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Magic and Minorities:

Exploring the Symptoms of Racial Disparities in Young Adult

Fantasy Literature and a Potential Cure in Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*

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Despite having almost infinite opportunities for representation and racial diversification, young adult fantasy literature has often been suffocated by its own rules and stipulations, specifically regarding the exclusion of non-white characters. With the genre's defining tropes and its history of being above and beyond realism, it seems as though fantasy should be best suited to address concepts such as representation and inclusion. For years, however, young adult fantasy literature has incorporated fantastical, boundless elements, like magic, but restricted and segregated itself in terms of racial diversity. The goal of this thesis is to unpack the fantasy genre's tropes and definitions, and to consider the elements that led the genre to play into racist ideals, and how fantasy can be reclaimed so that it can become a tool to combat racism as in Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*.

Young adult fantasy novels often have a similar overarching structure, but each author within the genre attempts to add their own unique point of view. Because fantasy novels often have very distinct characteristics, some authors fail to avoid the tropes or rely too heavily on them and, thus, fail to create a new world or a new vision. Because of this, one will often find young adult fantasy novels simply check off a list of essential attributes to include as opposed to contributing a theme or idea to the genre that challenges or pushes the boundaries of what it means to be a young adult fantasy novel. Before we are able to dive into the, perhaps, more racist tropes of young adult fantasy novels, and what that implies for *Children of Blood and Bone*, we must first define young adult fantasy so that we have a common definition. There are various definitions of young adult fantasy, and generally accepted nomenclature includes the

supernatural and the magical, or often a form of science fiction or dystopia fantasy. “Fantasy,” however, does not always require magic and supernatural, as there are many books, such as the *Temeraire* series by Naomi Novick, that does not include any magic at all; and while most readers and authors would rightly assume that a fantasy novel has to include magic to be considered traditional fantasy, we do not need to see magic, necessarily, to experience a fantasy novel.

In the introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, it is suggested that:

we view fantasy as a group of texts that share, to a greater degree or other, a cluster of common tropes which may be objects, but which may also be narrative techniques. At the centre are those stories which share tropes of the completely impossible and towards the edges, in subsets, are those stories which include only a small number of tropes, or which construct those tropes in such a way to leave doubt in the reader’s mind as to whether what they have read is fantastical nor not (James and Mendlesohn 1).

To discuss these tropes, we first have to acknowledge that there are far too many to cover, but a few of the more basic examples include:

the hero, the reluctant hero, the anti-hero, the designated hero, the mentor, the death of the mentor, the love interest, the designated love interest, the femme fatale, the innocent girl, the action girl, the damsel in distress, the action girl who spends more time being a damsel in distress, elves, mysterious kingdoms, prophecies, Chosen Ones, mysterious hidden kingdoms/cities/places, evil overlords, a land of evil, a race that is always evil, a

secret magical society, Villain monologues, specific special objects, mysterious forests, fairy lands, talking animals, magic swords, magic in general, and the quest (Lissauer 4).

All-in-all, fantasy is a genre that people tend to recognize when they see it, despite the meanings and the tropes often seeming beyond the scope of comprehension or definition.

As suggested by the *Cambridge Companion*, this common lexicon is imperative for young adult fantasy writers and readers alike to help us understand the genre as a whole. What most scholars agree on is that fantasy involves some aspect that is impossible within our own world, as opposed to something that is plausible given time and progress. This allows us to exclude works of science fiction but, other than that specification, it is a rather broad genre which allows us to include works from JK Rowling to Shakespeare to George RR Martin to Stephenie Meyer. Because of this, it is clear to see that fantasy has spanned hundreds and hundreds of years, including mythological and classical and religious texts as well. Mythology and religion are important aspects of many young adult fantasy novels including *Children of Blood and Bone*. One facet of fantasy that is difficult to neatly define is the idea of utopian and dystopian society. For the purposes of this essay, utopian and dystopian novels are included if they possess many, if not all, of the young adult fantasy tropes.

As Jack Zipes mentions in the foreword to *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, young adult fantasy and/or dystopian novels “need to depict utopias and dystopias because they allow readers to critique their contemporary society in the hope of social change” (ix). What is unfortunate about this particular trope in fantasy novels is that racial tensions are often not a point of conversation in these narratives. Authors of fantasy novels who desire to call attention to modern fears, specifically in these novels, fail to realize that racial

ideologies are often present in their narratives whether they intended that to be the case or not. Frequently, these young adult fantasy novels reinforce current social and racial hierarchies through their character depictions, and these portrayals often privilege the dominant “white” race. Young adult fantasy novels that shy away from, or are ignorant of, racial tensions and racial inequality seemingly imply that non-white ethnicities are unimportant in the future or in other worlds. This, unfortunately, reinforces what our current society believed in the past and also believes presently. As Mary Couzelis states in her article “The Future Is Pale: Race in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopian Novels,” “even narratives where authors pretend racial tensions have been eliminated in the future risk trivializing contemporary encounters teens have with prejudice” (131). Therefore, even in a world that is almost entirely different from our own, that includes magic and dragons and heroes, non-white people are still cast aside or placed in the background.

Three examples of standard contemporary young adult fantasy and/or dystopian novels that reinforce these stereotypes are Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*, Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies*, and J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. Lowry’s fiction “tells the story of twelve-year-old Jonas who lives in a futuristic society which elected to end strife by erasing difference, emotions, and memory, and the novel examines communal control, individual choice, and the power of memories” (Couzelis 132). Westerfeld’s novel “follows fifteen-year-old Tally Youngblood in a world destroyed by oil dependence and greed, and critiques governmental control and free will” (Couzelis 132). And Rowling’s narrative focuses on eleven-year-old Harry Potter and the discovery that he is a wizard, as well as the quests he embarks upon at his school of witchcraft and wizardry to defeat the villain, Voldemort. These three novels, while popular, are symptoms

of the disease within young adult fantasy fiction that perpetuates segregation within fiction as well as reality.

More often than not, the lack of attention to racial tensions in popular young adult fantasy novels such as these risk sustaining the epidemic of racial inequality. Usually when novels *do* address race in a productive manner, they are almost always marginalized because they are viewed as “only about race.” By remaining silent in their novels regarding contemporary issues of race, these authors and novels maintain hegemonic cultural relations and promote the status quo which is “race does not matter.” In furthering this view, many young adult fantasy novels contain a racist ideology of which their authors and audiences are often ignorant. If the purpose of fantasy-dystopian novels is to critique current society by creating an alternative society in which there is clearly evil, then the ideologies about class and race privilege must be uncovered. Couzelis’ examination of whiteness in *The Giver* and the *Uglies* reveals how “contemporary young adult dystopian novels do little to question today’s racial hierarchies,” and how this apathy leads to the separation of races in young adult fantasy fiction (132).

Susan Stewart notes in her article concerning Lowry’s *The Giver*; that the novel “promotes color blindness by implying that the future is full of ‘pale’ people with ‘light’ eyes” (22). In Lowry’s futuristic fantastical novel, the people are almost exclusively of the white race, and the titular character of the Giver explains to the protagonist, Jonas, that people made the “choice to eliminate difference, and to not see any color” (Couzelis 132). This particular future is absent of any distinct racial differences, and each characters’ physical attributes align only with that of the Anglo race. In essence, this implies that in a world that bestows fantastical gifts upon its people, and then presents these people with fantastical choices, that the people will

still voluntarily elect white as the superior race. Shannon Sullivan argues that “even though color blindness is usually intended as a strategy for the elimination of racism and white domination, it actually tends to fuel and be fueled by white privileged habits” (2). These habits run rampant throughout young adult fantasy novels, as many, if not all, of the protagonists and surrounding characters are themselves white.

In this same way, Scott Westerfeld’s book, *The Uglies* routinely avoids any confrontation with racial history that might precipitate questions or opinions about an all-white future. Tally, the protagonist, becomes “so indoctrinated into the government’s definition of beautiful that she is stunned to see adults ‘ugly’ by choice” and she has become so brainwashed by the Anglo standard of beauty that she calls these “ugly adults,” “grotesquely fat, or weirdly over-muscled or uncomfortably thin,” and that “almost all of them had wrong, ugly proportions” (Couzelis 137; Westerfeld 198). A notable characteristic that is absent from her observations is that of skin color. Tally makes no comment of these ugly people’s skin color, save for that it is different from her own. Many implications can be made from this lack of acknowledgement, one being that she does not believe racial variances are notable in any way which, from reading the book as a whole, seems doubtful.

Or, perhaps, this is a moment of white privilege, in which Tally is not required to even be aware of racial differences because it does not affect her in any life-altering way. To have:

Tally notice different skin colors in the past would highlight that the text promotes a monochromatic future and ignores the complexity of racial differences. Tally’s focus on attributes related to beauty closes off the potential for the reader to interrogate racial

hierarchies. Tally does not have to confront any history related to racial strife or feel any guilt over the desire to change appearance and select lighter skin tones (Couzelis 137).

In the magazine of beauty that Tally is to select from, the lack of racial differences noted is, in essence, an example of white privilege in this futuristic fantastical world. It is, unfortunately, very common for young white readers to have this experience when engaging in young adult fantasy literature, because if they have not had the experience themselves, then why on earth would it matter to them?

Similarly, In J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, racial hierarchies are utilized when categorizing wizards and witches. In addition to this, there is a blatant lack of acknowledgment of non-white characters and cultures, as they must fit into the hierarchies of wizardry, which adds to the "whitewashing [of] Hogwarts and the magical community as a whole" (Matkov 9). The color blind stance of the series also forces characters of color to assimilate into the white culture of the wizarding world and, thus, fails to achieve the "inclusivity" that one might expect from a magical world so different from our own. Indeed, "Eurocentrism and Orientalism reinforce normative whiteness" and all of the characters of color are silenced regarding these issues in the books, as Matkov states, "the Orient is not the Occident's interlocutor, but its silent Other" (215). For non-white characters, roles are minimal and they are presented as perfectly adapted to white, British culture. There are no discernible dialectical or cultural differences within these characters and, if any obvious differences exist, they are not acknowledged or considered in a positive manner. Moreover, if recognized, these differences are viewed as exotic and almost savage: "Three African wizards sat in serious conversation, all of them wearing long white robes and

roasting what looked like a rabbit on a bright purple fire...” (Rowling 27). These statements only serve to perpetuate a white perspective of non-white cultures using the lens of “otherness.”

Rowling’s vagueness with regards to the acknowledgment of racial differences within the wizarding world could potentially be inadvertent simply because she never thought to present any of her main characters as non-white, but dialogue in media is built from these Western viewpoints. Meaning, “subjects take on biases and perspectives relevant to that discursive position. In essence, these subjects construct discursive formations that privilege the West over the non-West” (A. 2). The readers, then, are also culpable in this superiority complex of the West and of whiteness. This “default whiteness” mindset has led to many readers assuming the whiteness of characters, especially within the *Harry Potter* series. The racist structures already in place in our society, namely the underrepresentation of people of color, prevents the audience from even considering other racial possibilities.

The *Harry Potter* series feeds the idea of white privilege, and fails to live up to the image of inclusivity and diversity with which it aligns itself. This not only leads to inconsistencies, but prevents the material from lacking a certain depth. “All children’s tales contain some political message, even when not intending to... [authors] write their internalized social norms into their works. Thus, authors who do not consciously choose to write against the dominant social and political system inevitably write for it” (A. 5). In this way, Rowling participates in white privilege in both the series as a whole, but also, more specifically, through her characters.

Perhaps:

a canonical black Hermione could understand the double-entendre of being called

Mudblood (given mud as brown) and have her sympathy for the elves (whose oppression

is negated by their penchant for servitude, remarkably like the Africans, who were assumed to be built for slavery) speak from the knowledge of her own marginalized experiences and of her people's history (A. 4).

Unfortunately, the main characters of the series, being white, reinforce the stance that whiteness is "superior" and the "default" and fail to engage in productive racial discourse.

Therefore,

race and ethnicity in [*Harry Potter*] straddles multiple intersections and methods. We witness how it not only carries classist undertones, given its focus on only upper and middle-class struggles, but also heteronormative in its portrayal of only Asian characters as female, and (potential) love interests (A. 6).

While the series presents surface-level representation, the complex ideas of racial and blood hegemonic classes that run rampant throughout the novels do little to evoke positive conversations regarding race and fail to be equitable and inclusive. There is no obvious attempt to engage in discussion about racism and racial tensions within the *Harry Potter* series, thus the hierarchies of the wizarding world parallel the hierarchies of our own world, with no positive or progressive dialogue.

In Lowry's *The Giver*, Westerfeld's *Uglies*, and Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, white privilege runs rampant because these authors still adhere to modern society's racial hierarchies. Furthermore, they ignore or write out any kind of future, or otherworldly world, that sees any race other than white as superior or even equal. These narratives do nothing to question or take issue with contemporary opinions surrounding race, and any moments within the texts, themselves, that could allow for meaningful conversation regarding racial ideologies and racial

bias are completely closed off or whitewashed. Each author crafts fantastical narratives that solely enforce white privilege, whether that be through ignorance of racial differences, segregation that clearly benefits one race, or color blindness — all qualities that solely white readers and white audiences experience. Elisabeth Leonard finds that young adult fantasy fiction often:

attempt[s] to deal with racial issues by imagining a world where they are non-issues, where colour-blindness is the norm. This may be a conscious model for a future society, or a gesture to ‘political correctness’ by an author whose interests in the story lie elsewhere, but either motive avoids wrestling with the difficult questions of how a non-racist society comes into being and how members of minority cultures or ethnic groups preserve their culture (254).

These three young adult fantasy novels are just a few examples in a long line of tradition in which non-white characters are either overlooked or completely shut out from this world in a format that could and should be used as an opportunity for inclusion.

When characters of color *are* present in young adult fantasy literature, racial and ethnic differences may be used to ostracize these characters by what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls a “racialist” belief, a view “that all the members of each race share... certain fundamental, biologically heritable, moral and intellectual characteristics with each other that they [do] not share with members of any other race” (608). Considering the nature of such racial ostracism, young adult fantasy literature is an excellent example being that depictions of race and ethnicity, when they appear in fantasy, are often presented metaphorically. Jeffrey A. Weinstock argues that many fictitious representations are “never totally divorced from real-world politics” and “readily

become metaphors for terrestrial groups and situations, thereby constructing and reinforcing specific ideological positions” (330). Many xenophobic or racist sentiments within young adult fantasy literature are often well-disguised, and Weinstock argues that “extraterrestrialism” frequently “draws from repertoires of real-world stereotypes and so functions as an unproblematic extension of Orientalism” (330). Non-white characters within young adult fantasy novels, therefore, are often present to fulfill racial stereotypes or aid the white protagonist/s on their quest.

While it would be fallacious to claim that young adult fantasy literature has never engaged in dialogue that opposes racism, many authors and readers seem to forget that the presence of racism in fantasy literature should not be an inevitability. On the contrary, the racist “phenomenon is the ongoing result of unfortunate, oftentimes unavoidable creative choices and trends, institutionalized by authors and readers alike, instilled into the genre’s DNA during the era of its earliest European incarnations; works which later became the ‘blueprints’ for almost all modern fantasy” (Rumsby 14). There are several basic factors which complicate the young adult fantasy novel’s potentially racist trajectory.

One clear issue that fantasy faces is that most modern novels are based on 18th and 19th century works “which provide naïve solutions to the [white male] subject’s basic problems” and “tend to center themselves on plots that end with the elimination of the offending” other (Janmohamed 86). For instance, many 18th century works utilize imperialistic viewpoints to craft narratives that involve outrageous stereotypes of non-white peoples. In doing this, the narratives fail “to create ‘real people’ so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes” (Frye 99). Because of these characterized depictions of non-white

people, minorities were further dehumanized in both real life and on paper. This led to a definition of race within literature that “pretends to be an objective term of classification, when in fact it is a dangerous trope” (Gates 4). This is particularly poignant in young adult fantasy novels because while works may not intentionally repeat or intentionally reinforce a specific racist ideology, the modern texts often mirror the same tropes and ideas found in earlier works of fantasy fiction.

This, unfortunately, perpetuates problematic understanding and acknowledgement of race and racial tension for readers. Not only this, but the genre as a whole has a tradition that has led to the:

revival and reaffirmation of outdated tropes and conceptions of racial representation that have lasted well into the 21st century, made only more problematic by the fact that these same discourses and narratives have been emulated by fantasy authors around the globe, helping to enshrine that specific brand of Eurocentric, colonial racism into international imaginations both fantastic and sociopolitical. In this sense, though one can rightfully argue that fantasy has allowed outdated modes of racial representation and racist ideologies to endure past their prime in the realm of popular imagination, the genre’s lineage of racial representation is not so much a disease as it is a symptom of latent Eurocentrism and colonialism, in the Western World and beyond (Rumsby 15).

Young adult fantasy literature is a symptom of the disease that only furthers what its predecessors put into place and is, therefore, perpetrated by antiquated tropes.

There is, however, a movement known as Afro-futurism, which is a rejection of the racist ideology present in young adult fantasy literature. This movement is a “cultural aesthetic,

philosophy of science, and philosophy of history that explores the developing intersection of African Diaspora culture with technology” (Ellis and Martinek 113). The development of Afro-futurism has led to myriad modern fantasy authors discarding traditional tropes for more culturally rich and ethnically diverse narratives. One particular author is Tomi Adeyemi and her young adult fantasy novel, *Children of Blood and Bone*. Adeyemi’s work is focused entirely on Yoruba culture, which is “the way of life among a certain group of people in Nigeria. It can also be defined as the language, custom, belief, rule, mode of dressing, folklore, religion, symbol and memories developed by members of all social groups that make their social environments meaningful” (Ossai 1). *Children of Blood and Bone* uses Yoruba culture and religion as inspiration and follows our heroine, Zélie Adebola, who must bring magic back to the land of Orisha. Referring back to the tropes of young adult fantasy literature, Zélie “is the one. Whatever happens, she must survive” (Adeyemi 209). She represents the “chosen one” motif, as is acknowledged by other characters within the novel on various occasions.

Under the orders of a tyrant king, magic-wielding people were massacred, leaving Zélie motherless. This young adult fantasy novel also features a rebel princess, Amari, who sees the injustice of her father, King Saran’s, plans for destruction. *Children of Blood and Bone* charts:

Zélie’s quest to restore magic to the land’s ancient clans and overthrow oppressive King Saran. In Orisha the maji — those that have magic powers — have been treated as second class citizens for years following the massacre; a kingdom wide genocide which wiped out magic, carried out by the king’s army. Those that still do have magic hide their powers, for fear of a return from King Saran’s troops. After a chance encounter leads Zélie to discover that magic is not dead — only dormant — and that she is the only one

who can bring it back, she embarks on a journey to reawaken the ancient magic of the clans (“Children of Blood and Bone”).

Regarding the divide between those with magic and those without, as well as the choice to include a racially diverse setting and cast of characters, Tomi Adeyemi recently stated: “Every obstacle in this book is based off something in the real world, because that’s the other thing about fantasy. This is something that Black people are dealing with today, or as recently as 30 years ago. It’s this big fantasy, but it’s meant to be this glaring mirror” (“Children of Blood and Bone”). Adeyemi’s “glaring mirror” highlights the inconsistencies and disparities within the world of young adult fantasy novels and seeks to destroy the “white default” by creating a narrative that speaks to the issues of black people today.

The setting of *Children of Blood and Bone* was also carefully selected as a way to point out the importance of culture for black people, being that it is:

West African inspired, based in the country “Nigeria” and restricted to the south western part of the country – Lagos and Orisha. The story taps into the religion aspect of traditions and folklore from the West African region. It is an impactful allegory of relevant issues such as colorism, racism and Yoruba cultural and religion redundancy (Ossai 1).

Children of Blood and Bone, as well as other books seeking to racially diversify the young adult fantasy genre by incorporating Yoruba culture and religion, have “served as a representation, identity, platform and intimate description of what the culture and religion is about, thereby, bringing its people and the diaspora closer to the truth and enveloped in the beauty of the power they both hold” (Ossai 3). Racial representation plays a pivotal role in Adeyemi’s piece,

specifically the plot, settings, and especially the characters. Adeyemi paid tribute to the Yoruba culture and religion while also rejecting the tropes of many young adult fantasy novels that readers might anticipate.

Children of Blood and Bone also focuses on including the various traditional forms of Yoruba religious beliefs, particularly the “Orisha” traditional form of worship. This decision was meant to unite fantasy with reality to provide readers with both an engaging story, as well as historical/cultural accuracy: “they used their gifts to care for the people of Orisha and were revered throughout the nation. But not everyone was gifted by the gods,” “‘Iwọ ni ìgbó kànlé mi òrìshà, iwọ ni gbójú lé...’” (Adeyemi 220). Both quotes highlight the importance of worship in Yoruba cultural tradition, as well as its place among Zélie and her comrades as they attempt to restore magic to their land.

Adeyemi is committed to the inclusion of black heroines and black “magic” within her novel, and she herself states that she is:

really militant about representation because I know the devastating effects [the lack of] it had on me. In my earliest stories, I had no problem putting myself in those adventures, but there was a 10-year period where I was still writing the adventures and fantasies that I wanted to have, but I was writing them as a white person or as a biracial person. I didn’t show my stories to anyone until I was 21 because I had internalized that black people couldn’t be in stories and have adventures, so I literally couldn’t put myself in my own imagination. I think we’re making great strides, but we can’t get complacent (Marcotte).

Adeyemi’s work is a “powerful fusion of mysticism, mythology, and magical realism with Afrocentricity has shaped an emerging genre of Afrofuturism for young adult readers” (Newark

4). Her work allows young adults to engage with political, racial, cultural, and social themes in a fantastical setting. Additionally, it allows many non-white children to finally see themselves reflected in literature, which Adeyemi states is her motivation for writing this piece.

Children of Blood and Bone is a modern work of speculative fiction that does not shy away from the aforementioned themes of racism and oppression. Adeyemi's novel has also been "linked to current political movements, such as Black Lives Matter, and she has been public about part of the inspiration for [her] works being institutionalized racism and instances of police brutality in the US in the last decade" (Newkirk). Adeyemi world-builds in such a way that the racial and class distinctions between magi and diviner serve as allegorical representations for people of color. By "arguing in favor of the maji's humanity, the novel thus demonstrates the inhumanity and cruelty of oppression and marginalization resulting from othering. The novel's political power therefore builds on the realization that the maji are indeed human" (Walter 11). This novel, as opposed to others within the same genre, acknowledges and engages with racial tensions and discrepancies, as well as the oppression and suffocation of non-white people within literature, but also within the world.

In *Children of Blood and Bone*, Adeyemi has created a world in which Africans are seen as the protagonists, as the magic-wielding heroes, and as the love interests. This intentional representation allows for African cultures to be engaged with and revered and respected, instead of being overlooked and cast off. Her narrative pays homage to Yoruba culture and religion from the point of view of Africans, instead of the overused tropes and storylines featured in mostly white young adult fantasy novels. Adeyemi's novel has also inspired not only "dramatic change in how Africans, especially the Yoruba people, want to identify with the cultural and religious

beliefs,” but also more “appreciation of the contents and beliefs of the South Western culture and religion” (Ossai 6). Tomi Adeyemi’s *Children of Blood and Bone* serves as a potential cure for the systemic disease of racism that has run rampant through the young adult fantasy genre. She proves herself to be a vital voice for religion and culture in Africa, as well as an educator for uninformed audiences that need to be exposed to the authentic reality of African cultures.

Adeyemi has crafted a novel in which young people of color are finally able to see themselves as, instead of the sidekick or the token, the hero.

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