INTRODUCTION

*The Dark Fantastic: Race and
the Imagination Gap*

"There is no magic."

This statement, perhaps most famously attributed to Harry Potter's uncle Vernon Dursley, is also something that my mother has said to me since I was a child. Magic has long been under siege in my culture, social class, and hometown. The eldest daughter of an African American, working-class, Detroit family, I was born in the late 1970s just as the fires of the Civil Rights era were smoldering to ashes.[1] My mother was doing me a favor by letting me know that magic was inaccessible to *me*. The real world held trouble enough for young Black girls, so there was no need for me to go off on a quest to seek it.[2] I was warned against walking through metaphoric looking glasses, trained to be suspicious of magic rings, and assured that no gallant princes were *ever* coming to my rescue. The existential concerns of our family, neighbors, and city left little room for Neverlands, Middle-Earths, or Fantasias. In order to survive, I had to face reality.

My life has been intentionally constructed to prove my mother's words wrong. Among my earliest memories are snapshots taken from behind the spectacles of my younger self, seeking desperately for any traces of magic in the real world, even when magic did not seem to search for—or take much notice of—me. Secret passageways remained closed off to me, but I continued to dream. Books were my ticket to the realm of the imagination; reading, a welcomed escape. Although I grew up in urban America during the height of the crack epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, my heart, mind, and soul were almost always somewhere else. In the realm of the fantastic, I found meaning, safety, catharsis—and hope. Though it eluded me, I *needed* magic.

1

My emerging critical consciousness as a reader, creative writer, and fangirl were soon on a collision course with my experiences as a teacher, scholar, and critic. The promise from Disney's classic *Cinderella* film, "In dreams you will lose your heartache . . . whatever you wish for, you keep," was obscured by the real conditions of my existence as a young Black woman in early twenty-first century America. It was also obscured in the lives of my family and friends, and in the lives of many children and adults whom I knew. Perhaps this is why some of my students, family members, and friends have been especially ambivalent about speculative fiction. They prefer to read and view stories that are, in their words, "true to life" or "keeping it real." Although there are many exceptions to this conventional wisdom about Black readers' and viewers' genre preferences—the recent *Black Panther* phenomenon for one—I have been told throughout my lifetime that stories like the ones I preferred were "for White people."

When people of color seek passageways into the fantastic, we have often discovered that the doors are barred. Even the very act of dreaming of worlds-that-never-were can be challenging when the known world does not provide many liberating spaces. A poignant example comes from Marlon Riggs's Emmy-award winning 1986 documentary about racial representation in media, *Ethnic Notions*.[3] Toward the end of the film, there is a haunting sequence in which Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech is interposed over Ethel Waters's ethereal performance of "Darkies Never Dream" in the 1943 movie *Cabin in the Sky*. While others have read her performance through the lens of minstrelsy, for me, it was almost as if Ethel's haunting melody was audaciously pointing to the possibility of the endarkened future of King's March on Washington, and beyond it to our time—a time when all people would ostensibly have access to the pleasures of dreaming.

But are the cartographies of dreams truly universal? When we dream inside the storied worlds of printed and digital books, fanfiction, fanart, fan videos, television shows, movies, comics, graphic novels, online fandom communities, and fan "cons," do those worlds offer all kinds of people escape from the world as we know it? Could they offer catharsis for some of our most pressing human problems? Might they help us collectively imagine our world anew?

This conversation is even more critical in today's social media environment, described by media theorist Henry Jenkins as *convergence*

culture, in which traditional and new media forms thrive together. Since today's young people are as likely to be engaged in virtual social worlds as they are in face-to-face communication, the ways that stories are told and retold in convergence culture are more significant than ever for shaping the collective consciousness. As Jenkins notes:

> Transmedia storytelling is the art of world making. To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience.[4]

Today's teens and young adults are increasingly using new forms of communication to read and tell stories. They engage in textual and visual production that is collaborative, shared in what has been characterized as environments of *digital intimacy*.[5] Digitally intimate virtual communities have their own ever-evolving rules, norms, and assumptions about meaning-making processes, authorship, and composing. As people participate with one another across these affinity spaces and networked publics,[6] they engage in participatory cultures in which "everyday citizens have an expanded capacity to communicate and circulate their ideas . . . [and] networked communities can shape our collective agendas."[7] This participatory turn has made it possible for more people to produce individual and collaborative content as part of their everyday lives, using a wide variety of multimodal tools to make meanings that are increasingly decentralized, crowdsourced, and situated in a multiplicity of contexts. A wide variety of communicative channels, modalities, and meanings helps to expand the stories that get told, circulated, and remixed, thereby challenging single stories about individuals and groups, and opening up interpretive space for multiple possible meanings.[8]

While digitally networked culture affords more scope for the imaginations of young people, this is not universally the case. Although a sense of the infinite possibilities inherent in fantasy, science fiction, comics, and other imaginative genres draws children, teens, and adults from all backgrounds to speculative fiction, not all people are equally represented in these genres. This problem of representation has created

discord in the collective imagination. As I describe later in this intro-
duction, the dark fantastic is my attempt to understand that discord as
it plays out in stories for young adults and in audience interactions with
those stories. But before journeying into the dark, I first want to call at-
tention to one of the most pressing problems in all genres of young adult
literature, media, and culture—a long-entrenched lack of diversity—and
its implications for young people who aren't mirrored in those texts.

The Imagination Gap in Youth Literature, Media, and Culture

Conversations about the lack of diversity in children's stories are not new.
New York Times op-eds written by notable Black children's author Walter
Dean Myers and his son, Christopher Myers, in the spring of 2014 were
among the latest developments in decades-long struggles over disparities
in children's publishing and media. Walter Dean Myers's and Christopher
Myers's powerful essays, "Where Are the People of Color in Children's
Books?" and "The Apartheid of Children's Literature," referenced their
work with children as well as their lifelong commitments as writers to
represent diverse kids' lives.[9] Both authors cited statistics collected by the
University of Wisconsin's Cooperative Children's Book Center, which has
analyzed trends in children's publishing on an annual basis for more than
two decades. The center has found that every year, over 85 percent of all
books published for children and young adults feature White charac-
ters—a statistic that has barely moved since the 1960s.[10]

After the Myers father-and-son editorials appeared, a number of the
largest publishers remained silent. In May 2014, a bold new hashtag
began circulating on social media websites—#WeNeedDiverseBooks,
launched by authors Ellen Oh, Malinda Lo, Aisha Saeed, and others in
response to BookCon's choice to feature only White male authors on
their children's literature panel.[11] Other prominent voices within the
children's publishing industry rose to the forefront of social media con-
versations around diversity in media.[12] These more recent efforts are
connected to a protest tradition launched decades ago by leaders in the
multicultural children's literature movement such as Augusta Baker,
Pura Belpré, Nancy Larrick, Jella Lepman, Charlemae Hill Rollins, and
Rudine Sims Bishop, as well as many other authors, librarians, educa-

tors, and community activists who work with some of our world's most vulnerable young people.

The problem of the diversity gap extends far beyond the mere lack of representation of characters of color in children's publishing and media. Many diverse characters that actually *do* show up on the page, on a tablet, on a television or movie screen, or on the computer are often problematic, as recurring controversies about picture books featuring smiling slaves demonstrate.[13] Stereotyping, caricature, and marginalization of people of color, poor and working-class children and families, gender and sexual minorities, immigrants, and other minoritized groups have been persistent problems in children's literature.[14] Additionally, the Cooperative Children's Book Center's annual reports show a troubling trend of books that feature diverse characters not being written by authors from that background, leading to questions about who has the right to tell diverse stories.[15] Even within the sparse numbers of diverse texts that make it into print every year, disparities remain.

As author, creative writing professor, and activist Daniel José Older has pointed out during heated discussions since the Myers editorials, calling for diversity is not enough:

> The question industry professionals need to ask themselves is: "How can I use my position to help create a literary world that is diverse, equitable, and doesn't just represent the same segment of society it always has since its inception? What concrete actions can I take to make actual change and move beyond the tired conversation we've been having for decades?"[16]

As one of those industry professionals—a professor responsible for designing, teaching, and evaluating courses on children's and young adult literature and comics in education, and a former reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews*' children's section—I hope to use this book as an occasion to take up Older's call. Inspired by a 2010 *Horn Book* article by children's and young adult author Zetta Elliott, I have described the diversity crisis in children's and young adult media as an *imagination gap*.[17] Over the past decade, much has been made of the persistence of racial and ethnic achievement gaps in literacy and educational attainment. These conversations have extended from classrooms and communities to the White House, prompting inquiry about other gaps, such as in empathy,

opportunities, resources, and technology.[18] Building on these efforts, I have begun to theorize a corresponding imagination gap in literature and media for young people.[19] This imagination gap is caused in part by the lack of diversity in childhood and teen life depicted in books, television, and films. 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. [20]

I have long suspected, and I am assuredly not alone, that racialized disparities in literacy attainment among kids and teens may be ultimately rooted in a massive failure of the collective imagination.

I wish to be perfectly clear here. I am not referring to any failure in the imaginations of young people. From the time I began teaching in Detroit in the late 1990s to my work with students in Philadelphia today, I have rarely encountered a young person without the capacity to imagine and dream even in the direst of life circumstances. Among children and young adults, storytelling and play are humming right along as always, as kids and teens all over the world are now using new media to inscribe themselves into existence (more on that later). Our young people have certainly not failed.

I am referring to the failures of adults:

- There is an imagination gap when nine out of every ten books published in the juvenile market feature the same kinds of characters that have been spotlighted since the inception of children's publishing in the United States.[21]
- There is an imagination gap when we cannot fathom that a young Black girl could be the symbolic mockingjay who inspires a revolution in one of today's most popular young adult adapted megaseries, *The Hunger Games*.[22]
- There is an imagination gap when one of the most visible Black female characters on teen television is stripped of agency, marginalized within the larger story, and becomes a caricature of her literary counterpart, as in *The Vampire Diaries*.[23]
- There is an imagination gap when a Korean Canadian woman's slam poetry critique of a popular character from an iconic fantasy series was seen by many fans as more of an issue than the author's troubling handling of one of her few characters of color in *Harry Potter*.[24]

- There is an imagination gap when children's and young adult literature critics' and sensitivity readers' perspectives on fantasy novels misrepresenting Native and First Nations people are seen as more problematic than the world-building itself (as in *Thirteenth Child*, *The Continent*).[25]

These are but a few of the many imagination gaps that I have seen as a teacher, fangirl, creative writer, scholar, critic, and researcher. The problem extends far beyond the mere lack of representation of characters of color in children's publishing and media. Often, the characters of color who *do* appear on the page or screen are stereotypes or caricatures. Marginalization has been a persistent problem in literature for children and adolescents throughout history. Therefore, even within the sparse numbers of diverse texts that make it into print every year, disparities remain.

Is it any wonder that some kids and teens of color don't like to read much?

Here is a radical, potentially dangerous thought: Maybe it's not that kids and teens of color and other marginalized and minoritized young people don't like to read. Maybe the real issue is that many adults haven't thought very much about the racialized mirrors, windows, and doors that are in the books we offer them to read, in the television and movies we invite them to view, and in the fan communities we entice them to play in. There has not been much sustained scholarly conversation about how kids and teens of color are affected by their representation in books, movies, comics, and online. Nor have previous studies of popular culture critically considered how those story representations shape not only the lives of young people today but whether they will want to pick up the next book, or the other media associated with it, tomorrow. One way we can begin this important conversation is by exploring the dark fantastic.

Critical Race Counterstorytelling for a Digital Age

The dark fantastic is my term for the role that racial difference plays in our fantastically storied imaginations. The fantastic—and here, I have been influenced by fantasy writers from J. R. R. Tolkien to J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman, fantasy theorists from Tzvetan Todorov to Brian Attebery and Farah Mendlesohn, and author-critics from Toni Morrison to Ursula K. LeGuin and Kevin Young—includes fantasy fiction but goes beyond it 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. I prefer *the fantastic* as a concept and a term to the more common designation of "speculative fiction." Words matter, and the fantastic has multiple resonant connotations. The fantastic captures the wonder of stepping into a world-that-never-was, and immersing yourself in it in a way that speculative fiction does not.

Other scholars, artists, and activists have focused on multicultural fantasy, the postcolonial fantastic, and the Black fantastic.[26] Prior to 2014, much of the important work on this topic was more taxonomic and descriptive than theoretical and conceptual, and was designed to raise awareness of the work of creators of color from Afrofuturist multimedia storytellers to Black comics artists and writers.[27] While some of the literature that I touch upon in *The Dark Fantastic* has been categorized by literary theorists as multicultural fantasy, Afrofuturism, or the Black fantastic, I distinguish the dark fantastic from these constructs.

The Black fantastic has historically been liberating, activist artistic production in the face of erasure and marginalization. Originators of the Black fantastic tradition in North America include W. E. B. Du Bois, Amiri Baraka, Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, Virginia Hamilton, Tananarive Due, Tina McElroy Ansa, Nisi Shawl, Sheree Renee Thomas, and Nalo Hopkinson. Newer authors include noted Hugo Award winners N. K. Jemisin and Nnedi Okorafor, as well as emerging stellar talent for young adult readers, such as Zetta Elliott, Tomi Adeyemi, Dhonielle Clayton, Alaya Dawn Johnson, Tracey Baptiste, Sherri L. Smith, Justina Ireland, and L. L. McKinney. To characterize how these authors, as well as Black speculative transmedia stories such as *Black Panther*, *Luke Cage*, and *Black Lightning*, are transforming the literary and popular culture landscape is beyond the scope of this project. While the aforementioned stories are still being told and transmediated, the texts that I focus on in this book have run their course and are considered to be "closed canons" in online fandom. The narratives of *The Hunger Games*, the BBC's version of *Merlin*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Harry Potter* are complete as of early 2018. All of these stories were featured on screens large and small—and in the case of the first three, on the page—during the first two decades of the 2000s, long before the Afrofuturistic renaissance of the late 2010s.

Afrofuturism is both an aesthetic and an activist movement in the arts. While the term first appeared in Mark Dery's 1993 cyberculture essay "Black to the Future," Alondra Nelson was among those who initiated conversations about the intersections between speculative fiction, futurism, and African Diaspora culture. I view the Black fantastic as part of the larger Afrofuturist project, which responds to and transcends what I describe in this book as "the dark fantastic cycle" in the Western imagination. Recent key critical works on Black American and African Diaspora speculative fiction include Ytasha L. Womack's *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013) and Andre L. Carrington's *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (2016), among others.[28] Taken together, these and other critical works, such as Helen Young's *Race in Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (2015), form an important new canon for the study of race in contemporary science fiction, fantasy, and horror.[29]

The Dark Fantastic, while informed by these and other projects and taking heart in the rise of Afrofuturism, is a different project altogether. *The Dark Fantastic* is not about the Black fantastic or Afrofuturism. Both are burgeoning and important genres that I value, and my own emerging creative work is in conversation with these and other traditions. But the fact remains that the vast majority of speculative narratives read and viewed in the United States are still written by White authors and screenwriters and consumed by mass audiences. Most youth digital media culture surrounding these works is centered in fandoms like those I explore in this book. Thus *The Dark Fantastic* considers the work of mainstream authors, television writers, and other storytelling creatives through the networked communities—such as fandoms—where such work is discussed, and the attendant implications for the larger culture.

As a literacy scholar working in the tradition of reader response theorists such as Louise Rosenblatt and Lawrence R. Sipe, I study transactions between readers, writers, and texts using qualitative research methods such as ethnography, autoethnography, and discourse analysis. While authorial intention is important, my role as a professor in a school of education, where I am preparing teachers for the classroom, means that I must take the experiences of readers into account. Therefore, in the tradition of memoirs by readers of color, such as Karla Holloway's *BookMarks* and Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory*, my theorization of the con-

struct of the dark fantastic is autoethnographic as well as phenomeno-
logical, grounded in my experiences as a child and adult participant in
communities of the fantastic (both as a reader transacting with authors
and as a writer of original fiction and fanwork) and in the virtual social
communities of the digital world. A generation of scholarship in critical
race theory and qualitative research informs my analytic approach in *The
Dark Fantastic*: critical counterstorytelling for a digital age.

In order to bring critical race theory into conversations about young
adult literature, media, fandom, and popular culture, counterstories, or
alternative narratives, must be foregrounded.[30] First theorized by legal
scholars Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Mari Matsuda, Richard Del-
gado, and others in the 1980s, critical race theory emerged from the need
to explain the persistence of racial discrimination and social suffering in
the United States long after the classical Civil Rights movement ended.
Critical race theory uses storytelling and personal narrative as method,
following a long intellectual tradition in African American letters be-
ginning with the slave narratives. Critical race counterstorytelling, ac-
cording to Daniella Cook and Adrienne Dixson, provides the following
affordances for the contemporary study of race in texts, schools, and
society. It

1. provides psychic preservation by not silencing the experiences of
   the oppressed and thus exposing neglected evidence;
2. challenges normative reality through an exchange that overcomes
   ethnocentrism and the dysconscious conviction of viewing the
   world one way;
3. privileges the voices of people of color as the basis for understand-
   ing how race and racism function; and
4. purposefully attempts to disrupt liberal ideology.[31]

In *The Dark Fantastic*, I bring this rich restorying tradition to bear in
my analysis of the fantastic as both genre and social construct, narrat-
ing my experiences as a Black woman interlocutor before moving to the
interplay among the voices of texts, critics, and researchers, and finishing
with the voices of the characters of color themselves. In order to theorize
the role of race in the collective literary imagination, I privilege the fic-
tional, imagined "Africanist Others" Toni Morrison describes in *Playing*

in the Dark in each of the texts and genres I examine. This choice is intentional: shifting focus away from White heroic protagonists and illuminating the imaginary stories of people of color at the margins can reveal much, especially for today's youth. Thus, in my chapter on *The Vampire Diaries* television show, I am more interested in the way that Bonnie Bennett is constructed in and by the text than the positioning of protagonist Elena Gilbert. And as I analyze racial innocence in *The Hunger Games*, it is Katniss's friend Rue, not Katniss herself, whose positionality I seek to privilege. The marginalization of these dark fictional girls within these multimedia texts is analogous to the marginalization of people of color in schooling and society. I examine how race and the imagination bend such texts at the seams, contorting both space and time.[32]

Tracing the dark fantastic cycle for this book required not only critical race counterstorytelling and case study as method, but also an intimate familiarity with highly popular texts consumed by youth and young adults, as well as the contested digital contexts of fandom communities and social media. As Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse note about autoethnographic work produced by fans who are also scholars:

> We hope to shift the concerns from a dichotomy of academic and fannish identity to subject positions that are multiple and permit us to treat the academic and fannish parts as equally important. Our identities are neither separate nor separable. We rarely speak as fan or scholar; we rarely differentiate between an academic and fannish audience, except perhaps in formality of tone. . . . The act of performing fandom parallels the act of performing academia. Both rely on dialogue, community, and intertextuality. . . . We contend that our self-definition as participants and observers does not hinder us from seeing but rather helps us to see a more comprehensive picture of fandom.[33]

Analysis of race in speculative fiction should include counterstories that narrate stories from the perspectives of readers, writers, fans, and audiences who are racialized. It is my hope that this counterstorying approach—moving from an autoethnography of reading and participation toward critical and empirical perspectives in the field, and then concluding with an exploration of the stories being told about race and difference through the vantage point of the Dark Other—might serve as

a launching point for further empirical work in reading and literacy education, as well as illuminate the participatory experiences of people of color as they interact with media of all kinds and engage in the myriad social communities of the digital age.

Tour of *The Dark Fantastic*

In chapter 1, "Toward a Theory of the Dark Fantastic," I begin by defining and describing the construct of the dark fantastic. A dark fantastic reading reveals an eerie cycle that moves inevitably from spectacle to hesitation, from violence to haunting, and can only be subverted through emancipation. Grounding the project in my lived experiences as an insider/outsider of the genre, I use Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, as well as other key texts across disciplines, as a guide for framing the dark fantastic as I have encountered it in operation across texts, authors and creators, genres and modes, and affinity groups.

Thus, chapter 2, "Lamentations of a Mockingjay: *The Hunger Games*' Rue and Racial Innocence in the Dark Fantastic," is my critical examination of race in terms of digital age reader/viewer response and associated fan cultures through the lens of Robin Bernstein's concept of *racial innocence*. I theorize that racial innocence is one of the reasons why it has been difficult to racially integrate the fantastic.

After examining how the dark fantastic is refracted because of the necessity of innocence in fantastic narratives, chapter 3, "A Queen out of Place: Dark Fantastic Dreaming and the Spacetime Politics of Gwen in BBC's *Merlin*," moves to the issue of *location*. Although some fantasy authors and screenwriters have begun to look beyond an exclusively European past to dream and imagine, Angel Coulby being cast as Gwen, the servant girl who would grow up to become Queen Guinevere on *Merlin*, led to consternation on the part of some viewers. I look at fan and viewer reactions to Gwen as a princess out of place, eliciting questions about accuracy and authenticity, and raise questions about the challenges of location for an emancipatory Black fantastic. I conclude by making the case for why Gwen matters in our considerations of the role that race plays in fairy tales, given the enduring presence of fairy stories in the culture and how they ultimately shape the popular imagination.

Chapter 4, "The Curious Case of Bonnie Bennett: *The Vampire Diaries* and the Monstrous Contradiction of the Dark Fantastic," considers how the intersections among race, gender, and desire are commodified within the auspices of the fantastic, thereby illustrating how Black girl characters are uniquely subjected to *violence* even in a horror narrative. Theories of race in horror from Kinitra Brooks and others are essential for understanding what happens as Irish American Bonnie McCullough in the book series is transformed into African American Bonnie Bennett on the television screen. Bonnie's curious case is framed by conversations that I had with my niece about race, fangirling, and the dark fantastic worlds that we choose for ourselves.

Chapter 5, "Hermione Is Black: A Postscript to Harry Potter and the Crisis of Infinite Dark Fantastic Worlds," moves from ideological concepts to concrete action by showcasing the ways that audiences respond to textual erasure and misrepresentation by using social media to create new worlds—and how creatives are in turn starting to think about the implications of race and difference in participatory culture. After reflecting on my own experiences as a prominent participant in Harry Potter fandom in the early 2000s and my subsequent ostracism from the community, I speculate on the implications of expanding canons and characters in science fiction, fantasy, horror, comics, and graphica across media forms, and point toward a new way that today's young people and new authors are ensuring that we have *all* kinds of characters in *all* kinds of stories.

The Dark Fantastic is intended to be the opening of a conversation, not the culmination of it. It is my hope that this book helps people across fields consider how to address the diversity crisis in young adult literature, media, and fan cultures much more critically by thinking through some of the reasons why, until recently, the fantastic has not been a site of liberation and transcendence for many people.

Examining examples of today's dark fantastic may help us understand how profound our societal crisis of imagination has become. Theorizing the dark fantastic may provide some answers for why magical stories seem to be written for some people and not for others. Working toward a fantastic that is restorative, transformative, and emancipatory has the power to remake our world.