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Black Girl Magic: Intersectional Self-Definition in Young Adult Afrocentric Fantasy

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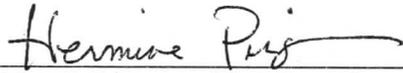
Black Girl Magic: Intersectional Self-Definition in
Young Adult Afrocentric Fantasy Literature

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

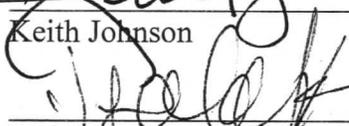
by

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Accepted for Honors



Thesis Director, Hermine Pinson


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INTRODUCTION

When I was eleven years old, I accepted my friend's "double dog dare" to write a novel; three years later, *Secrets of Meynch* was accepted for publication. My story explored the fantasy genre that drew me into my love of literature as a child, when I first read C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. With Narnia's talking animals and Lewis' layers of fantastical allegory, the series opened my eyes to the worlds of imagination that books create, and incited my love for literature as a whole and for specifically fantasy literature.

However, years later, after I had the opportunity to study C.S. Lewis abroad at the University of Oxford, I began to reexamine my focus on the mainstream tradition of epic fantasy based in medieval European history. This shift was provoked by a new awareness of my own identity as a Black woman after I made the choice to embrace my natural hair. (The choice itself was rather anticlimactic; I simply was not able to hunt down a nearby black hair-friendly salon while abroad.) But as my naturally curly texture started to grow out from the roots, and I cut off the heat damage from twelve years of flat ironing, I felt the impetus to also cut off the insecurities that had brought me to this point. Many of those insecurities, evident in retrospect, could be traced not only to the standards of beauty I saw on television and in movies, but also all the way back to the novels I so loved and the representations I saw there.

As I reread stories like *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *A Wrinkle in Time*, classic novels that shaped my love for literature, I realized how much I had internalized the fact that the Eurocentric conventions of fantasy — knights, castles, wizards, fairies — consistently excluded Black characters. These fantasy narratives were

fundamentally conservative, in that even wildly magical alternate worlds were overtly whitewashed and maintained heteropatriarchal gender norms. While in the past I related to the protagonists through characteristics beneath skin color, like intelligence, courage, and hopefulness, the fact remained that there were few, if any, Black characters of note in these spaces. I had willed myself into these narratives without consciously acknowledging the ways in which my identity as a Black woman was not welcome in these worlds. But subconsciously, my imagination had learned its boundaries; when I produced my own novel, none of my protagonists featured my own racial identity. I could not see myself as the hero of my own story.

Yet, coincidentally, as I worked on my thesis this year, not one but two acclaimed blockbuster movies significant to the concerns of my research were released. *Black Panther* is an unapologetically Black movie, set in the fictional nation of Wakanda, that promotes director Ryan Coogler's message of Pan-African possibility. The movie features not only complex Black protagonists, but also complex Black *female* protagonists. As African women in positions of power, Nakia, Okoye, and Shuri all demonstrate different personalities, agendas, loyalties, and flaws. The fantastic nature of Wakanda – a technologically thriving, self-sufficient African nation that was never colonized – created a space where these characters could assert their independence, political power, and scientific genius (Pinto). I see little Black girls dressed up as Nakia, Okoye, and Shuri in the movie theater, and I have so much hope that they will see their own identities celebrated in these heroes. Now that *Black Panther* has made more money in a single year than any other movie in history – \$1.3 billion as of mid-April 2018 (Kurz) – Black Panther's box office smashing success shows me that in a time such as this, truly Afrocentric stories might be beginning to

find a platform in the mainstream imagination. In my thesis, I intend to bring stories like *Black Panther* – fantastic Afrocentric stories – to the forefront.

However, having read *A Wrinkle in Time* years ago and resonating with Meg’s nerdy personality and adolescent frustrations, I believe that it is just as important to discuss director Ava DuVernay’s choice to cast Meg as biracial in the new film adaptation. In a recent article for *The New York Times*, English and Africana Studies professor Salamishah Tillet articulates frustrations to which I wholly related in reading the 1962 novel:

Even as we saw parts of ourselves in Meg’s heroism, we also had to resist our own invisibility in a novel that was unable or unwilling to imagine any people of color as inhabitants of the many planets, including Earth, to which its characters traveled. Such racial myopia is not L’Engle’s alone. . . . So instead of seeing my full self in Meg, I ended up cherry-picking the traits to which I could relate: her bravery and intelligence, or even more rare her feelings of abandonment and anger caused by her father’s absence.

Tillet goes on to praise DuVernay’s 2018 movie adaptation for interceding in “notions of the universal.”¹ She asserts that, “rather than assume children of color will seamlessly identify with Meg as we do with the book or with the young, white heroines of the *Hunger Games* or *Divergent* franchise,” we need to promote stories that depict a “racially inflected female future and present.”

It is this assertion that is at the heart of my thesis. Considering the recent popularity and success of magical, heroic stories for young readers – especially ones that feature girls as the main protagonists – there still remains a dearth of young adult (YA) fantasy and science fiction titles in the mainstream where girls of color are the heroes. Of approximately

¹ A version of this article appeared in print on March 11, 2018 with the headline: “Notions of the Universal, Redefined.” The headline for the article online is “I Saw Myself in ‘A Wrinkle in Time.’ But I Had to Work Hard.”

3,500 children's books received from United States publishers in 2017 by the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, 116 were by Black authors and 319 were about African-American characters (CCBC, "Publishing Statistics"). These numbers, of course, become even slimmer when the search is narrowed to just fantasy and science fiction with Black female protagonists. After being the very Black girl Tillet describes, one who attempted to see myself in fictional worlds that did not see me, I intend to highlight YA novels that not only are Afrocentric, but that use the fantastic to bring about a vision of a racially inflected female world through young Black female protagonists.

DEFINITIONS AND GENRES

The novels I have chosen for my thesis are *Zahrah the Windseeker* by Nnedi Okorafor, *The Chaos* by Nalo Hopkinson, and *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* by N.K. Jemisin. As a Black girl, I did not just want to be represented; I wanted to be understood, in all my confusing, contradictory feelings, and I wanted to gain the tools to articulate and express my feelings. I believe literature, and specifically these YA novels, can give young Black girls those tools. Although *Zahrah the Windseeker* could be considered middle grade, because of its more simplistic writing style and the age of its protagonist (thirteen years old), I would still categorize it, *The Chaos*, and *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* as “young adult,” since that category is broadly aimed at teenagers (thirteen to eighteen years old). I want to particularly think about the impact that these stories have in depicting Black girls to a young Black girl readership, whose insecurities are amplified by puberty hormones and other external factors. Before my literary analysis, I will define the other key terms in my thesis title: “Afrocentric,” “fantasy,” and “intersectional self-definition.”

Two of the three novels easily fall under the classification of Afrofuturism, a genre inclusive of science fiction and fantasy, as well as visual art, music, and technological infusion in Afro-Diasporic cultures.² Okorafor’s *Zahrah the Windseeker* explores a world in which nature has evolved into a form of technology (similar to *Black Panther*, in which the

² Lisa Yaszek, like many other scholars, points to the works of Samuel Delany from the 1960s as the starting point of Afrofuturism, but Delany himself has defined the starting point to be as early as 1857 when Martin Delany’s (no relation) *Blake*, or *The Huts of America* was published (Delany 383).

technological is linked inexorably to nature³). Scholars such as Lisa Yaszek and Yatasha Womack defend Afrofuturist fiction's insistence that "the mundane and the supernatural worlds coexist on a continuum and that much of what white Eurowesterners describe as magic is black scientific practice" (Yaszek 66). With computers that grow from seeds and flowers that grow into light plants, the Ooni kingdom in *Zahrah the Windseeker* may look so fantastic as to be magical, but Yaszek argues that "by telling tales that merge Eurowestern and African ways of knowing the world, Afrofuturists prove SF luminary Arthur C. Clarke's famous claim that 'any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic'" (Yaszek 66). Afrofuturism as a literary genre⁴ challenges the Eurowestern definitions that separate "real" science from magic, and therefore science fiction from fantasy. Hopkinson's *The Chaos* can be also seen as an Afrofuturist novel. It takes place in a post-apocalyptic future and centers on a real place – Toronto, Canada. The novel's increasing emphasis on the surreal goes on to transform Toronto into a fantastic world that looks nothing like the mainstream dystopias of *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*. If a dystopia presents a bleak view of society's future leading to dehumanization and oppression, *The Chaos* is only dystopian inasmuch as the racial and gender oppression of modern Toronto is dystopian.

However, I have chosen not to use the term "Afrofuturist" in my title because of the complications I see in defining *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* as Afrofuturist. Fantasy novels can be Afrofuturist, but I believe that the "future" aspect must be key. *The Hundred*

³ Wakanda sits on vast amounts of the fictional metal vibranium, which enabled its technological advancement. Other elements of nature, such as the heart-shaped herb, also contribute to the superpowers that can be channeled through technology.

⁴ The term "Black speculative fiction" can be seen as both encompassing and as synonymous with Afrofuturist fiction. Yatasha Womack refers to "Black speculative fiction" as also offering a means towards shaking up the hegemony, since science fiction and fantasy are already concerned with subverting paradigm.

Thousand Kingdoms takes place in an entirely alternate universe that draws on many Eurowestern tropes familiar to readers of *The Lord of the Rings*: warring kingdoms ruled by heteropatriarchal monarchies, an elite class, castles, power struggles for the throne, good/light versus evil/dark. These tropes harken back to a romanticized medieval European *past* and so convey a somewhat conservative vision of this African magical world, which contradicts a literal understanding of Afrofuturism as an African future. Even though, as I will later discuss, Jemisin definitely does critique and transcend these conventions, I cannot dismiss their importance because they are so foundational to the plot twist payoffs in her world building.

Instead, I have chosen as a unifying term “Afrocentric,” which Dr. Molefi Asante defines as a paradigm that “studies ideas, concepts, events, personalities, and political and economic processes from a standpoint of black people as *subjects* and not as *objects* [emphasis mine], basing all knowledge on the authentic interrogation of *location*” (Asante). This concern best grounds my thesis: I will be analyzing Zahrah, Scotch, and Yeine as active in and in the center of their own identity formation, as opposed to solely defined by their marginalization from mainstream narratives. Furthermore, Asante’s question as an Afrocentrist – “What would African people do if there was no white people? ... What natural responses would occur in the relationships, attitudes toward the environment, kinship patterns, preferences for colors, type of religion, and historical referent points for African people if there had not been any intervention of colonialism or enslavement?”⁵ – allows for the alternate worlds of these novels, in which there *was* no history of white colonialism

⁵ Asante presents this as the framework for his definition of Afrocentrism; I would posit that black people can be placed at the center of the text even without a reimagined non-colonized world (as seen in the works of Toni Morrison that I cite later, for example). Nevertheless, I believe he is advocating an useful reimagining of African identity.

(except for *The Chaos*). In fact, of the variables he chooses, *Zahrah the Windseeker* and *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*⁶ examine attitudes about the environment, preferences for colors, and the type of religion that emerges in these non-colonized Afrocentric societies.

Even more specifically, I emphasize the usefulness of the genre categorization “Futurist Fiction and Fantasy” that Gregory Rutledge uses in his 2001 essay “Futurist Fiction & Fantasy: The Racial Establishment.” It is particularly the “fantasy” to which I intend to call attention in my thesis – not just in terms of the genre of fantasy, but in the portrayal of the *fantastic*.⁷ Rutledge discusses the relation between the fantastic and Black experiences:

In contrast to realism and futurist fiction, which are supposedly tied to scientific possibility, fantasy may include impossibilities because it contains “irreducible” elements of a supernatural or magical nature (Kratz 3; Stableford 63-64). The link between *Otherness* and the Otherworld phenomenon of both fantasy and futurist fiction is something with which many persons of African descent may identify. Relegated early to the position of the exotic *Other*, Africans and their descendants have been marked as the primitive for centuries (Rutledge 237).

I argue that although not all three novels would fall into the fantasy genre, Okorafor, Hopkinson, and Jemisin all highlight *fantastic* elements in service of their protagonists’ characterizations.⁸ These elements represent manifestations of the characters’ subconscious insecurities that result from the ways in which they have been Othered in their societies; in confronting these manifestations, the characters confront their internal turmoil. Futurist

⁶ To elaborate on the previous footnote, these novels are Afrocentric by Asante’s definition because they take place in entirely African universes. I maintain that the authors’ interaction with and critique of Western ideas does not disqualify the novels from that label.

⁷ I will not be using the term “magic” because, as previously mentioned in my discussion of Afrofuturism, it has been used to “Other” African religious beliefs and practices.

⁸ As opposed to in service of plot; for example, a magical door appearing out of nowhere when a character needs to escape, or a talking creature who gives exactly the right advice.

fiction and fantasy can uniquely address these concerns because the genre articulates the “crossing of thresholds” between worlds and is “at ease with the fluid and ambiguous. Already situated within a marginalized literary genre, writers, readers and critics ... are comfortable with notions of hybridity, transformation and non-linearity” (Carstens and Roberts 80). This understanding, when applied to *Afrocentric* futurist fiction and fantasy, fuels more intersectional depictions of diaspora identity formation; the genre offers an acceptance of Black identity ambiguities that can bridge the divide between the protagonists of *Zahrah the Windseeker*, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, and *The Chaos* and their communities. Black futurist fiction and fantasy “imagines new landscapes and life experiences beyond the limits of the so-called real and expands our ideas of what human nature really is, allowing us to consider all aspects of ourselves” (Womack 32). Making a fantastic story Afrocentric imagines a reality that is not only inclusive of Black people – particularly Black women – as participants, but also as creators of worlds that embrace new variations of existence, as well as new variations of expression (Womack 16).

These fantastic elements are particularly accessible to younger audiences, acting as metaphors for the fearful unknown that is growing up and understanding one’s own identity. To disavow the importance of fantasy is to ignore the way in which many young readers are introduced to the concept of suspending disbelief. Coming of age stories for Black girls uniquely highlight the conflict between self-identity and presentations of identity. When these protagonists resist racial, class, and gender norms that would confirm their relegation as the *Other*, they consequently promote an intersectional understanding of their own identities – that is, an intersectional self-definition. Black feminist theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins and Audre Lorde have articulated that “Black women’s lives are a series of

negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as [Black] women with our objectification as the Other” (Collins 99). Black women must continually block out images and representations that seek to oppress them into certain stereotypes – the Jezebel, the mammy, the “sassy sidekick,” etc. These images must be understood as “intersectional,” or fueled by overlapping and interdependent systems of oppression based on race, class, gender identity, and sexuality. It is impossible to separate these identities, and the experiences that arise as a consequence of those identities. As Audre Lorde said, “there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (Lorde 138). In light of the intersectional oppression against Black women, I argue that Black female characters must assert an intersectional self-definition that can combat that oppression.

By embracing the fullness of their identities, Zahrah, Scotch, and Yeine use intersectionality as the framework to understand how multiple aspects of their identities intersect, influence one another, and compound to create unique experiences. These particular protagonists represent a progression of ages and levels of maturity, as well as identities across the diaspora. Their empowerment comes because of, not despite, their intersectional identities, as realized through fantastic means.

ZAHRAH THE WINDSEEKER, DADALOCKS,
AND THE FLYING AFRICANS

In *Zahrah the Windseeker*, Nnedi Okorafor tells the story of thirteen-year-old Zahrah Tsami, who lives in the technologically advanced African-analogous Ooni kingdom on the planet Ginen. The citizens of the Ooni kingdom live in a society that has advanced through the evolution of nature, reflected in their technology. Computers grow out of so-called CPU seeds, “light bulbs” are literally flower bulbs that grow into light plants, and even hospital equipment grows in or from the hospital’s walls. Technology and ecology seem to have become one. This lush setting contrasts sharply, however, with the society that inhabits it. The Ooni kingdom maintains a restrictive, appearance-focused culture; they live in the natural world, but evidently do not want to be of it. Zahrah, whose wild hair includes actual vegetal vines called dadalocks – clearly evocative of dreadlocks – has been Othered by her society because her appearance is deemed too primitive. Okorafor’s fantastic devices, Zahrah’s dadalocks and the mythology of the Windseeker, are what enable Zahrah to embrace the beginnings of intersectional self-definition.

The censure of the Ooni kingdom recalls the binary opposition of civilization versus savagery, in which civilization is the dominant side of the dichotomy. In the Ooni kingdom, to call something “civilized” is to pay the ultimate compliment:

A large part of the culture in the northern Ooni Kingdom where I live is to look “civilized.” That’s northern slang for stylish. There’s no way the typical northerner would go outside without wearing his or her *most civilized clothes* and looking clean and nice. Not even for a second. We all carry mirrors in our pockets, and we take them out every so often to inspect our reflection and make sure we look good. (Okorafor 9).

This idea of “civilized” mandating that Zahrah must constrain her natural self evokes the rhetoric of European colonists.⁹ In emphasizing the inferiority of those they subjugated, white colonists would call natives and Africans “savage,” primitive and closer to nature, “[creating a] supposed link, on the one hand, between the white ‘races’ and intellectual development ... and on the other hand, the link between the black ‘races’ and whatever is instinctual” (Hall 243). This “savagery” was coded as not only less civilized, but malevolent, especially when linked to Christian beliefs about the demonic gods of non-Christian pagans (a concept that Jemisin will further explore). The tragedy of Zahrah’s situation is evident, as her self-identity is shaped by her desire to belong to a community: “My dada hair was like a big red badge on my forehead that said, ‘I don’t fit in and never will’” (Okorafor 12). But the basis of the Ooni community is their agreement on the Other – that is, the uncivilized; Zahrah can never belong to that community because her existence outside of it defines it.

Moreover, the concept of excluding natural dreadlocks from perceptions of being “stylish” and “looking good” echo the Eurowestern beauty standards particularly aimed at Black Americans. Indeed, as Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps describe in *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, hair has always been a central part of the construction of identity for Black women in America. Hair was an integral part of a complex language system in its ability to communicate markers of religion, social status, and regional loyalty in Western African societies in the 1400s and 1500s (Byrd 2). Hair also carried

⁹ This can seem confusing at first, since Okorafor begins with the premise that the Ooni kingdom is an entirely African kingdom (albeit on another planet) that has not been influenced by European colonization. Unlike *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, in which Jemisin will problematize fictional Black communities towards a commentary on colorism, I believe Okorafor simply wants to make her message as clear as possible, instead of leaving it implicit in allegory, in order to reach young Black American girls who are hearing the same criticisms of their hair and bodies.

spiritual qualities; as the closest point to heaven, it was believed by some that communication from the gods traveled through one's hair to reach the soul (Byrd 4). When Africans were brought to the New World, their heads shaved by their European captors, they were not just losing their freedom, their families, and their home: they were losing a piece of their identity. Indeed, "given the importance of hair to an African ... the shaved head was the first step the Europeans took to erase the slave's culture" (Byrd 10). In captivity, African Americans took their own steps to try to gain some of this individuality back, concocting homemade products to replace the combs, herbal ointments, and palm oil used in Africa for hairdressing. They had to take advantage of what was available to them: bacon grease, for example, cornmeal, or kerosene (Byrd 17). Utilizing methods that were sometimes dangerous and likely not wholly effective, African-Americans nevertheless clung to any opportunity to regain what agency they could in hair care. Okorafor draws on this history and underscores how central Black women's hair is to their identity formation. As young as Zahrah is, before she even knows what it means, this issue is already central to her intersectional self-definition as a young Black woman.

Zahrah's self-definition, before she goes on her quest in the jungle, has so far come about only in relation to the society from which she is excluded – Zahrah defines herself as a loner in an attempt to accept her outsider status. Her isolation causes her to further pull away from her community: "I'd given up on being accepted and just wanted to be left alone. I wanted to blend in so I wouldn't be noticed" (Okorafor 12). Because she wants to fit in more than anything, she cannot see being "born dada" as anything other than a curse. Even though her hair is as natural as the Ooni technology, she has been labeled "too natural." Okorafor then explicitly draws the parallel between Zahrah's hair and the Forbidden Greeny Jungle as

presentations of the natural and untamed, as seen in her friend Dari's comment to Zahrah: "Look at you ... You're as strange and misunderstood as the jungle. It'll welcome you, I'm sure of it" (97). The jungle's positioning as a forbidden space further emphasizes the hypocrisy of a "natural" society that does not truly want to embrace the nature that created it.

Zahrah soon discovers that her *dada* identity allows her to be a "windseeker," a person who has the ability to float off the ground and eventually fly. Her unique manifestation of Black womanhood literally empowers her. She begins to venture into the jungle to practice her new powers, becoming more and more comfortable with her identity and with the jungle as a space. But it is only after Dari gets bitten by a war snake that Zahrah must go deep into the jungle to find the cure, encountering all sorts of strange creatures (huge spiders, talking panthers, speculating frogs, and friendly gorillas). Zahrah steals the elgort egg that will cure Dari and escapes the elgort's nest by finally being able to fly. By the time she returns to her parents' house, she feels as if the Zahrah who lived there is an entirely different being:

I was no longer the Zahrah who was afraid of the world around her, who kept her head down, afraid of confrontation. I could almost see my old self coming out the door, my chin to my chest, ashamed of what I was, all too concerned with my clothes being civilized and making my hair less noticeable (273).

She has conquered the forbidden jungle, and in so doing conquered her fear of her own identity.

Through comparing *Zahrah the Windseeker* to Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, I argue that Zahrah's struggle to find her place in two polarized spaces can be seen as representative of the cultural tension in the Black American identity. The figure of the Windseeker, a hybrid figure able to be simultaneously part of Ooni society and the jungle,

deconstructs the opposition of “civilized” American/Western culture versus “primitive” African traditions. Zahrah does not belong in either of the two exclusively but can cross between them, thereby contesting the binary choice set up, at least verbally, by the reminiscent Eurowestern ideas of Ooni society. Moreover, the figure of the Windseeker does not have one geographical place of belonging; the ability to fly defines a Windseeker as a hybrid body who can cross regional borders and abide in fluid spaces like the sky. Nsibidi, a fellow Windseeker, claims: “Once a Windseeker learns to fly, he or she is plagued by wanderlust. Rarely do we stay where we were born and raised” (Okorafor 305). In this sense, the idea of being a Windseeker evokes an image similar to that of the flying Africans in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. In that novel, the protagonist Milkman realizes he needs to retrace his family history and claim a concrete birthright, and he is told about his ancestors, Jake and Solomon, who are said to be “flying Africans”:

“Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could really fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa. The one who did around here was this same Solomon, or Shalimar—I never knew which was right. . . . He disappeared and left everybody. Wife, everybody, including some twenty-one children. And they say they all saw him go . . . Oh, it’s just foolishness, you know, but according to the story he wasn’t running away. He was flying. He flew. You know, just like a bird. Just stood up in the fields one day, ran up a hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air. Went right back to wherever it was he came from” (Morrison 322-23).

Milkman’s childhood longing for flight represents the fact that unlike his father Macon, who gives up on claiming his heritage (Morrison 9), Milkman longs for a cultural past and a community. But the people in his town reject him as “peculiar” when he is a child (Morrison 10), and Milkman only further alienates himself from them through his selfish behavior towards his family and towards Hagar. By the end of the novel, Milkman finds the town of

Shalimar, which represents his heritage, and discovers how the myth of Solomon's flight unifies the community in Shalimar – the children sing about Solomon's flight and every family claims they are related to Solomon (Morrison 302-303). Milkman realizes the difference between flight as an abandonment of responsibility – as seen in Macon's statement that "you can't fly on off and leave a body" (Morrison 358) – versus flight as a way to embrace this culture: "For now he knew what Shalimar knew: if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (363).¹⁰ This myth, the fantastic, connects Shalimar – an African-American community – to the African continent. Like Milkman's flight and the myth of the flying Africans, the Windseeker mythology represents Zahrah's way of embracing her self-identity and her cultural heritage.

¹⁰ It should be noted that Pilate, Milkman's aunt and the primary black female character in Morrison's novel, has already achieved the cultural acceptance that enables the magical flight Morrison describes; she sits with "one foot pointed east and one pointed west" (32) because she has incorporated both African and American traditions into her spirituality. She has accepted herself and her responsibility to her family/community.

THE CHAOS, BIRACIALISM,
AND BODY ISSUES

For sixteen-year-old Scotch, the protagonist of *The Chaos*, understanding her own identity is much complicated. As a biracial and white-passing girl who identifies as black, she is shocked and confused by the sticky black substance that is darkening her skin, and she begins to see surreal visions of her own inner turmoil. In the tradition of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison, Hopkinson's incorporation of Caribbean folklore points to a more grounded concern about diasporic double-consciousness. Hopkinson depicts a post-apocalyptic world in which the Big Ben is blowing giant soap bubbles and chanting dirty seventeenth-century drinking songs, a volcano suddenly appears in the middle of Lake Ontario and covers the sky with its ashes, and the subconscious takes surreal physical form (Hopkinson 137). Scotch's cultural confusion, fixation on blackness,¹¹ and even her problematic ideas about body image and sexuality take physical form and reflect her struggle to reconcile her self-identity with her presentation of identity.

The daughter of a white Jamaican man and a Black American woman, Scotch is light-skinned and can be mistaken for "anything-but-black," unlike her brother Rich. She uses a "half Jamaican, pretend Creole" accent when she wants to be taken seriously (Hopkinson 17) and hates that "even [her friends] Ben and Glory sounded more comfortable than I did when they spoke like their Caribbean parents" (18).¹² At an open mic night with

¹¹ I will be capitalizing "Black" when referring to the cultural identity, and leaving it lowercase when referring to her skin color.

¹² While Afrofuturist authors such as Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler wrote formally and in loquacious literary styles, Hopkinson embraces the realistic informality of the Creole and Caribbean dialects she incorporates into her works. This work features much less Creole

Rich, her discussion with a man at the bar leads him to disbelieve that Rich is her brother. He defends his confusion: “You don’t look like you’re half-black. I mean, you could be almost anything at all, you know? ... But you don’t have to be black or white. You’re, like, a child of the world!” (59). He is baffled when Scotch takes offense and rejects him. “He genuinely has no clue. They never did. ... Yeah, that would be freaking cool, to have no people, no culture,” she thinks as she rejoins her brother (59-60). Skin tone is not Scotch’s only concern about her body; when her body begins developing before other girls in her class, the girls label her a slut, continually harassing, attacking, and shaming her until she changed schools (13, 18). Her family moves from Guelph, where Scotch and her brother had been among a handful of Black students, to Toronto, where there are a lot more (and “Blacker”) students. While her parents assure her that the harassment was not Scotch’s fault, they push her to act and dress “modestly,” “so you don’t present a target” (29). Each morning, Scotch leaves the house in parent-approved clothes (slacks and a baggy sweater), then changes into the clothes she wants to wear (a tight white t-shirt, low-slung jeans, a form-fitting hoodie) at school (38-39). Through these interactions, Hopkinson presents the nuances of even well-meaning and accidental intersectional oppression: Scotch not only feels the pressure of maintaining a restrictive racial presentation according to external norms, but now she must also maintain a restrictive gender presentation.

Grappling with her own body issues and sexuality, however, does not automatically make Scotch empathetic towards others’ body issues and sexualities. In befriending Punum, a queer South Asian guitarist who uses crutches and a wheelchair, Scotch displays some of the same stereotyping about Punum that she experienced from the man in the bar. Watching

than *Midnight Robber* or *Brown Girl in the Ring*, but Hopkinson’s fascination with the vernacular makes Scotch sound like a genuine sixteen-year-old biracial girl.

the bartender flirt with Punum, Scotch thinks, “I’d never seen anyone come onto someone in a wheelchair before” (69). Yet later, she reacts with some empathy towards Punum’s defensiveness:

“...It’s just, well, not the kind of thing you see every day.”

“You mean a chick doing spoken word, or a crip doing it?”

“Um, both actually. But I never said you were, you know—”

“A crip? No, I said it. But you’d better not.”

“Actually I get that.”

Her look changed. “You do?”

“Yeah it’s like me being black. There’s names we can call ourselves that other people better not.”

“Oh. Okay.” For a second, she didn’t seem to know what to say. What she didn’t say was, “But you’re not black.” Maybe she wasn’t so bad after all (76).

It seems that Scotch partially understands Punum’s allusion to the intersectional frustration of a queer, disabled, person of color, but Scotch’s self-centered focus here undercuts the sincerity of her empathy. Similarly, although Scotch fears the sting of being labeled a “slut” by bullies again, and defends her multiple hookups as “just exploring” (13), she uses the word “slut” freely in discussing other girls, such as Claudia, who is in a polyamorous relationship with Simon and Mark (11). Although she considers Ben and Glory her friends and even notes her own reactions to physical closeness to Punum (81), Scotch still thinks and says homophobic statements like, “Glory, you can’t be gay! I’ll be all alone! ... Don’t you see? I’ll be the only normal one of the three of us!” (146). In all these cases, Scotch often gets defensive rather than examining her fears and insecurities. Hopkinson’s Toronto, like the world today, does not accept disabilities and diverse sexualities without question or prejudice, and Scotch’s attitudes reflect that. Although much of her stereotyping can be seen to come from internalized frustrations about her own body and identity, that does not excuse

the ways in Scotch often voices her prejudices – which is why Hopkinson often has other characters like Punum, Ben, and Glory soundly (and justifiably) criticize her.

Hopkinson also depicts Scotch's contradicting reactions to larger instances of oppression. From a coffee shop window, Scotch and Punum see police surround and savagely beat a man in a wheelchair who was trying to cross the street, and the other diners see the situation but fall back on victim-blaming (109-110). Scotch freezes, and Punum is the one who confronts the police and forces them to bring the man's wheelchair with them (112). Yet later, while helping Chaos survivors at the Convention Center, Scotch worries that Ben, as a gay black teenager, might be targeted by mob violence, since "there were all these tweets online about mobs beating up anyone who acted funny, like they might be one of the monsters roaming around" (133). Scotch's contradictions and subsequent unlikability are just as much a part of the process of her emerging intersectional self-definition. It is helpful to think of Scotch as a young woman whose perception of herself and of the world, like other young women's, will continue to evolve.

Hopkinson underscores her portrayal of Scotch's intersectional self-definition as a biracial teenager by linking her coming of age to the surreal/fantastic elements of the novel. Before the Chaos officially begins, Scotch sees visions of surreal creatures in situations when she feels mocked or threatened by other students (19, 36). When Scotch dumps her boyfriend Tafari, it is clear that she does so partially as a way to lash out against the expectations (such as monogamy) that she feels everyone has of her. But more significantly, she dumps him so that he will not notice her additional, and arguably most significant body issue – her skin is slowly being covered by a sticky black substance that will not come off (66):

Whatever we did, the marks just kept on coming. ... If I concentrated on the marks, I could feel them itch ever so slightly. I mostly didn't feel them unless I was really quiet and thought about it. But at night, when I was sleeping, I could sense the new ones as they were coming in. Gave me nightmares, and when I woke up, sure enough, there'd be a new one (67).

Hopkinson clearly depicts this "skin condition" as supernatural, linked to Scotch's heightened need to be accepted as Black. Scotch avows her Blackness in terms of her self-identity, but because of her light skin (her presentation of racial identity), she worries that her Blackness is less valid. As Scotch struggles with her own blackness, or lack thereof, the symbolism of her skin literally turning blacker seems fairly obvious. She realizes that "if this kept up, pretty soon I'd be nothing but one big, sticky blob. A real, live tar baby" (63). This term invokes a comparison to Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, in its portrayal of a similarly unlikable, sexualized modern Black woman who has lost her connection to "essentials from the past, her Diasporean values" (Hawthorne 103). This comparison to *Tar Baby* is also notable because of its primarily Caribbean setting, the heritage to which Scotch wants to connect; and because "the narrative voice of *Tar Baby* strikes an independent position of observation, viewing Western culture [and contemporary black culture] from the vantage of the outsider" (Hawthorne 101), much like Scotch's own positioning as an outsider from the Black community. When the world goes into the Chaos (after Rich pops a literal giant bubble, symbolically evocative of disillusionment), it soon becomes clear that the entire world now being able to see the crazy, secret desires that everybody, including Scotch, carries inside (147).

Of all the surreal manifestations she encounters – hoodie-wearing sasquatches, escalators that ask questions about quantum physics, and Baba Yaga and her flying house –

Scotch must confront Spot, the gruesome, fully realized manifestation of her secret “tar baby” fantasies to be blacker. An emotionally traumatized Scotch leaves their first encounter with the surreal creature physically transformed, her skin entirely covered by the tar-like substance, even weighing down the natural hair in which she takes pride (193). Scotch wants to be “Blacker,” but not like this:

Every kid who’d ever read a comic knew how this was supposed to go: if you got covered in the black skin, you would be evil and have scary teeth, but you’d have bitchin’ powers, like super strength. And you would be even hotter and sexier than before. You weren’t supposed to end up looking like a five-eight pile of walking rubber doo-doo (195).

Drawing strength from her memory of her parents’ story of the tar baby (her cultural heritage), Scotch finally confronts the creature; however, in order to truly defeat it, Scotch must acknowledge the truth it tells her: “You are your normal self. You carry your taint around with you” (232). Spot represents her own flaws, insecurities, and previous methods of self-identity construction, so she must throw herself and it into the fire to be reborn. Afterwards, she emerges from the volcano actually dark-skinned (233).

In one sense, through this “happy ending” Scotch does get her wish to be physically blacker, and critics should certainly note the problematic way in which this could be read as affirming the necessity of “biological” or visible blackness as a biracial person. But Hopkinson troubles that interpretation through detailing the trauma of the experience that brought Scotch to this point. Scotch does not truly understand what the implications of this physical change will be, and because of this “rebirth,” she essentially will have to learn anew the prejudices through which the world will view her. Hopkinson does not present blackness as inherently good or evil – it is simply an undeniable aspect of Scotch’s identity.

Scotch comes to terms with it in a certain way through these fantastic events, but the end of the novel leaves her story, and her self-definition, open-ended.

Of the novels in this thesis, Hopkinson fills *The Chaos* with the most numerous and diverse people of various shades, colors, abilities and sexualities. Consequently, I suggest that Scotch's unlikability is an assertion of diversity that can appeal to Black teenagers; in her attempts to understand her self-identity and her presentations of identity, she can get it all wrong and still be a fully formed, understandable character.

THE HUNDRED THOUSAND KINGDOMS,
COLORISM, AND REIMAGINING BLACKNESS

In *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, N.K. Jemisin presents two races: the light-skinned Amn and the dark-skinned, “barbarian” Darre. Like Scotch, nineteen-year-old protagonist Yeine is biracial. She was raised by the Darre as a child, but her recently deceased Amn mother was part of the privileged, ruling Arameri family, and so at the outset of the novel she is suddenly summoned to her grandfather’s castle in the clouds, called Sky. To Yeine’s shock and initial dismay, especially since she suspects he had her mother murdered, Dekarta Arameri names her as one of the potential heirs to his absolute power over all the kingdoms. Now an outsider and a figure of suspicion to all potential communities – the Darre see her as too Amn, the Amn see her as too Darre and too “upper-class” Arameri – her situation becomes even more precarious when Yeine realizes that she shares her body with the soul of Enefa, one of the Enefadeh gods magically enslaved by the Arameri. In shaping Yeine’s understanding of her own identity, Jemisin’s meticulous, entirely fantastic worldbuilding transcends conventional, Eurocentric epic fantasy tropes and not only intervenes in presumptions of whiteness, but also explores intersectional oppression based on gender, race/colorism, and class.

Jemisin riffs on the binary presumption of “light versus dark” in fantasy literature through her depiction of the intersectional oppression of colorism, class, and gender norms. The Darre, with whom Yeine more closely associates herself, are considered a lesser race because they did not originally worship Itempas the Bright: “I knew that once my people had been heretics. That was why the Amn called races like mine *darkling*; we had accepted

the Bright only to save ourselves when the Arameri threatened us with annihilation” (Jemisin 113). It is no coincidence that Jemisin uses the word *darkling* for the darker-skinned race, evocative of “darkie” and other derogatory terms used for Black people. However, all of the characters of this novel are described as various shades of brown; Jemisin is not commenting on simply whiteness versus blackness, but in fact on colorism within Black communities. Yeine’s light skin, and her Arameri heritage, allow her the privilege of social and economic mobility, and Yeine focuses on using her privilege for the good of the impoverished Darre community. When Yeine’s first act as an Arameri heir is to lift the trade embargo against the Darre, her treacherous cousin Scimina challenges her “favoritism” and Yeine asserts her actions’ righteousness: “Of course it would be seen as favoritism—and those who saw it as such would be completely right. How could I not help my people with my new power and wealth? What kind of woman would I be if I thought only of myself?” (154) Here Jemisin draws an implicit parallel to the historical tension between light-skinned African-American “house slaves” and dark-skinned “field slaves,” in which being white-passing allowed a person better conditions and more of a chance at freedom. This tension carries into the modern day, where being light-skinned can open the doors to greater social capital and economic success in America’s white capitalism. In “The Persistent Problem of Colorism: Skin Tone, Status, and Inequality,” Margaret Hunter states: “All blacks experience discrimination, but the intensity of that discrimination, the frequency, and the outcomes of that discrimination will differ dramatically by skin tone. Darker-skinned African Americans may earn less money than lighter-skinned African Americans, although both earn less than whites. These two systems of discrimination (race and color) work in concert. The two systems are distinct, but inextricably connected” (Hunter 238).

However, Jemisin does not make this parallel clear-cut in favor of the Darre, since she portrays their intersectional oppression in terms of racialized gender dynamics. Although emphasized much less compared to *Zahrah the Windseeker*, Yeine also wears her natural hair, a fact she reveals in talking to her former Darr friend, Imyan: ““You laughed the first time you saw me ... I’d been trying to grow my hair longer, thinking to look like my mother. You said it looked like curly tree moss.’ Imyan’s eyes narrowed. Her own hair—long and beautifully Darre-straight—had been arranged in an efficient braids-and-knot behind her head” (Jemisin 183). Although the Darre are the darker skinned race, their naturally straight hair is implied to be a source of pride, whereas it is Yeine’s Amn racial heritage that gives her unruly curls. Moreover, the current Darre power structure attempts to undermine Yeine’s strength as a woman. It used to be that “in my land, only weak women allowed men to protect them” (21-22). Scimina declares that the Darre “... were quite the warriors once, and matriarchal. We [the Arameri] forced them to stop conquering their neighbors and treating their men like chattel, but like most of these *darkling* races, they cling to their traditions in secret” (155). One of these traditions is the warrior ritual, which used to be the capture, circumcision, and sexual enslavement of a boy from an enemy tribe (155). After the Arameri subjugation, the Darr men are able to assert a patriarchal hierarchy, in which now girls are sent out to survive in the forest alone for a month, and then brought back to either beat her male sponsor in combat, or submit to public rape (155). Although Jemisin clearly encourages the reader to more negatively view the light-skinned Arameri’s ruthless manipulation of their privilege, she still portrays the difficult aspects of the dark-skinned Darre.

In crafting the mythology of the Three, Jemisin's commentary on light and darkness extends into an exploration of the layers of connotations within the understanding of "light versus dark" as "good versus evil." *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Harry Potter* series, arguably two of the most well-known current examples of mainstream epic fantasy, clearly illustrate the Biblical dualism of light and darkness as symbolic of good and evil. "Good" characters are coded as very pale-skinned (the Elves) and associated with light magic, but more importantly, the "evil," or more morally ambiguous, characters are associated with darkness. Voldemort and Sauron are both referred to as "The Dark Lord," and those who align themselves with their darkness are associated with outright evil (the Death Eaters/the Orcs) or rigid prejudice (the Malfoys). These novels' numerous medieval references and evocations¹³ deepen the negative connotations of "darkness" in fantasy. The medieval era is often synonymous with the "Dark Ages," and this Enlightenment-era label appropriates the preexisting Biblical dualism of light and darkness to create a secular metaphor. The light of "progress, reason, and tolerance" illuminates what was seen as the "Dark Ages" of decline, ignorance, and superstition (Tunturi 20). As such, a light/dark trope in fantasy literature can also be used to underscore a contrast between more socially or technologically "advanced" characters and their "savage" counterparts, such as the brown Calormen people in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The negative connotations of good and evil, of course, remain: social order brings light and peace, whereas the darkness of ignorance creates a space in which violence and brutality are carried out. The conventional happy endings of these fantasy texts

¹³ Tolkien famously derived his world building from Anglo-Saxon and medieval sources, most recognizable in his fictional languages that draw on Old English. Rowling features many subtle medieval elements, from the Order of Merlin, to the Philosopher's Stone legend (born from rumors of twelfth century scribe Nicolas Flamel's alchemy), to fantastic beasts like the basilisk and the phoenix based on medieval bestiaries.

dictate that good conquers evil, order overcomes chaos, and the light conquers the dark. In her book “Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,” Toni Morrison describes the way in which blackness in white literature has “offered platforms for moralizing and fabulation, and for the imaginative entertainment of violence, sublime incredibility, and terror—and terror’s most significant, overweening ingredient: darkness, with all the connotative value it awakened” (Morrison 37). As previously discussed, mainstream fantasy texts like *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* certainly portray darkness as a playground for the sublime evil. In the white imagination, Morrison argues that the “power of blackness” takes on creative possibility as a “fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire” (38). I believe Jemisin’s world building in *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* is significant because of its layered intervention in this problematic portrayal of darkness/blackness.

Seemingly following in the mainstream tradition at first, Jemisin states that the light-skinned Amn, as the more sophisticated and “civilized” race, worship Itempas Skyfather, the Bright. “It is in His name,” claims Viraine, the palace scrivener (a shaman, royal advisor and scholar of godly lore), “that we have imposed the age of the Bright upon the world. Peace, order, enlightenment” (Jemisin 44). (By “imposed,” of course, he means the Arameri enslaved the Enefadeh gods and subjugated the Darre in order to bring about their absolute power.) Naturally then, Itempas’ counterpart deity, Nahadoth, the Nightlord, is reviled as “pure evil,” and those who followed him were “dark” and “savage ... devoted to violent midnight revels, worshipping madness as a sacrament” (25). Jemisin knows that her audience will not find it hard to assume Itempas’ goodness and Nahadoth’s evil because of the long literary tradition that associated light with good and darkness with evil.

Consequently, Jemisin goes about complicating that assumption through a slow unfolding of her world's mythology. Because of Yeine/Enefa's interrupted, broken narrative asides (Enefa argues with Yeine in her attempts to fully take over Yeine's body), the full reveal comes over midway through the novel: Enefa, Itempas and Nahadoth were actually siblings, lovers, and equal co-rulers, "once upon a time" (133). But Enefa, with Nahadoth's encouragement, secretly created the first life (Sieh, also a deity but painfully childlike) and humans after that (133). Driven by a corrupted, possessive love for Nahadoth, Itempas grew jealous of Enefa and of her and Nahadoth's affection for humans, murdered Enefa, and trapped Nahadoth in human form (44).

Not only is Itempas the Bright ultimately the corrupted one, but Jemisin refuses to paint Nahadoth's darkness as inherently evil. Nahadoth has many faces in the narrative: a confidante, a lover, a psychopath. But most significant for Yeine, he is forced to serve the Arameri's whims and Scimina Arameri's sexual pleasure, his full destructive power tempered by the human body that traps him during the day. That human body, whom Yeine distinguishes as Naha, is aware of Nahadoth's possession and enslavement but helpless to stop it, "a slave, a whore, not even allowed part-time control of his own body. The only power he had was what little he could exert over his lovers, his users . . . Every day a plaything of the Arameri. Every night—not sleep but oblivion, as close to death as any mortal can come short of the event itself. No peace, no true rest" (295). Because of this, Yeine treats Nahadoth with cautious courtesy; she chooses her words carefully and does not magically command him to answer her questions even though her Arameri sigil gives her that power (74-75). When he questions her motivations, she realizes that, although she fears him and his power, she knows that commanding him would be wrong – not because he is a

god, but because he is a slave (74). Jemisin, instead of making Nahadoth a Satan-like being, deliberately presents him as the figure of a “dark” man who is enslaved. Of course, I would be remiss if I took the analogy too far; Jemisin is very clear that Nahadoth is a powerful deity with an immense capacity for violence and chaos. And yet Yeine makes comments throughout the novel that show Jemisin’s sympathy for this character: “He was not like Itempas, unable to accept change, bending or breaking everything around him to his will. Nahadoth bent himself to the will of others” (283).

Through her depiction of Nahadoth, Jemisin provokes the darkness in Yeine’s self-definition, creating a human and flawed young woman. Jemisin does not shy away from graphic descriptions of Yeine’s sexual encounters with Nahadoth (212-213, 299-303). In one sense, this too can be seen as interacting with a mainstream convention of fantasy fiction: the “bad boy” hero who seduces the heroine into embracing her “dark side.” But to read it this way, I argue, ignores Jemisin’s nuanced portrayal of Yeine as herself an unabashedly ambitious character, drawn to Nahadoth’s power and bloodlust just as much as she is drawn to his looks or his ability to give sexual pleasure. This is evident in Yeine’s description of how she won the Darr warrior ritual as a young girl; to allay rumors that her Arameri heritage disqualified her from a position of power within the Darr community, her grandmother chooses the strongest Darr man as Yeine’s sponsor and potential rapist (155). Yeine not only beats him in combat, she “put on a good show ... enough to satisfy the requirements of the ritual. Then [she] stabbed him in the head with a stone knife [she] had hidden in [her] sleeve ... *She is no true Darre*, went the whispers. *There is too much death in her*” (157). This is no shrinking virgin frightened by violence. Yeine fully knows that Nahadoth is a dangerous lover. Telling herself the story of Nahadoth’s first human lover as

it is told by the priests, versus as it is told by her grandmother, she notes the difference in the story's moral, depending on the speaker: "The priests' lesson: beware the Nightlord, for his pleasure is a mortal's doom. My grandmother's lesson: beware love, especially with the wrong man" (77). But Yeine also acknowledges that the violent and even fatal edge to his pleasure only heightens the draw she feels toward him:

The Darren language has a word for the attraction one feels to danger: *esui*. It is *esui* that makes warriors charge into hopeless battles and die laughing. *Esui* is also what draws women to lovers who are bad for them ... The Semite word that comes closest is "lust," if one includes the variations "bloodlust" and "lust for life," though these do not adequately capture the layered nature of *esui*. ... It is *esui*, I think, that draws me to Nahadoth (219).

Yeine's first stirrings of true lust comes when, in frustration at his stated inability to help her resist Enefa's control, she punches Nahadoth, drawing blood, and he touches her mouth with his bloody fingers (193). I do not believe it is a coincidence that Jemisin links Yeine's sexual desire and one of the few moments in which she is allowed to truly express her internalized rage – her bloodlust. His presence does not make Yeine more lustful; it gives that preexisting lust an outlet, and in a way it empowers her. Her being allowed to express her rage affirms her right to that rage. Similarly, her sexuality, violent though it may be, is also hers to seize. Both darkness and light are already within her; Nahadoth simply brings out the former.

Yeine must come to terms with both her Amn and Darr racial identities, her light (compassion) and her dark (violence), her humanness and the god inside of her, in order to embrace a truly intersectional self-definition and her destiny as Enefa reborn. She hates her Arameri status – "I am not Arameri! ... You eat your own young, you feed on suffering, like monsters out of some ancient tale! I will never be one of you in anything but blood, and

if I could burn that out of myself I would!” (339) – but she benefits from its privilege and expresses an affinity for Arameri ruthlessness when it suits her (218, 230). She identifies as Darr, but realizes her physical appearance undermines that: “My Amn hair, my Amn eyes. My Amn mother who might have inculcated me with her Arameri ways. I had fought so hard to win my [Darre] people’s respect” (113). She contains two souls, but her mind is human¹⁴: ““You don’t have Enefa’s memories or personality. You don’t think like her. That means you’re strong, Yeine. That comes from *you*, not her”” (140-141). In her agenda to help the Darr *and* free the Enefadeh, she “want[s] so many things, each of them contradictory, all of them together impossible” (299). Yeine’s struggle to assert an intersectional self-definition means that she must continually resist the racial and gender norms around her.

“I’m tired of being what everyone else had made me,” I said. “I want to be myself.”
 “Don’t be a child. ... You are what your creators and experiences have made you, like every other being in this universe. Accept that and be done ... The future, however, is yours to make” (281-282).

Finally Enefa, after fighting to consume Yeine to be reborn as a goddess, relents, giving her essence to Yeine. Yeine becomes the embodiment of the goddess’ power, equal in power to her spiritual siblings/lovers and necessary to balance them. In a beautifully transcendent moment, this becomes a symbolic balancing of all those messy contradictions in her identity that Yeine has been fighting throughout the novel, and a powerful final image of resolution to black girls struggling with similar contradictions:

Within me was the gray light I had so hated before, transformed into all the colors that had been stolen from existence. Through my skin I could see those colors

¹⁴ This itself is a privilege that Naha, the body that houses Nahadoth, does not have.

dancing along my veins and nerves, no less powerful for being hidden. Not my power. But it was my flesh, wasn't it? Who was I?

"Yeine," said Nahadoth in a tone of wonder.

A shudder passed through me, the same feeling of balance I'd had a moment before.

Suddenly I understood. It *was* my flesh, and my power, too. I was what mortal life had made me, what Enefa had made me, but all that was in the past. From henceforth, I could be whomever I wanted.

"Yes," I said, and smiled at him. "That is my name" (361).

CONCLUSION

In these novels, Okorafor, Hopkinson, and Jemisin portray aspects of Black womanhood, though mysterious and fearful at first, as powers to be celebrated in the end. The worlds of these novels are steeped in African or Afro-Caribbean traditions that are themselves shaped by mythology as it was passed down through the diasporic generations. This is why simply placing Black characters in white stories – within Eurowestern conventions – would still constrain the possibilities for self-definition. By affirming the importance of a constructed cultural identity within the self-identity, these authors expand the possibilities and mediums through which Black girl readers can gain self-knowledge and defeat their insecurities.

Zahrah, Scotch, and Yeine all come to realize that their uneasiness in their societies comes from intersectional oppression. As Black girls, they are told they are too black or not black enough; too strong or not strong enough; too feminine, too sexual, etc. But Okorafor, Hopkinson, and Jemisin have created multifaceted characters who assert the right to value their Black identity, even as it is complex, contradictory and messy. To do the opposite – to present a polished Black girl who already has it all together – is a truly dangerous fantasy that tells Black girls they are not enough as they are. Through an Afrocentric lens, young Black female audiences can see Zahrah, Scotch, and Yeine as the protagonists of their own stories, encouraged to construct independent self-definitions instead of simply submitting to externally enforced racial or gender norms. It is the fantastic that provides the means for Black girls who have already begun to feel the pressure of controlling images to step into a space that subverts them.

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