

Elizabeth Thomas is a visionary and personal text that examines how “When people of color seek passageways into the fantastic, [they] have often discovered that the doors are barred” (p. 2), and captures the problem of “When youth grow up without seeing diverse images in the mirrors, windows, and doors of children’s and young adult literature, they are confined to single stories about the world around them and, ultimately, the development of their imaginations is affected” (p. 6). Essentializing the need for research, teaching, reading, and writing on how characters of color are portrayed in fantasy literature, Thomas analyzes how readers read outside of authorial intention to see their diverse identities in popular fantastic literature for young people. It is through these critical counterstories that more can be found and expected in fantasy literature as a genre.

Thomas defines the dark fantastic as “the role that racial difference plays in our fantastically storied imaginations” (p. 7), and the fantastic as a genre that “includes fantasy fiction but goes beyond to include all stories-about-worlds-that-never-were, whether they are marketed, shelved, or classified as fairy tales, horror, superhero comics, ‘soft’ science fiction, alternate histories, or otherwise” (pp. 7-8). The marginalization of characters of color in the fantastic inspires this text, and asks readers to be prepared to conduct “Analysis of race in speculative fiction [that] should include counterstories that narrate stories from the perspectives of readers, writers, fans, and audiences who are racialized” (p. 11).

Five chapters make up the bulk of the text beyond the introduction, and each chapter, outlined below examines Thomas’ theory of the dark fantastic or

how it can be used to understand race in four popular fantasy stories. Thomas also infuses each chapter with the voices of fans and fandom to show how fans of color have used digital spaces to engage in conversations on race beyond the pages of their favorite books.

## Chapter 1: Toward a Theory of the Dark Fantastic

In this first formal chapter, Thomas examines how her journey as a reader of the fantastic and the concept of the imagination came into play and helped her to theorize an understanding of dark characters in fantastic literature. Thomas further examines these ideas by discussing believability (p. 18), and how the “positioning of readers, viewers, and fans within the ‘stories about stories’ of the fantastic is vital” (p. 19).

However, to examine the dark fantastic, readers have to understand that “The traditional purpose of darkness in the fantastic is to disturb, to unsettle, to cause unrest” (p. 19). Thomas examines Cohen’s monster theory (p. 20) to provide the foundation for her theory of the dark fantastic cycle, which she will then use as a lens to examine four characters and fandoms in the subsequent chapters.

Finally, Thomas lays out and explains the dark fantastic cycle to share her understanding about “Observing the role of Dark Others in the fantastic.” The pattern of the dark fantastic cycle is “(1) spectacle, (2) hesitation, (3) violence, (4) haunting, (5) emancipation” (p. 26). The ability to notice and analyze this cycle helps in “Liberating the fantastic from its fear and loathing of darkness and Dark Others [that] not only requires new narratives for the sake of endarkened readers. It requires emancipating the imagination itself” (p. 29). Through her examination of dark girl protagonists in subsequent chapters, Thomas asks readers to see beyond themselves and view darkness and dark

characters in fantasy literature in a more nuanced and important cultural way.

### **Chapter 2: Lamentations of a Mockingjay: The Hunger Games' Rue and Racial Innocence in the Dark Fantastic.**

Chapter 2 is Thomas' first description of how using the dark fantastic cycle as a lens allows a fuller understanding of Dark Others in popular young adult fantasy novels. Through her look at the character of Rue from Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* and her treatment as one of the few characters of color in the novel, Thomas begins to show how story and fandom intertwine in discourse about race.

Thomas examines both the critical discourse surrounding Rue's character, but more importantly values the voice of the fandom surrounding *The Hunger Games* as experts of equal voice. While this chapter looks at race in particular, Thomas' analysis also examines how class comes into play when readers examine the dark fantastic. Central to her discussion on Rue, Thomas also examines Rue's relationship with the protagonist, Katniss, and how Rue's character serves more to reify Katniss' privilege as a white person in contrast to a technically more diverse government as antagonist in The Capitol and thus her role as the protagonist (p. 42).

The most compelling argument of the chapter, however, is how Thomas uses the dark fantastic cycle to show how authors can (un)intentionally cause "characters who are racially marked... [to be] rejected by readers" and serve to be nothing more than sacrifices to further the story of white protagonists (p. 61). She calls on readers to "name, deconstruct, and rethink the very meanings of white and black, light and dark, innocence and evil, *anthropos* and *humanitas*, in the depths of our

imaginations" (Emphasis in original, p. 64).

### **Chapter 3: A Queen Out of Place: Dark Fantastic Dreaming and the Spacetime Politics of Gwen in BBC's Merlin.**

Chapter 3 examines the political and cultural discourse surrounding the BBC television show *Merlin* and their choice to cast a Black woman as the legendary Queen Guinevere. While the fervor around this casting choice and the change of "Gwen" into "the daughter of a blacksmith [who] works as the maidservant to the lady Morgana" instead of the traditional noble princess traded to Arthur to strengthen alliances among Saxon Britain (p. 69). These changes among others, especially when viewed through the lens of the dark fantastic cycle, allow Thomas to show the great potential of the Dark Other to be so much more than the embodiment of the monster.

According to the author, casting legendary roles with actors and actresses of color allows the countless negative stereotypes of the Dark Other over space and time to be turned on its head. She argues that "Because our society has traditionally dealt with darkness and difference through violence, this violence is transferred into the waking dream of the secondary world" in fantasy literature and thus allows the issues of the real world to be examined through the fantastic lens (p. 73).

Through an examination of the historical inaccuracy of a white-only medieval Europe, Thomas guides readers to an understanding that there are many common misconceptions about people of color in the middle ages. Thus, shows like *Merlin* allow conversations to happen to disrupt this ideology (p. 76). Additionally, the show gives more potential and hope to the character of Gwen as she outlives Arthur and comes into her own power and leadership as a character, but one that continues to be complicated by the influence of how Dark Others are rarely given the agency they deserve.

#### **Chapter 4: The Curious Case of Bonnie Bennett: The Vampire Diaries and the Monstrous Contradiction of the Dark Fantastic**

Chapter 4 examines an American television show, *The Vampire Diaries*, and Thomas' view of another casting change from a white character in the book to an actress of color in the television show. A secondary character in the show, Bonnie Bennett, is an African American witch whose character is changed in the television show from Bonnie McCullough, a red-haired Irish girl descended from the Druids who is best friends with the protagonist, Elena, in the book (p. 110). While Bonnie's character is powerful because she is one of the few who can control the vampires in the story, her innocence becomes a powerful thread woven through the narrative of the story.

While Thomas recognizes that the casting and character change of Bonnie into a character of color might have been an answer to pressure on the network to diversify casting, she argues that "Race matters in the real world, and it matters in fiction" (p. 111). More importantly, she shows that "within these [vampire] narratives of death and natural longevity, characters like Bonnie have the potential to form counternarratives of nature and fertility, life and renewed hope" in ways that other stories might not (p. 113). The interesting caveat to discussion on the Dark Other in this vampire story is that vampires turn traditional views of the monster over as, in such stories, the monsters become the focus of desire and empathy from viewers (p. 114).

While seamlessly tying in personal narrative of her own fan experience and the experience of her niece as a young viewer, Thomas also engages readers in the potential of fantastic literature to push viewers into discussions on racial politics and activism (p. 129). At its root, she argues too of the importance of Black readers to see themselves in Black television

and movies and to have the space to restory and counterstory their worlds (p. 136).

#### **Chapter 5: Hermione is Black: A Postscript to Harry Potter and the Crisis of Infinite Dark Fantastic Worlds**

In the final concluding chapter, Thomas starts with the concept that books and stories belong to their readers. This is a powerful reminder of the potential of reading the fantastic as a genre, and gives at least a rationale for reading more with young people. This final chapter is, in many ways, the most personal as Thomas shares her experience and expertise in the early *Harry Potter* online fandom and fanfiction community. This personal look at both her rise within it and her decision to leave it are ensconced in the discourse surrounding J.K. Rowling's announcements about Dumbledore's sexuality and Hermione's race after her series was concluded.

Thomas reiterates her argument all along that Black girls are central to her understanding of the Dark Fantastic cycle. She repeats "Throughout The Dark Fantastic, we have witnessed Black girl characters caught in the wake within storied realms of the collective imagination. These girls-that-never-were, but who nonetheless remain with us due to their very fictionality, are dying and *not* dead, present and *not* present, inconsequential to speculative narratives yet vital to their functioning" (emphasis in original, p. 151). She calls for more Black authors, artists, and creators to tell more stories alongside her so that future generations have more to build their collective imagination than previous generations, and that Black readers control the narrative outside of authorial intention and can continue to do so through fandoms.

She ends with the idea that "The rising generation is not only inscribing themselves into the narrative but also demanding to be the center of all their worlds, textual, visual, fannish, and otherwise" and that

through this emancipation of “the imagination for readers and fans who have for too long inhabited the margins--real and imagined” is possible (p. 156). Her final pages of the book give an in depth look at restorying and the theoretical potential of the power of doing so.

### **Critical Evaluation of Strengths and Weaknesses and Pertinence to Certain Audiences**

Thomas’ book is, in many ways, visionary. Her in-depth look at both her theory of the Dark Fantastic and the concept of the Dark Other is an incredible tool to use as a lens for studying race and gender in fantasy literature, but also has much potential even broader in any fiction. More importantly, the potential of using these concepts with both secondary students and teacher candidates is apparent.

As a teacher educator, I found her analysis to be important in building my own analytical toolbox for looking at how Dark characters are portrayed in literature, and found myself considering many other examples of how Black characters in particular were pushed to the margins in fantasy stories both on the page and on the screen. As a lover and writer of fantasy literature myself, I felt a great potential in using Thomas’ work to better understand how to build and analyze characters in a more inclusive way.

As a white, cisgendered, male teacher educator, I have been pushing myself over the last few years to check my understanding of diverse perspectives and address the gaps in my own vision of the world. I have done so through analysis of young adult literature (Strickland, 2019a) and fantastic popular culture in zombie literature (Strickland, 2019b), but most importantly I have done so through the reading of young adult literature. Young adult literature, when viewed through critical lenses like Thomas’ Dark Fantastic cycle and the youth lens

(Petroni, Sargianidies, and Lewis, 2015) allows adults to see young people as so much more than the socially constructed view of adolescence(ts) and to break the deficit perspectives that culture often surrounds young people with.

The great potential of studying and critically analyzing how identities are shaped through literature is the potential for change in how students and teachers view others that are different from themselves. If “Students were encouraged to engage in spaces that welcomed counter-discourses of who they were supposed to be, thus allowing them to reposition themselves and reshape their identities[,]” then the agency of youth can be grown with adults as allies rather than authorities (Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016, p. 86). Breaking hegemonic control over young people and recognizing the spaces and voices of youths where they control their own agency is of paramount importance.

Finally, it is hard to talk about weaknesses in this strong text, but there are a couple worth noting. One (and this is kind of a strength at the same time): Thomas conducts her analysis looking at Black girls in particular in these fantasy stories. This is hyper-focused on one group and how they have been portrayed in fantastic literature. While much of Thomas’ analysis speaks about race broadly and her theories and concepts are not limited by the hyper-focus on Black girls, those wanting to look at other Dark Others in their own hyper-focused ways might find the examples used as limited. However, the theory of the Dark Fantastic does not limit itself to Black girls, Thomas just uses Black girl characters in her chapters as examples through her own vision.

Another weakness might be for those looking for the critical lens that Thomas provides, but finds the focus on the fantastic to be off putting. I personally don’t think readers would go to this text without a love or at least a like of fantasy literature anyway,

but there are anti-fantasy or only-canon readers out there that cannot get past the subject used. Thomas' Chapter 3 on Gwen and *Merlin* as a modern retelling of the Arthurian tradition is so strong, however, that I would say that this weakness too is not much of one.

Thomas' book *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to The Hunger Games* is the book that those of us studying speculative or

fantastic literature broadly have needed to help us situate our work within the needs of diversity and social justice education in the 21st century. The relevance that Thomas' work brings to fantasy literature is arguably going to impact the next decade of work in both English education and English as a field, and gives a foundation for young scholars to push forward with a rationale that fantasy literature is of equal value for academic study.

### References

- Glenn, W. J., & Ginsberg, R. (2016) Resisting readers' identity (re)construction across English and young adult literature course contexts. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 51(1). 84-105.
- Petrone, R., Sarigianides, S. T., & Lewis, M. A. (2015). The youth lens: Analyzing adolescence/ts in literary texts. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 46(4). 506-533.
- Strickland, T. H. (2019a). What yal tells us about learning, schooling, and teaching. *SIGNAL Journal*, 43(1). 18-23.
- Strickland, T. H. (2019b). Zombie literature: Analyzing the fear of the unknown through popular culture. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, 6(3). 48-56.