BY S. R. TOLIVER

EMANCIPATING THE FANTASTIC:

Dismantling Antiblackness in Speculative Fiction

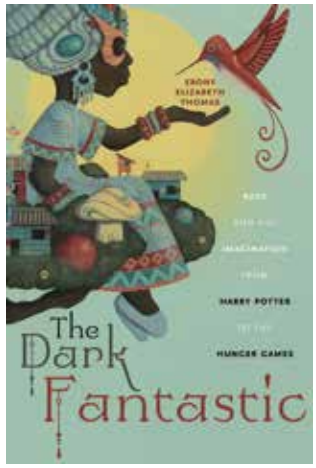
INTRODUCTION

Growing up, the science behind the X-men's genetic mutations and the magic behind heroes' powers fascinated me. However, when I was six-years-old, I realized how limited speculative worlds are to Black girls. I was invited to a superhero-themed costume party where I dressed up as Wonder Woman. At the party, the kids teased me, laughing because I did not choose a Black hero. I cried that day. At the time, I did not understand why speculative worlds filled with unbounded magic and possibility could not imagine an unbounded, magical me. I've spent my doctoral career trying to figure that out.

In this article, I explore the topic through interviews with two respected authors and colleagues—Ebony Thomas, author of the recent book *The Dark Fantastic: Race and Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games,* and Zetta Elliott, author of *Dragons in a Bag* and *Ship of Souls.*

In 2016, **Troy Wiggins**, a speculative fiction writer and editor of FIYAH magazine wrote the following: "Speculative fiction is a space dedicated to investigating the world with the boundless power of human imaginations . . . which is why it is so disappointing that a space defined by creating new and different realities is so bound by banal, real-world structural antiblackness and inequality" (par. 4) His sentiments echo Black authors, readers, and scholars of speculative fiction, as antiblackness has been a constant presence in speculative readership, publishing, and fandom (Ireland, 2016).

Although Wiggins spoke to the larger speculative fiction world, speculative fiction for adolescents is also bound by antiblackness. **Ebony Elizabeth Thomas** (2019) wrote in her recent book, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games,* that it used to be delusional to say that Black kids could enter the fantastic. She watched the speculative movies



and the mini-series, and she knew she was not supposed to be there. In fact, she was told that the fantastic stories she preferred "were 'for White people'" (p. 2). That is, speculative stories were not for little Black girls.

We have to help our kids develop the capacity to imagine and dream of stronger and more inclusive communities than the ones we have unfortunately made for them."

—Zetta Elliott

Zetta Elliott, author of *Dragons in a Bag* and *Ship of Souls*, mirrors this feeling. In her Horn Book essay, "Decolonizing the Imagination," she writes, "I learned early on that only White children had wonderful adventures in distant lands; only White children were magically transported through time and space; only White children found the buried key that unlocked their own private Eden" (Elliott, 2010, par. 1).

The idea that the imagination is closed off to Black children is nothing new, but it has led to what Thomas calls the imagination gap in youth literature. Thomas argues that "when youth grow up without seeing diverse images . . . they are confined to single stories about the world around them and, ultimately, the development of their imaginations is affected" (p. 6).

Elliott (2010) also discussed the imagination gap, writing that "If we do not create stories that expose the beauty and complexity of our varied realities, we will indeed remain trapped by the 'fictions' created by those outside of our cultures and communities" (par. 12).

But how can the prevalence of an imagination gap in youth publishing and readership signal antiblackness?

SPECULATIVE ANTIBLACKNESS

Michael Dumas (2016) wrote that antiblackness is marked by conflict between Black bodies and social and cultural respect. This shows up through the imagination gap in several ways, and I interviewed both Dr. Elliott and Dr. Thomas to discuss the pervasiveness of antiblackness in speculative youth literature.

Elliott asserts that although some people have intimated that Black speculative fiction is a moment in current history, "Black people had been writing speculative fiction for more than a century [and] it tends to be considered a moment when it starts to cross over and have mainstream appeal."

Further, she says "for those of us who write and read speculative fiction, we just continued to do what we've been doing . . . our work is there and will continue to be there."

When people situate Black speculative fiction as a transient moment, not an artistic legacy, there is a disregard for Black literary history beyond mainstream appeal. Indie published authors as well as authors from small publishing houses who have yet to "cross over" are disregarded. (This results in Samuel Delaney often being regarded as the first Black science fiction author even though Sutton E. Griggs published a speculative text, *Imperium in Imperio*, in 1899 and Martin Delany published *Blake, or The Huts of America* in 1857 [Delaney, 1998].)

Antiblackness is also shown in the inability of publishers to consistently acknowledge Black speculative stories.

Thomas says that large publishing houses "couldn't imagine that we could be something other than servile or comedic or restricted to certain genres, like history and realism."

Additionally, Elliott admits that "publishing speculative fiction is the hardest thing to sell if you're a Black writer. If you're doing a Civil Rights narrative or a slavery narrative, or if you're writing about a Black kid who got shot by a cop, then that's trending, and has been in publishing for a long time."

Since as Elliott and Thomas suggest, Black literature is predominately relegated to the realms of realism and history, there is a complete disregard for the speculative,

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> Let's begin to transform the legacy of collective imagination.
>
> — *Ebony Thomas*

Ebony Thomas shared ideas from her new book, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination in Youth Literature, Media, and Culture,* in a keynote talk at the 2019 Summer Conference of NCTE's ELATE (English Language Arts Teacher Educators) in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

imaginative stories produced by Black writers. As Thomas says, "just like Black bodies are regulated, we are forced to regulate the Black imagination, Black creativity, and Black possibilities."

THE SEGREGATION OF THE BLACK AND THE IMAGINARY

In *The Dark Fantastic*, Thomas writes "my literate imagination was segregated. Books and movies about children and teens who looked like me were read and viewed out of duty in order to learn something about the past. Books and movies that showcased the pleasures of dreaming, imagination, and escape were stories about people who did not look like me" (p. 17).

Thomas's discussions of a segregated imaginary are also shown in Christopher Myers's (2014) essay, "The Apartheid of Children's Literature."

Myers writes that "characters of color are limited to the townships of occasional historical books that concern themselves with the legacies of civil rights and slavery but are never given a pass card to traverse the lands of adventure, curiosity, imagination or personal growth." This aligns with antiblackness, as Dumas (2016) argues that "the scholarship on antiblackness insists that the very imagination of all children was never intended to include the Black" (p. 12).

In our interview, Thomas said that in the early 21st century, "it was courageous and agentive and revolutionary" to write speculative stories featuring Black characters because "our kids were segregated to only exist in certain genres."

"We always center the *teaching* of Black children as if they are inherently flawed," she added, "so when books are evaluated and selected for Black children, text selectors look for history or representations of contemporary society. Black children are *supposed* to know about Civil Rights and slavery."

Black kids do not necessarily need to know about speculative genres, for the speculative was never intended to include the dreams of Black children.

But Elliott says "we can't afford to let our kids fall behind in their capacity to dream because they're the ones who need the strongest ability to dream their way out of the reality we've been placed in. We have to help our kids develop the capacity to imagine and dream of stronger and more inclusive communities than the ones we have unfortunately made for them."

EMANCIPATING THE FANTASTIC

Thomas (2019) writes that emancipating the Black fantastic requires creating new paradigms, mentoring diverse talent, and building culturally sustaining publishing practices and literacy education. Moreover, it requires various academic, literary, and public entities to acknowledge the ways in which they have segregated the imagination and promoted antiblackness in speculative fiction.

And as Elliott elaborated in our interview: "Because we live in a White supremacist society, the dominant group has set the default, and the default setting is almost always White and straight and Protestant and able-bodied. So, we [authors] have to make manual adjustments in our writing in order to counter the default."

For Elliott, this means making sure characters' identities are centralized in the story, ensuring that each character "has an ethnicity, a race, and a cultural history."

For Thomas, it means "building on tradition in all that we do" and restorying those traditions by reshaping the narratives used to represent minoritized populations.

But what would emancipating the imagination look like for English educators?

Thomas says "teachers should read widely [because] we must find ways to help students explore their imaginations."

Of course, with numerous other responsibilities, it may be difficult to find speculative fiction books that feature Black youth and other youth of color. Still, Elliott advocates for teachers to look beyond the larger publishing houses and find books from smaller publishers and self-published writers.

Thomas also believes that "speculative fiction is not extraneous to the curriculum." Instead, it can be

RESOURCES

(Re)Writing Reality: Explore the benefits S. R. Toliver and Keith Miller found in using the sci-fi genre with youths of color in their Jan. 2019 *English Journal* article "(Re)Writing Reality: Using Science Fiction to Analyze the World."
http://bit.ly/EJ_sci-fi

Read Toliver's blog post "Build Your Stack: Ensuring Black Girls Access to Science Fiction" at **http://bit.ly/blog_Toliver**

Read Ebony Thomas's post "On Seeking the Fantastic When the World Tells You Not To" on the Lit Hub blog:
http://bit.ly/Thomas-Lithub

Ebony Thomas introduces an interview with Zetta Elliott on her Dark Fantastic blog:
http://bit.ly/Thomas_Elliott

Zetta Elliott interviews Haitian-American speculative fiction writer Ibi Aanu Zoboi in "Black Girls Hunger for Heroes, Too: A Black Feminist Conversation on Fantasy Fiction for Teens":
http://bit.ly/Elliott_and_Zaboi

"Writing about magic for kids of color is a way of telling them, you have the power to save the world, to reshape the future." Hear Zetta Elliott in this Youtube clip:
http://bit.ly/Elliott-magic

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embedded as a major part of it. And Elliot concurs, saying, "speculative fiction isn't a break from the rest of the curriculum. It can be integrated in a way that it enhances the study of social issues. It lets us look more deeply and engage more deeply with history, and it allows us to have a better and a more nuanced understanding of social justice."

Speculative fiction often uses aliens, technology, dystopia, and monsters to metaphorically discuss some aspect of the modern world. So critically analyzing speculative books with students can be another entry point into social justice conversations in the classroom.

Lastly, Thomas urges our involvement. "Collective progress is how we dismantle white supremacy and racism in fantasy, science fiction, horror, and other speculative subgenres," she says.

Elliott agrees—engaging in a community-wide reading of speculative books, she explains, would provide a way to learn as a collective by engaging in conversations about difference, challenging each other in productive ways, and providing a space to collectively explore justice through the imagination.

Social justice and emancipation begin with the speculative.

DREAMING IN COLOR

Social justice and emancipation begin with the speculative. We have to be able to imagine something different, something better. This is why it is so important for all children to traverse the realms of the fantastic, for if a child cannot dream of something different and imagine something better, then they may not know what actions to take to survive in this broken world.

It is our jobs as teachers, scholars, and activists to assist *all* readers to decolonize the imagination. Our future depends on it.

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