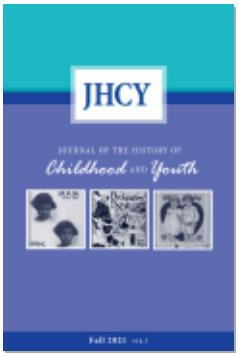
We Have Always Dreamed of (Afro)Futures: *The Brownies' Book* and the Black Fantastic Storytelling Tradition



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WE HAVE ALWAYS DREAMED OF (AFRO)FUTURES: *THE BROWNIES' BOOK* AND THE BLACK FANTASTIC STORYTELLING TRADITION

How long 'til Black Future Month? The title of Hugo Award-winning MacArthur genius N. K. Jemisin's anthology of speculative stories echoes a centuries-old question in the hearts and minds of many one hundred years after *The Brownies' Book*.[1] Five centuries after Virginia governor George Yeardley and cape merchant Abraham Piersey purchased "20. and odd Negroes" from *The White Lion,* one might question whether there are *any* stories that matter right now other than lamentations for the thwarted potential of lost human lives.[2] As we commemorate the centenary of *The Brownies' Book*, anti-Blackness abounds much as it has for the long centuries since the inception of the transatlantic slave trade and the imbuing of African heritage with permanent underclass status. The United Nations has declared 2015 to 2024 the International Decade for People of African Descent, but slave markets still operate from Mauritania to Libya, the Mediterranean remains both perilous crossing and elusive welcome, the elders of the Windrush generation in the United Kingdom are not yet saved, broadcasters around the world have been unapologetic about blackface in their culture and media, and the United States continues its extrajudicial police murders of its own citizens. At times, such persistent and totalizing oppression seems inescapable.

How long 'til Black Future Month, indeed.

Black childhood has always been expected to flower under these untenable conditions. In contrast to the assumed innocence of white childhoods, there is often no way to fully insulate Black children and teens from the horrors of perilous times. This was a particular concern of W. E. B. Du Bois, who believed that childhood "had the power to transfigure, reshape, and perhaps transcend the 'color line' and lift the 'veil' of racial disillusionment and inequality."[3] In the wake of the 1918 pandemic and the Red Summer of 1919, W. E. B. Du Bois

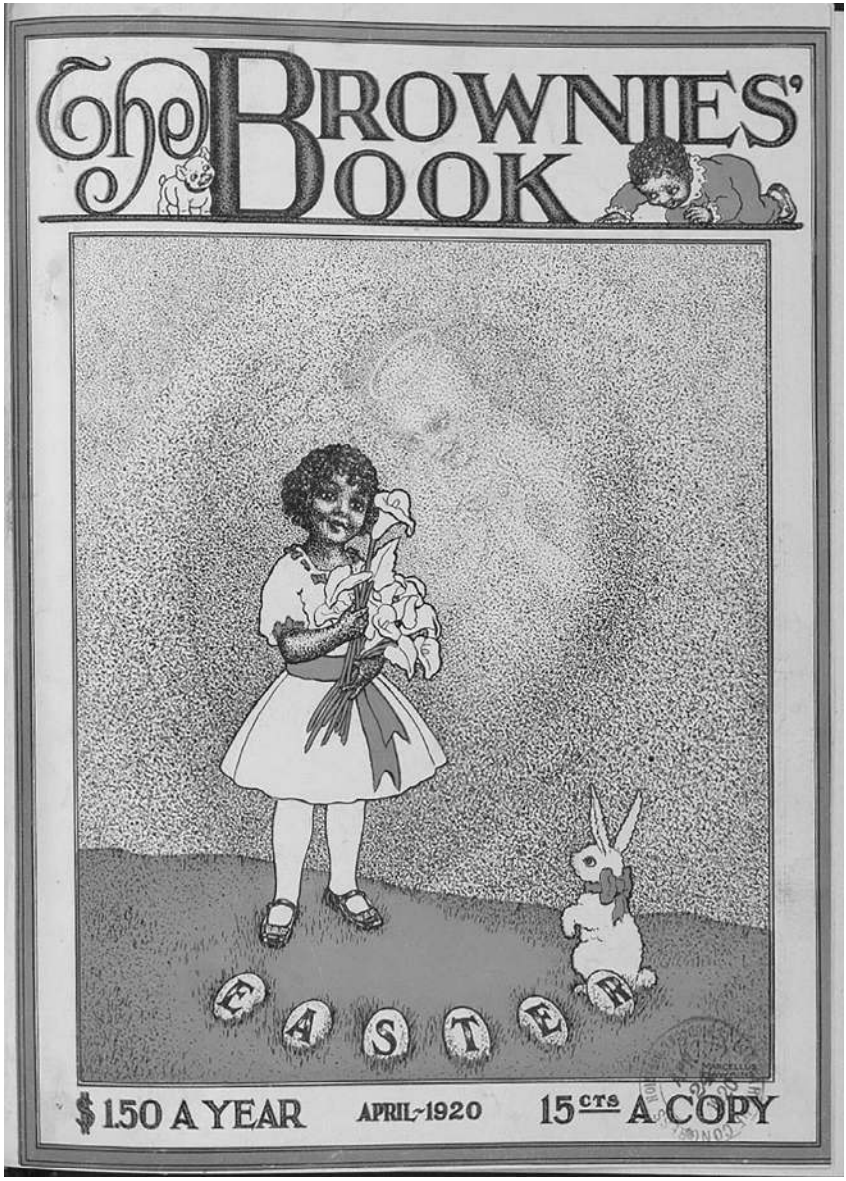

Figure 1. Cover of *The Brownies' Book* (April 1920), Rare Book and Special Collections Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

expressed dismay about the consequences of racial terror for the children of his time:

> But in the problem of our children we black folk are sorely puzzled. For example, a little girl writes us—we remember her as red-bronze and black-curled, with dancing eyes—"I want to learn more about my race, so I want to begin early . . . *I hate the white man just as much as he hates me and probably more!*" Think of this from twelve years! And yet, can you blame the child? To the consternation of the Editors of THE CRISIS we have had to record some horror in nearly every Children's Number—in 1915, it was Leo Frank; in 1916, the lynching at Gainesville, Fla.; in 1917 and 1918, the riot and court martial at Houston, Tex., etc.
>
> This was inevitable in our role as newspaper—but what effect must it have on our children?[4]

The solution that Du Bois proposed in the October 1919 edition of *The Crisis* was to create *The Brownies' Book,* a children's magazine "for the true brownies," which Madhumita Lahiri proposes as a move that "recast the chromatic condition of racially subordinated children in magical terms . . . familiar from the dominant culture of Anglo-American childhood."[5] Noting that this new use for "brownies" created a new category—"the children of the sun"—Lahiri argues for this moment as "a decisive restructuring of the propaganda of US childhood." I would like to further position it as an agentive act of restorying.[6] In previous work, I have characterized restorying as indicative of the complex ways that contemporary young people are critically re-narrating their lived experiences, synthesizing and recontextualizing a multiplicity of stories to form new narratives. In other words, as readers imagine themselves into stories, they *reimagine the very stories themselves*, reimagining time, place, identity, perspective, mode, and metanarratives through retold stories.

Stories matter. But before stories can be restoried, retold, and counterstoried, the story must be told in the first place. Fortunately, the storytelling traditions of the historic African diaspora have not been broken by the profound adversity of the past half millennium. In fact, our storying has thrived. In *The Grey Album,* poet Kevin Young whimsically theorizes the narrative traditions of the Black Atlantic world as "animal tales; the spirituals as codes for runaway slaves; runaway slaves themselves; maroons; the blues code of life, tragic and comic, 'laughing to keep from crying'; nothing but a good man feeling bad; nothing but a bad woman feeling good.'"[7] He further observes, "The lost shadow book is the book that Blackness writes every day. The book that memory, time, accident, and the more active forms of oppression prevent from being read."[8] Yet amid the persistence of oppression, there is ripe potential for new narratives:

"The spaces between performance and pain," he writes, "between blackness as a problem and a possibility, illuminate the storying tradition. . . . Storying describes the way in which Black writers have forged their own traditions, their own identities, even their own freedom."[9] In the midst of constant dehumanization, Black storying has long served as catharsis, vehicle for cultural transmission, community builder, and, maybe most importantly, a source of hope.

There is perhaps no form of Black storying that has more cachet in pop culture right now than Afrofuturism. While the term first appeared in Mark Dery's 1993 cyber-culture essay "Black to the Future," Alondra Nelson was among those who initiated conversations about the intersections among speculative fiction, futurism, and African diaspora cultures in the 1990s.[10] Key critical works on Black American and African diaspora speculative fiction in the twenty-first century were led by Isiah Lavender III's *Race in American Science Fiction* and Ytasha Womack's *Afrofuturism.* Other works in this burgeoning field include Sheena Howard and Ronald Jackson's Eisner Award-winning *Black Comics*, andré carrington's *Speculative Blackness,* Michelle Commander's *Afro-Atlantic Flight,* Kinitra Brooks's *Searching for Sycorax,* Diana Adesola Mafe's *Where No Black Woman Has Gone Before,* Sami Schalk's *Bodyminds Reimagined,* and my own monograph, *The Dark Fantastic.*[11] Indeed, the category has expanded so capaciously over the past three decades that both creatives and critics have begun to question its very boundaries. Ask each of us what we mean as we reference Afrofuturism, and you will receive very different answers about how we define the Black creative imaginary as it dreams of the future.[12]

Afrofuturistic dreams can seem elusive because of the persistence of a dark fantastic cycle in the stories that mainstream culture provides for youth and young adults. That is why, alongside critical conversations focused on the history, development, and celebration of Afrofuturism, I believe that it is vital to explore the way that race operates in the popular fantastic traditions of the West, especially within highly commodified speculative transmedia that is produced in the United States and the United Kingdom and marketed to young people all over the world. Proposing that Black characters in such stories are trapped in a cycle—the *dark fantastic*—recent analysis of popular young adult literature and media reveals movement through four stages: spectacle, hesitation, violence, and haunting. Specifically, it can be argued that the Black characters who are interpellated by these imagined storyworlds as *monstrous*, *invisible*, and *always dying* mirror the realities of imperiled Black lives.[13] Only through emancipation—either through Black feminist storytelling or agentive youth restorying—could such characters escape this cycle. Exceptions are notable, and they prove the rule.

Despite adversity, oppression, and all the shadow books lost along the way, Black people have *always* dreamed of Afrofutures. Traditions of Black storying and storytelling extend deep into our past, predating the Middle Passage, yet the Door of No Return irrevocably transformed the tenor of Black narrative. Dionne Brand describes the metaphor of the Door as "that place where our ancestors departed one world for another; the Old World for the New. The place where all names were forgotten and all beginnings recast. In some desolate sense it was the creation place of Blacks in the New World Diaspora at the same time that it signified the end of traceable beginnings."[14] Black stories beyond the Door—that is, a *portal*—became irrevocably entangled with Black embodiment. The Black presence in the United States came to define the project of the new nation-state, as Toni Morrison reminded us more than a quarter century ago in *Playing in the Dark.* Indeed, what Morrison characterizes as the signing, abiding Africanist presence in US letters is in itself a multitude of stories, emerging as Black storytellers found new words to share their lived experiences, imbued with memories and rememories, imagining future worlds.[15] Although it has provided a foundation for popular culture in the United States and beyond, although it remains vibrant within our communities, this Black storying tradition has been suppressed over time, from Hollywood to published children's literature. If, as Young observes, "The lost shadow book is the book that Blackness writes every day," quantum recovery projects that excavate both the lost possibility and elusive promise of the shadow books written by Blackness seem worthwhile. For the ways that everyday Black lives (and space-times) are represented to and for children and teens through the literature, media, and popular culture that they encounter in schooling and society have import for Black tomorrows—and future months.

BLACK TO THE FUTURE: PANDEMICS, PORTALS, AND *THE BROWNIES' BOOK*

What does it mean to dream of (Afro)futures during a(nother) totalizing crisis? Various answers emerged early in the COVID-19 pandemic, but in April 2020, Indian poet and author Arundhati Roy's essay, "The Pandemic Is a Portal," published in the *Financial Times,* went viral across the social Web. Roy's metaphor of a portal felt like a *mot juste* for the first global pestilence in a century:

> Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk

> through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.[16]

"The Pandemic Is a Portal" has been cited more than one hundred times during the nine months (at the time of this writing) since its publication. I believe that many were hopeful about the rupture that the pandemic might represent between past and future worlds. During a time of mass suffering, grappling with the meaning of the virus and hoping for silver linings amid horror are understandable impulses. However, when George Floyd's life was snuffed out on camera by Minneapolis officer Derek Chavin on Memorial Day, the pandemic no longer felt like a portal to a new and better world. Instead, it felt like an inescapable torus.

The acceleration of Black death within moments of broader social crisis cannot be overstated. As I read Roy and others during the first weeks of the quarantine, I began to wonder whether there was any correlation between the Great Influenza of a century ago and the Red Summer of 1919 that brought my maternal grandfather's family to Detroit after the violent murder of my great-grandfather outside Selma, Alabama. Murderous anti-Blackness, more than the economic opportunity offered by Henry Ford's famed automobile factories, led to my family becoming part of the Great Migration north and west, a movement chronicled notably in Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns*.[17] As I searched for correlations, Saidiya Hartman's essay, "The End of White Supremacy," validated my most fearful musings.

> For every year between 1906 and 1920, Black folks in cities experienced a rate of death that equaled the white rate of death at the peak of the pandemic. . . . Time is everything: the rate of Black death had been at peak pandemic levels *for years,* prior to 1918. . . . Slavery had already been an intersection of slow and fast violence, the slow violence of four hundred years of building racial empire, coupled with the sudden spectacle of lynching. By the time of the pandemic, those speeds intersected with uneven healthcare and substandard housing for African Americans and then the holocaust of lynchings of 1918.[18]

The pandemic may indeed be a portal, but the afterlife of slavery is a walker between worlds. Hartman's pandemic meditation and reflection hearken back to W. E. B. Du Bois's 1920 short story, "The Comet," published as the final chapter of *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*.[19] "The Comet" is considered one of the first Black US speculative fiction short stories (along with Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood,* serialized in *The Colored American Magazine* from 1902 to 1903).[20] As noted in "The End of White Supremacy," "The Comet" appeared at the other end of our *previous* pandemic portal: 1918–19. Although more critical

attention is now being paid to the origins of Black speculative narrative, both "The Comet" and *Of One Blood* were republished in Sheree Renée Thomas's landmark 2000 edited volume *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, attesting to the longevity of Black future dreaming.[21] In moments when the present is unbearable, during Hopkins's and Du Bois's times, as well as in ours, future dreaming provides a way to not only escape but also to theorize lived experiences that feel impossible.

The same year that *Darkwater* was published, the landmark children's periodical *The Brownies' Book*, emerged. Edited by W. E. B. DuBois and Jessie Fauset, and published from 1920 to 1921, Violet Harris argues that *The Brownies' Book* was a "radical departure" from previous children's magazines.[22] Its poems, stories, informative articles, and advice columns were written expressly for Black audiences. The imagery showcased a wide range of Black child life. Readers were apprised of the history and achievements of notable figures, as well as political issues, and the Black fantastic was well represented within its pages. Fern Kory notes the significance: "The fact that the first stories offered to children by the editors of [the NAACP's influential magazine] *Crisis* were folktales and fairy stories suggests that these genres were central to their conception of an African American children's literature."[23] Katharine Capshaw considers the speculative elements found within the pages of the periodical: "One distinguishing feature of *The Brownies' Book* material is its investment in fantasy . . . the magazine's larger interest in the fantastic and mystical has been overlooked."[24] Brigitte Fielder notes Du Bois' whimsical use of an anthropomorphic crow in his columns throughout the run of the magazine.[25] And, as noted previously, Madhumita Lahiri finds mythic resonance in the title of the publication itself, viewing the hailing of creatures of Anglo-American folklore as "the children of the sun" as an act of agency during a time of heightened racial violence in the United States and around the world.[26] This rich literary history is sometimes obscured from popular considerations of the development of Afrofuturism, the Black fantastic, and other Black speculative creative traditions, but should be highlighted—the perennial question of imperiled Black childhoods is often taken up by our storytellers in the shadows.

The Brownies' Book is one example of this shadow book tradition: missing from the mainstream shelf but present in Black communities. While the pages of *The Brownies' Book*'s first issue include the reality of segregation and the necessity of protest, there are many evocative glimpses of whimsy and wonder as well. Delightful tall tales, such as Peggy Poe's "Pumpkin Land," thrilling horror like Edna May Harrold's "The Ouija Board," and even problematic fairy tales like A. T. Kilpatrick's "Gyp: A Fairy Story" were selected for the magazine's

debut issue. Just as we have always dreamed of Afrofutures, we have always engaged in counter-storytelling. Women, people of color, and other marginalized populations have *always* had to read ourselves into canons that excluded us. One of the first scholars to conceptualize the process of narrating the self into existence was Noliwe Rooks. In her consideration of Black women authors of slave narratives, she writes:

> Black women writers have begun the task of reshaping and redefining the patriarchy's notions regarding slave women by offering an alternative view of history—a vision which has Black women at its center. While they have not as yet answered all of the stereotypes of Black women that we have come to accept, they have made a definite start. . . . *Black women have begun to write themselves into existence.*[27]

In the worlds beyond the Door, in this pandemic/portal/torus, we have *always* had to read and write ourselves into existence. Our children's and grandchildren's generations have brought our shadow book tradition to bear in new digital and virtual spaces, setting the social Web on fire with everything from Twitter hashtag activism to TikTok takedowns, shaping our cultural discourse. If the portal feels like an inescapable torus, restorying is how we have survived.

And in our defiant survival, we dream of Afrofutures still.

THE SHADOW BOOK INHERITANCE: INHIBITOR OR ENABLER?

Dreaming of (Afro)futures can be challenging when, a century after the first issue of *The Brownies' Book,* many books for "the children of the sun" are still missing from the shelf. The University of Wisconsin's Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) has analyzed trends in children's publishing on an annual basis for more than two decades. They have found that every year, the vast majority of all children's and young adult books published feature white characters, animals, and machines—a statistic that has not moved considerably since the 1960s. The work of the CCBC over the past three decades has raised public awareness beyond librarianship, education, and publishing. And the needle is slowly moving. One must give credit where credit is due. By the end of the 2010s, 10 percent of all children's books featured Black child characters.[28] Given the fact that only 15 percent of children in the United States are Black, this seems to be a promising development. However, the situation is far more complicated than the numbers reveal.

The missing books cast a pernicious shadow. Radical educator, activist, and artist Maya Gonzalez has invited those of us working on diversity and inclusion in children's and young adult literature to think beyond the annual CCBC

statistics. In a blog post with compelling infographics, "The Case of the Missing Books/10 Years of Data," Gonzalez calculated the cumulative effect of the underrepresentation of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) due to the persistence of the diversity gap in children's and young adult literature. She estimates that between 2006 and 2016, publishers would have had to produce 14,422 *more* diverse and multicultural books in order to attain parity with the BIPOC percentage of the United States population.[29] This is a chilling prospect. Every year these gaps remain; not only would more diverse books need to be published in order to not only to achieve parity, rectifying previous disparities in publishing would require overrepresentation due to the cumulative effect of the books missing from the shelf, year after year, decade after decade . . . and century after century. What the literary landscape for children might have looked like in a world that *had* fulfilled Fauset and Du Bois's hope for young people haunts us.

Shadow books featuring Afrofuturism and the Black fantastic are missing from the shelf in favor of books that feature Black trauma. Most African American children's nonfiction in print focuses on historical periods (like slavery, the Civil War, or the civil rights movement) or notable figures (like Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Rosa Parks, and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.).[30] While there have been notable attempts to fill in the gaps, especially since the recent adaptation of Marvel's *Black Panther*, there is still a great need for Black children to see themselves in science fiction, fantasy and fairy tales, mysteries, and comics, as well as in nonfiction beyond slavery and the civil rights movement. Philip Nel has suggested that "genre is the New Jim Crow," noting that as recently as 2015, 41 percent of all Black children's and young adult literature published was nonfiction, compared to 31 percent of all titles.[31] Lauding the influence of the American Library Association's Coretta Scott King Award and Black-focused imprints at major publishing houses on the field, he argues, "their choices reinforce the perception that not all genres are for Black writers or readers . . . while historical and realist books are necessary, they should not dominate the field at the expense of other types of literature."[32] The effect of the overabundance of traumatic narratives was a central concern of Du Bois one hundred years ago, as he notes in his October 1919 column in *The Crisis*: "To educate them in human hatred is more disastrous to them than to the hated; to seek to raise them in ignorance of their racial identity and peculiar situation is inadvisable—impossible."[33] Announcing *The Brownies' Book,* DuBois emphasizes the influential magazine's continued commitment to the literary humanization of Black children: "We can think of no more splendid duty during this critical hour."[34] During a similar critical hour of United States history, children's

publishing abdicated much of this sacred duty by failing to provide imaginative escape for our Black children and teens until Hollywood success showed there was money to be made from Wakanda.

Another shadow cast upon our children's bookshelves upholds the selective tradition through presenting the "American Dream narrative," which the treatment of Black Americans and Native Americans directly contradicts. This is not surprising. As Clare Bradford notes, one of the key functions of mainstream children's literature is to "explain and interpret national histories—histories that involve invasion, conquest, and assimilation."[35] However, interpreting these fraught events can prove difficult in light of the other key functions of children's literature: to transmit values, to convey a sense of nostalgia and wonder, to spark young imaginations, and to provide an expected happily ever after at the end of each story. Fictionalized accounts of past events written for elementary and middle school audiences are often framed within a metanarrative, or master story, of progress, triumph, and optimism, and deviations from this enforced norm elicit negative responses even today. Many authors have provided this uplifting message in creative and inspiring ways. However, the message that some young people may take away from these books is that no matter how traumatic and violent our collective national past might have been, the United States has always been a land of freedom, opportunity, and equality under the law for everyone if they just work hard enough. Thus, African American historical children's literature is often packaged, contextualized, and retold in ways that reinforce the message that principles of liberty and equality *always* prevailed over slavery, Jim Crow, and racism.

The shadows of this selective tradition have implications for how young people imagine their place in the world. A pertinent example comes from a haunting neo-slave narrative in verse that I often use as a teaching example in my classes and keynote talks: Marilyn Nelson's *Fortune's Bones: The Manumission Requiem*.[36] *Fortune's Bones* features the true account of an African American man enslaved by a physician in eighteenth-century Connecticut. When Fortune died in the 1790s, his family was denied burial rights, and for the next century, his skeleton was used to educate generations of physicians in New England. By the early twentieth century, his identity was lost and was only recovered during the civil rights movement. Debates over whether Fortune's skeleton should have remained on display at the Mattatuck Museum or whether he should be buried raged until September 2013, when his bones were finally laid to rest. Although Fortune's story is starkly typical of what we find in the archive, I have been most intrigued by the text as a memorial. Nelson, who is a lyrical and evocative poet, uses the trope of the requiem mass to remember Fortune,

and her verses illumine the meaning of his life and death to those around him, from his wife and children to his enslaver. She ends with the haunting poem, "Not My Bones," which places Thich Nhat Hanh in conversation with the Black spiritual tradition.

> You can own someone's body,
> but the soul runs free.
> It roams the night sky's
> mute geometry.
> You can murder hope, you can pound faith flat,
> but like weeds and wildflowers, they grow right back.
> For you are not your body,
> you are not your body.[37]

These are moving words indeed. However, in the age of Black Lives Matter, travel bans, stop and frisk, zero-tolerance policies, schooling during a global pandemic, and what noted legal scholar Michelle Alexander and others have called "the new Jim Crow" of mass incarceration, a growing number of students of color, poor students, LGBTQ+ students, disabled students, and other marginalized kids might say in response to Nelson's lyrical poem that yes, they *are* indeed their bodies. When children's and teens' lived experiences contradict those of the people they read about in stories, they may feel disconnected from characters like Fortune; today's Black children, even more so. Beyond studying students' reader responses across the grade span, I have taken a comprehensive look at the texts themselves. I wanted to know about how the range of the literature on the shelf represented slavery in the United States. Was *Fortune's Bones* an aberration?

After more than a decade of research, I have found that it is not. Among the texts that I have reviewed over the years, many featured Black characters' triumph over enslavement. No matter what hardships they faced, enslaved characters are always portrayed as heroic or transcendent, bravely overcoming the structural conditions of their existence, despite the circumstances. Enslaved characters' hardships are rarely mentioned or described within the text itself. In children's picture books, historical context meant for adult chaperones of stories tends to be relegated to a preface or afterword. The actual stories that the child would read often lacked the inclusion of those realities. In an artistic effort to portray enslaved Black Americans as fully human, the profound impact of enslavement is diminished on the page, and subsequently, in a youngster's imagination. Thus, the noble intent of an author and illustrator to humanize enslaved Black people for contemporary readers might send messages to young people that are unintentionally contradictory.[38]

Children's literature is a site for the origin of ideas about race and racism in the United States. Ever since I was a child, I have wondered why Black children show up most often in certain genres of the fictions of childhood and not in others. I remember growing weary of many of the Black children's books I read when I was in school. It seemed that if we were not following the North Star to freedom or marching for civil rights, we were dodging bullets in the ghetto or we were the Black best friend in the otherwise all-white landscapes of childhood and teen life. In recent interviews and presentations, my weariness has shown up as a cynical joke about "The Five Black Kids You Meet in Children's Literature." It's quite telling indeed that audiences almost always laugh.[39] Knowingly. They've met those kids in books, too.

WHEN WE'VE BEEN THERE 10,000 YEARS: DREAMING OF FUTURES FOR THE CHILDREN OF THE SUN

One thing is certain: we will always dream of the (Afro)future. "It does not matter that a white critic coined the term Afrofuturism that somehow captured public imagination in a way similar to cyberpunk; it does not matter," Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek have recently declared in response to the genre's growing number of critics.[40] Much has been made about the current Afrofuturistic renaissance, perhaps best signaled by the February 2018 release of Marvel's blockbuster comics film *Black Panther*. Four major speculative young adult novels by young Black women authors were published at major presses the same year, a first for the field: Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone,* Dhonielle Clayton's *The Belles,* Justina Ireland's *Dread Nation,* and L. L. McKinney's *A Blade So Black.* Moving from youth publishing to Hollywood, it must be candidly observed that a few large-scale Afrofuturistic projects since *Black Panther*—Disney's *Black Is King* being one of the most notable—does not make a revolution, nor make up for 500 years' worth of negative imagery. Also troubling is the fact that most big-budget Black speculative fiction remains tied to white canons: the CW's *Black Lightning* and HBO's *Watchmen* and *Lovecraft Country* being further examples that prove this rule.[41] Both shows were lauded but also critiqued for their use of the traumatic Black past for world building, as well as their handling of Vietnamese and Korean characters.

Black fantastic storytelling in the United States has increasingly come under fire for blending disparate African cultures. In July 2019, US superstar Beyoncé Knowles-Carter released her eighth studio album, *The Gift,* as an accompaniment to Disney's photo-realistic reimagining of its 1993 animated film *The Lion King.* Calling it "sonic cinema," *The Gift* featured African artists (WizKid, Shatta Wale, Burna Boy, Mr. Eazi, Tiwa Savage, Tekno, Yemi Alade, Busiswa, and

Salatiel) as well as those from the African diaspora, mainly the United States (Jay-Z, Blue Ivy Carter, Childish Gambino, Pharrell Williams, Kendrick Lamar, Tierra Whack). *The Gift* was greeted with fan praise, but critics were mixed. Most notably, questions were raised about the tendency of Black creatives from the United States to amalgamate away the distinctions among African ethnic groups, nations, and cultures.

Boluwatife Akinro and Joshua Segun-Lean interpreted Beyoncé's album as part and parcel of a long tradition of US exceptionalism that filters Africa through an American lens:

> The ease with which African American intellectuals situate themselves in the center of histories of global black experience is akin to the ease with which western intellectuals have traced philosophical thought in an unbroken line from Socrates to Hegel. Yet, so few black thinkers in America seem able to grapple with the implications of their Americocentrism in relation to Africa. And again, even in critiques of such Americocentrism, the tendency to leave Africa out of the conversation is repeated.[42]

One year later, Beyoncé released a visual album on the Disney+ streaming service, *Black is King*, which invited African artists to contribute song, dance, and film. This time, while some critics on both sides of the Atlantic lauded the spectacle, including Nigeria's Franklin Ugobude (*The Guardian Nigeria*) and the United States' Kinitra Brooks (*Washington Post*) and Janell Hobson (*Ms. Magazine*), others were much more skeptical and even outraged.[43]

Perhaps the most scathing critique of *Black is King* was leveled by South African critic Tshiamo Malatji (*Culture Review*), who framed his argument in light of Black American complicity in US capitalism and imperialism. Noting support for Democratic political figures such as former US Barack Obama as well as Black Hollywood, Malatji both echoed and extended Akinro and Segun-Lean's questioning whether Black Americans had the right to treat Africa as a playground for the imagination:

> Certainly, many people in Black America have ancestral roots to Africa which were severed by the unnatural evil of slavery. This does make their ancestry different to the also true common ancestry that everyone shares with the continent. However, this does not mean they cannot occupy positions of power relative to the continent. A person stripped from the village can indeed become more powerful than the village itself.[44]

Malatji, Akinro, and Segun-Lean's pushbacks against *The Gift* and *Black is King* reflect the unease expressed by some continental Africans, as well as first- and second-generation African immigrants in the West, about the way that the

African continent is imagined by creatives from the diaspora, particularly the United States. Black British critic and historian Jade Bentil has called this phenomenon *Wakandafication*.[45] Wakandafication is the idea that Black American creatives, intellectuals, and others amalgamate disparate African nations, cultures, ethnic groups, and communities, picking and choosing buffet style, privileging monarchies and exotified spectacle, all for the benefit of elevating the *Black American* pre-enslavement past, for the benefit of capitalism and US empire.

These critiques existed prior to *The Gift* and *Black Is King*. Consider the mixed reception toward Marvel's *Black Panther,* helmed by director Ryan Coogler. Teju Cole's essay "On the Blackness of the Panther" is one example of the post-film critique.[46] Consider the distinctions made by some African creatives between Afrofuturism, which is rooted in the experiences of diasporans (including the transatlantic slave trade and continuing oppression in the West), and Africanfuturism, coined in 2013 by Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum and avidly promoted by award-winning Nigerian American author Nnedi Okorafor as being "specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West."[47] In contrast to Marvel's Wakandan kingdom in *Black Panther*, Zamunda in *Coming to America,* and Disney's Africa in *The Lion King,* many Africans and their recent descendants have implored Black Americans to contend with present-day Africa: a living place of diverse peoples, different cultures, and varied concerns, with as many splendors *and* challenges as anywhere else in the world.

The idea of half-remembered, nebulously glorious African pasts is not a recent development in Black American creative and intellectual work. Wakandafication needs to be historicized. In *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History,* Wilson Jeremiah Moses reminds us that Black Americans began dreaming of Africa the moment they (we) were taken from it.[48] This fantastic longing for a lost African homeland is traceable to enslavement. The Africa that Black creatives are searching so desperately for is *not* the African continent that exists now. The longing is for the precolonial, medieval and early modern African kingdoms and villages from which our ancestors were stolen. The imagined glory of the kingdoms of the Nile, and the grandeur of the medieval Ghana, Mali, and Songhai empires is akin to white Western imaginings of ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, and feudal Europe.

Dreaming of Afrofutures is a complicated, fraught, many-storied matter. Black speculation is not limited to "we were kings and queens in Africa." For all our culture's hypervisibility, the true heart of Black American storied

imagination is nearly invisible to the rest of the world. Afrofuturism has recently penetrated the popular consciousness, but Black fantasy ("sword and soul"), Black steampunk ("steamfunk"), Black Comix, and other independent spec fic genres simply do not exist in these conversations. The work of award-winning geniuses—Octavia Butler, N. K. Jemisin, Tananarive Due, and others—is ignored in Wakandafiction discourse. In the rush to characterize the Black American imagination as a tool of capitalism and imperialism, their work is rarely discussed or considered, nor are the lack of adaptations of it. As we continue to search for the substance of Black (fantastic) imagination, I believe that we have much to learn from Black storytellers of all ages, as well as fandom and youth digital culture. At the same time, it is vital for creatives and critics alike to take critiques of the field. How might we exist in solidarity and amity with others of African descent, and those oppressed around the world, through the shared enterprise of dreaming of better futures?

In order to move forward with our storied future dreams, we *must* contend with our shared histories in the contemporary moment. Just as our current moment echoes the perils of portals past, *The Brownies' Book* itself provided tales of *otherwheres* and *elsewhens*. One example among many that can be found within its pages is Alphonso O. Stafford's haunting fairy tale "The Twin Heroes," adapted from African myth. "In that far-off time when the world was young," Stafford begins, perhaps anticipating the need for the eager Black child readers of 1920 to be transported away from their circumstances. The story features mother Isokah, powerful and wise, strong warrior twins Mansur and Luembur, and a dream-girl noted for her beauty, Yuah.

Within the story, there is a fantastic journey spun just for the children of the sun:

> For days and days Mansur travelled. What a picture of natural beauty met his eye everywhere! How verdant was the foliage of the trees, shrubs, and plants of the African plains and highlands; how sparkling the streams that foamed over rocky beds of granite and sandstone, how beautiful was the coloring of the flowers, how gay was the plumage of the birds, how graceful and striking in size were the animals that fled before him as he pushed his way onward to the land of Zambay, the mother of his desired Yuah. When overcome by hunger, Mansur called upon his magic for food.[49]

How appealing the verdant landscape and magical powers of Mansur must have seemed to children reading *The Brownies' Book* in the spring and summer of 1920! Perhaps they were tucked near a half-opened window or next to the cookstove in the segregated neighborhoods of the cities, perhaps sitting in the shade of a porch painted haint blue or tucked beneath a magnolia tree in the

Figure 2. Illustration by Albert Alex Smith, accompanying the story "The Twin Heroes," by Alphonso O. Stafford (April 1920). Rare Book and Special Collections Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

countryside of the racial nadir at the height of the Ku Klux Klan's power. Amid the horrendous reports of lynchings and riots in periodicals of the day such as *The Crisis*, amid the daily slights and indignities of a Jim Crow nation, at the end of the journey, Mansur finds love with his dream girl, Yuah, and a forbidden mirror:

> Coming to the last mirror, larger than the others, Mansur was filled with a strange foreboding. Yuah did not uncover it. "Why not let me look into it, Yuah?" asked Mansur.
>
> "Because, my beloved one, in it you will see reflected the land of Never Return—from it none returns who wanders there."
>
> Now this remark made Mansur very curious, and he longed as never before, to see this mirror that would picture so strange a land or so mysterious a scene.[50]

Of course, the young hero cannot resist temptation, and harm befalls him. But his twin brother rescues him, and the heroes overcome that dreadful mirror, escaping the door/portal/torus and away from that mirror world. This element of fugitive escape is familiar, and it is evident across the genres of Black

speculative fiction; numerous examples abound. There is *Star Trek Deep Space Nine's* Captain Benjamin Sisko traveling *backward* in time during a future war to become the ill-fated Benny Russell, the only Black writer at a 1950s science fiction pulp magazine. There is *Lovecraft Country's* Hippolyta Freeman, who travels *forward* in time from her shoggoth-infested 1950s and evolves to become the heroine Ornythia Blue. And today's children's stories hearken back to Virginia Hamilton's retelling of the flying Africans in *The People Could Fly*: echoes found in "The Twin Heroes."[51]

> Swift as the wind, the twin brothers left the gates of the dread Land of Never Return and travelled upward to the place where the weird old woman worked in the field, under the rays of the glinting sun. . . .

Commemorating *The Brownies' Book* reminds us that today's creatives, especially those telling stories for young people, are tied to traditions long and deep and wide. As Toni Morrison famously noted in *Playing in the Dark,* "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." Therefore, I ask: What are these playgrounds for the imagination? Who has access? Do we all get to play? What does it mean for how stories teach us how to imagine the Black presence across space-time: past, present, and future? If we have always dreamed of Afrofutures, from Du Bois's pandemic moment until the present, what is the future of Black fantastic storytelling? For if we are our ancestors' wildest dreams, whose bright futures are we envisioning today?

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