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HSS-490
4/30/2024

Black Voices in Fantasy: Why They Matter

Introduction

Fantasy as a genre is difficult to define. According to “What is Fantasy” by Laetz and Johnston, “One popular idea is that fantasy essentially bears some special relationship to the imagination”, and I agree. There are elements of fantasy that we easily recognize and associate with it such as dragons, magic, or supernatural beings. However, these elements can also be present in other genres such as science-fiction or magical realism, so how do we differentiate between them? I agree most with the Merriam-Webster definition of fantasy “a genre of speculative fiction involving magical elements, typically set in a fictional universe and usually inspired by mythology or folklore”.

Originally fantasy was a eurocentric focused genre, despite being influenced by cultures from around the world. The development of fantasy as a formal genre in the Western world, particularly through the 19th and early 20th centuries, leaned heavily on European traditions, narratives, and settings leading to whiteness being synonymous with fantasy for hundreds of years to come. Most of these stories used mythologies from Norse, Celtic and Arthurian legends.

Early fantasy writers such George MacDonald (*The Princess and the Goblin*, 1872), William Morris (*The Story of the Glittering Plain*, 1891), and Lord Dunsany (*The King of Elfland's Daughter*, 1924), set a precedent for the genre with stories that often revolved around

mythical creatures, enchanted forests, and medieval European settings. In *The Princess and the Goblin*, Princess Irene and her friend Curdie fight to uncover a goblin's plot to kidnap Irene and overthrow the kingdom using mystery and magic. *The Story of the Glittering Plain* follows Hallblithe as he tries to rescue his fiancée from her kidnappers in an imaginative and high fantasy world. In *The King of Elfland's Daughter* Prince Alveric's is trying to woo Lirazel, the daughter of the King of Elfland, and has to deal with the consequences of bringing the otherworldly into the realm of mortals. Through these stories the groundwork for fantasy as a genre was born.

The dominance of eurocentric narratives in fantasy literature was not just a matter of cultural preference but also reflected broader societal attitudes and the lack of diversity in publishing. Authors from non-european backgrounds and their stories were often marginalized or overlooked, reinforcing the genre's homogeneous representation. In more recent times we have authors who still pull from the basic three mythologies in the works we know and love. This includes the 20th century classic craftings of CS Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the "king of fantasy" himself Mr. JRR Tolkien and his infamous *Lord of the Rings* series. Their works set the stage for high fantasy, a subgenre that often features epic quests, medieval settings, and a clear distinction between good and evil, elements that have become synonymous with fantasy literature.

For example, Characters in "The Lord of the Rings," such as Gandalf and the dwarves, draw inspiration from Norse myths, as does the concept of the ring of power, which has parallels to the cursed ring of Andvari from the *Völsunga saga*. Celtic mythology is better seen from C.S. Lewis in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, where the depiction of Aslan and the land's magical qualities

reflect themes common in Celtic tales including, but not limited to transformations in metamorphosis or the idea of a thin veil separating worlds like the wardrobe does (Sammons).

Lastly, the idea of a noble quest, a fellowship of heroes, and the theme of a king destined to return and restore peace are all central to Arthurian legend and resonate within *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and many other fantasy novels throughout time. Lewis even explicitly references Arthurian legend in *That Hideous Strength*, the final book of his Space Trilogy, integrating the classic into a more contemporary setting and drawing inspiration from a tried and true method.

The dominance of eurocentric narratives in fantasy literature was not just a matter of cultural preference but also reflected broader societal attitudes and the lack of diversity in publishing. Authors from non-European backgrounds and their stories were often marginalized or overlooked, reinforcing the genre's homogeneous representation. However, over the last few decades authors like NK Jemisin, Octavia E. Butler and Nnedi Okorafor, have infiltrated the fantasy scene to bring diversity to fiction in a way that hadn't been done before. They were some of the first to use African American protagonists and cultures to share African American stories. Fast Forward a couple decades and their successors are doing the same thing in a new way.

Over the last decade there've been more black fantasy stories with similar thematic elements surrounding ideas of identity and racial oppression, but why? Where is the significance? In this essay I will be using four texts to argue that black authors are using fantasy for its fantastical elements to comment on ancestry and heritage as it relates to ideas of power, knowledge and modern-day oppression.

Ancestry is the history of one's family or descent according to the Oxford dictionary, but it's so much more than that. Ancestry connects an individual to their lineage in religious and cultural ways. Ancestry is key to shaping someone's personal and public identity. In each of the books I'll be analyzing ancestry as a key component to the thematic essence of the plot, and in the characters journey of acceptance and understanding of their history. Heritage on the other hand, is the physical manifestation of these ancestral differences. It's the things you can't control but are immediately identifiable. For a fantastical example, Harry Potter's *ancestry* would be his parents, their history, and all those who came before them. His *heritage* on the other hand would be his fair skin or black hair as both are hereditary and out of the owner's control, yet associate him with a group of people.

In Children of Blood and Bone by Tomi Adeyemi, *The Blood Trial* by N.E. Davenport, *The Gilded Ones* by Namina Forna, and *Legendborn* by Tracy Deonn, the authors use themes of ancestry and heritage not merely as cultural backdrops but as pivotal elements that influence characters' identity and power through ancestry and heritage. This thesis will demonstrate how these novels intertwine these themes with the fantastical elements of their plots to reflect and critique the real-world experiences and struggles of African Americans, thereby conveying deeper messages about identity, reality, and empowerment.

The Text:

Children of Blood and Bone

In the land of Orisha, magic once flourished among the Maji, a revered class of people with the ability to summon various elements and forces. However King Saran, a Kosidan,

(person without magical ability), orders a genocide against the Maji that becomes infamously known as “The Raid”. During this period the most powerful of the Maji, known as Diviners, are slaughtered by the dozens and as a result the Maji’s magic all but disappeared.

When the book begins sixteen-year-old Zélie Adebola, the only Maji in her family, has the chance to bring back magic and strike against the ruthless monarchy for ordering The Raid that killed her mother. After Zélie’s mentor and teacher, Mama Agba, has a vision in which Zélie saves their power she embarks on a dangerous quest to the legendary temple of Chândomblé. Alongside her brother, Tzain, and her lionaire, Nailah, Zélie searches for the three sacred artifacts necessary to summon the gods and restore magic before their connection is severed forever. Along the way they meet Amari, the rogue daughter of King Saran, and incorporate her into their plight to save magic. As a result of recruiting Amari, the group is pursued by Amari’s brother, Inan, aka the Crown Prince, and his guards.

As Inan searches for his sister, he discovers his own set of powers connected to the Maji, and he despises them. Inan's powers incite a profound internal conflict as he, like the rest of the world, had been taught to fear Maji, to hate them. Inan’s newfound magical ability sparks massive internal conflict as it directly interferes with his duty to eradicate every Maji in Orisha. The order he was given by his father.

Inan hated himself but no one hated Maji more than the King himself. Diviners had assassinated his first family shortly after his rein began. Resulting in the book’s conflict consisting not only mass murder but daily oppression as the Maji tried to survive the physical, verbal, and financial abuse plaguing them. Despite this detestation, his powers become essential

in finding his sister and the scroll artifact she stole from their father. The scroll being one of three artifacts giving Maji the opportunity to become Diviners and harness the power within them.

Zélie's journey to bring magic back to the land of Orisha isn't just about restoring magic for the world or avenging her mother's execution. She's reclaiming the strength that was stolen from her people that was meant to keep them weak. When Mama Abgba has her vision she says, "I feel like I can breathe again" (pg.91) after using her magic for the first time in years. She was sitting in the middle of the room sobbing, finally using a piece of her she believed she lost in The Raid.

In Orisha, magic was not merely a set of supernatural abilities but a fundamental aspect of a Maji's identity, deeply intertwined with their culture, spirituality, and way of life. The eradication of magic by the monarchy was, therefore, an attempt to sever the Maji from their roots, effectively erasing their history and identity. Zélie's fight to restore magic is thus a fight to reclaim her people's stolen legacy and to reconnect with the essence of who they are.

Zélie, like the other Maji turned Diviners, is forced to accept the pieces of herself she was pushed to hate and reconnect with her roots. The theme of reconnecting with one's roots and the power of ancestral legacy is not just a subplot, but a driving force of the narrative. The reconnection is a spiritually transformative process requiring Zélie to learn the stories, languages, rituals, and magic of a past that was nearly eradicated. Through her literal and metaphorical journey across the world, she gained a deeper understanding of her ancestry, mission, and wisdom in a way that was impossible before. The best example of this in the text is when Zélie, Amari and Tzain arrive at the temple Chândomblé.

While they are there the last priest of the Diviners, Lekan, activates Zélie's Reaper ability (power over the dead) in its entirety. This gives her a direct link with her goddess, Oya, and her god, The Sky Mother. This connection gives Zélie the ability to speak the god's language, feel her ancestors and finally become the Diviner she was meant to be. Once her abilities begin to awaken Zélie is overcome with a power she can hardly describe. That power is her legacy, and she could finally feel what her ancestor had died for as reflected in lines like "...A new kind of air catches in my throat. I finally understand mama Agba's words. It's like breathing air for the first time" (pg.170).

Understanding her heritage empowers Zélie and strengthens her resolve, her ability, and her control. By connecting with her ancestors and finally learning about who she descends from imbues her with a palpable emotional strength transcending her fears and doubts. Knowledge provides her with both literal and metaphorical power. However, at the end, she loses her ability to use magic once she reestablishes the connection to magic for the rest of the world.

This lack of magical ability is irrelevant though. Zélie has white hair, the mark of a Diviner, and as such will forever be treated as one. She even says so herself on page twenty-seven stating "Part of me considers cutting it all off, but even without my white hair, my Maji heritage would damn our family all the same" (pg.27). This is a physical manifestation of the differences between our so called "inferior" characters vs our "superior" ones.

People in positions of power consistently used their influence to their advantage, more so where Maji were concerned. In Orisha there is even a "Diviner tax" that raises exponentially every month to enslave Diviners and anyone who associates with them. If someone can't pay

taxes, they are sent to the stocks (modern day slavery) to be worked to death. As the taxes increase so does their debt and though it appears to have an ending, it's a constant cycle of abusive use of power by those who shouldn't have it.

Throughout the piece Zélie was targeted constantly due to her appearance. Usually by those in positions of power. Almost every guard Zélie interacts with calls her some form of a slur, sexualizes her in some way, beats her or a combination of the three. There is a scene within the book in which Zélie is groped by a drunk guard as she tries to pass a checkpoint in Lagos. She's mistaken as a prostitute originally due to being a Maji.

Though she quickly announces she's only trading fish at the market, "despite {Zelie's} words, he lunges forward. {She} grunts as he wraps his pudgy hands around {her} neck and presses {her} against a wooden wall" (pg. 51). All the while his partner watches. Diviners are treated as subhuman, and it's triggered by their outside appearance. As much as Zélie wants to fight back she can't without jeopardizing her entire family. The people who are meant to protect and serve: abuse. If there wasn't for the distinct white hair there would be no physical or easily identifiable trait allowing easy manipulation, abuse, and discrimination.

Just as *Children of Blood and Bone* uses Zélie's hair to symbolize her heritage and the societal oppression it triggers, *The Blood Trials* similarly explores themes of identity and persecution, through physically identifiable means. For the main character, Ikenna Amari, it's her skin. In *The Blood Trials*, physical differences and magical abilities become a focal point for discrimination and fear, mirroring how physical traits like Zélie's white hair serve as a marker of identity and oppression in *Children of Blood and Bone*. Ikenna's mixed-race heritage and her

inherited blood gift encapsulate the tension between her personal identity and the societal roles imposed upon her.

The Blood Trials

Ikenna was born an outsider to the place she calls home, The Republic of Mareen. They favor purity and she was of mixed race with the blood of Khanaians and Mareenians running through her veins. As a result, she had an Afrocentric appearance, and was noted as having a wider nose, thicker hair and darker skin. She describes the way she's treated perfectly on page 417 stating "because I am Akulu (Black), and in Mareen, that means I don't have worth" (417). By the time she enters the world, her mother is already dead, killed on orders of the Khanaian's leader, The Blood Emperor, during the war against Mareen. All she had was her grandfather, Verne Amari, the target of her mother's assault.

Verne was a legendary war hero with a reputation befitting a potential warhead. He was intelligent, hard-working and resilient. However, above all he was an outsider as a Khanaian and had to work three times as hard to be seen in the same light as his peers. Through the Mareenian war against the Accacian's Verne was able to showcase his ability and became an invaluable asset to The Republic. Leading the charge against his enemies, it makes sense that the Blood Emperor would choose to attack him. He was attempting to weaken Verne's mental state by killing his only heir: his pregnant daughter. In the end, Verne comes out of the war victorious, saving the Republic in ways no one else could've, becoming Legatus commander, and though he couldn't save his daughter, his granddaughter lived on.

This history of his legacy suffocates Ikenna as the sole heir to the Amari name. It's a burden she feels unfit to carry. The weight only gets heavier once her grandfather dies a couple months before she's to graduate from the military academy. Ikenna's devastated and drowns herself in alcohol, apathy, and impulsive decisions. Even though graduating from the military academy is monumental, Ikenna couldn't care less. With weeks left of the program she lost all motivation to care about anything, let alone the country that hated her family for something out of their control. Then, the night before she's set to graduate, she discovers her grandfather's death may have been an assassination. More than that, it seems likely someone close to him orchestrated it. Armed with this information, Ikenna decides to fulfill her grandfather's final wish for her—the Praetorians trials.

The Trials are an annual series of deadly tests meant to push its participants to their physical and mental limits. A brutal series of harsh challenges meant to kill the weakest and breed the strongest soldiers in The Republic of Mareen. The trials are especially dangerous because Ikenna has a rare gift, given by the gods. She harnesses a magic ingrained in her blood. As a Khanaian it's her birth right to learn to control her blood gift. However, the people within the republic fear the blood power because it's associated with the blood emperor and the war from a decade before. Ikenna knows she'll be killed if anyone discovers her ability and yet is conflicted because it's the only thing she has left connecting her to her grandfather.

As she advances through the Trials it truly is a matter of life and death, and for Ikenna death is around every corner. Almost immediately after arriving at the academy she's injected with a serum meant to kill her. During her first trial she's purposely paired with her malicious childhood bully who leaves her for dead. All the while, Ikenna is personally targeted for

misogynistic and racist reasons. Everyone around her from the teachers to the other students undermine Ikenna, her grandfather, her heritage, and her ability to become one of the elites.

Eventually, the trials come to a close and Ikenna is finally able to find and assemble the pieces of what happened to her grandfather. Verne Amari was murdered because he believed in peace with the Accacians. He was removed to allow space for a new Legatus Commander to lead the nation into a war. Despite everything Verne had given the republic he was an outsider. He saved the country from war, promoted peace, and made history on multiple occasions.

This ostracization is what causes Verne to be so cautious in regard to Ikenna's blood gift. He didn't want Ikenna to be subjected to the external prejudice. However, in the process he taught Ikenna internal trepidation. "A lifetime of hiding my blood-gift kicks in, and I'm horrified by the visual manifestation. I want it to go away. I want to stuff it back inside me where the rest of the world can never see it. If it's glimpsed, I'm dead" (pg. 247). In the process of teaching her about her power and the magic in her blood he also taught Ikenna to fear it and herself. Ikenna avoided everything that made her strong. She knew enough about the magic to handle basic tasks but had no existent the power she truly possessed until it became too great to contain without her acceptance.

Ikenna had been fighting her magic so long that when she truly needed it, she was unable to call it at will. She feels this most in chapter 21. During a mission one of her best friends, Zayne, falls to his death. "The blood-gifted can snatch the mortally wounded back from death. It's something I know of in theory. Something I've read about. Something Grandfather had me study. But it's something I never fucking learn to do. Something we never attempted in our

training before...I hate that we played it safe. (278-279)". This moment is incredibly important to Ikenna, the plot and the point of this paper. Ikenna not having the necessary ability, experience and knowledge of her history caused her to lose one of the only people she had left after her grandfather died.

The blood being used as a power is a very potent metaphor in itself, when talking about the connection between one's heritage and identity. In Ikenna's case it's not just about power, but it's a symbol of her legacy in the lineage that she carries. This magical ability is both her asset, and her biggest weakness as she challenges the oppressive structures around her and tries to forge a connection with a history she feels disconnected to. Her ability to manipulate blood is a direct metaphor and connection to her, embracing her heritage and transforming it into a tool for personal and societal change.

Throughout the narrative, Ikenna grapples with questions of who she is, where she belongs and what it means to have a legacy. The challenges she faces force her to confront her fears and insecurities about her ancestry and what it means for her future. Her journey is not only a quest for truth and vengeance but also a deep dive into her identity and the blood heritage that comes with it.

Ikenna's loyalty to a country that despised her was commendable, but she realized her real strength came from her blood gift. This emotional growth, spurred by her deeper understanding of her ancestry, is a powerful source of strength in itself, enabling her to navigate the complexities of her world with greater resilience and resolve. She was in denial of who she was and as a result, a fraction of who she could be. I believe the last line of the book

encompasses this message perfectly stating “Blood is my gift. And blood is what they’ll get if anyone gets in my goddamn way” (446).

In *The Blood Trials*, Ikenna had to accept that she was an outsider and forever would be. Similarly, In *The Gilded ones* the protagonist, Dekka, is also despised for her foreign or mixed heritage. Her mother was an immigrant and from the moment Dekka was born she was at a disadvantage. “I’ve been in Irfut for my entire life, born and raise, and I’m still treated like a stranger – still stared and pointed out, still excluded” (pg.3). Irfut, like the entirety of Otera, believed in a society where purity and conformity are highly valued. The world is steeped in rigid sets of rules, norms, and expectations for all the things, especially what a women should be. An example of the way the society pushes ideas of innocence can be seen in their annual purity ritual.

The Gilded Ones

The Purity Ritual is a rite of passage for women in Dekka’s society. The ritual consists of a public observation at the age of sixteen where the girls are cut, and their blood examined. If their blood runs red or “true”, they’re deemed pure. All girls are nervous about the process but for Dekka it was magnified. She was already expected to fail. Dekka needed her blood to be red so she could finally be accepted by her village, her family, and make her father proud.

However, Dekka’s blood run’s gold: the color of impurity. A physical and symbolic manifestation of just how different she was. She was instantly deemed demonic, impure, and sent to prison to be continuously tortured and killed. The people’s fear of her only grew as she was discovered to be impossible to kill. After being dismembered, set on fire, drowned, beheaded,

poisoned, hung, stoned, disemboweled and bloodlet (pg.42)...Deka was still alive unblemished in the slightest. It sickened her. Then a mysterious woman appears and offers her a choice: stay and face her fate or leave to fight for the emperor in an army of girls just like her—the Alaki, near-immortals with rare gifts.

Deka chooses the later saying “All these days, I have been praying, submitting, in the hopes of belonging somewhere, and here I have it – the answer, the one I’ve been seeking” (43). The woman, Deka named White hands because of her snow-white gloves, takes her from Irfut to the capitol. There she trains to harness her supernatural abilities and work together with the other Alaki to become elite warriors against Otera’s biggest threat, Deathshrieks.

Deathshrieks are supernatural beasts with razor-sharp claws and screams that can kill. They serve as a physical manifestation of the societal fears and prejudices permeating Otera and are seen as the embodiment of evil. These beings become the common ground for Alaki and humans alike. Having a common enemy provided a purpose and a centralized focus to the people’s hatred. Soon after Deka arrives at the Alaki village she becomes a standout among them due to her unique ability to control the Deathshrieks. This allows for more efficient killing, less Alaki casualties, and of course, the increased slaughtering of these creatures. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Deathshrieks are not only more intelligent than originally believed but connected to the very Alaki sent to kill them.

Deka discovers that the Alaki are not demons, but rather the original inhabitants of Otera, subjugated and rewritten in history by the current ruling powers. Deathshrieks are Alaki who have passed on and taken another form. They descended from the four goddesses of Otera. One

of which is Dekka's mother, which explains why she's stronger than her peers and has extra abilities.

For months Alaki had been killing their own kin unbeknownst to them. The monarchy had manipulated the nation into fearing the strong by concealing information and promoting discrimination. Once Dekka tells them, many Alaki stop the assaults but by then the damage was already done. Hundreds of thousands of the creatures were already gone. Dekka spent so long being scared of this unknown entity that even when she witnessed similarities in between herself and the Deathshrieks, she immediately believed herself to be a monster rather than questioning whether she was told the facts.

It didn't occur to her to question what had been instilled in her very being. In truth, Dekka was the chosen one with the destiny to change her world. Dekka descended from the most divine beings of her land and despite it, she was treated worthless. In her journey to accepting who she is, she has to become comfortable with nonconformity. Once she knows the truth she knows exactly what to do.

Her journey of self-acceptance was tough, tougher than every other protagonist discussed in this paper. Why? Dekka was the only one of the girls without a role model of some kind. Zélie had her mother before her passing and Mama Agba as she grew up. Ikenna had her grandfather and Bree Mathews, who will be discussed shortly, had her mentor and mother's messages to help guide her. Dekka's father had no idea how to teach her to love and accept herself when he secretly didn't. However, once she does learn about her history and where she comes from her power

starts to truly grow and she comes into her own. She stops being ashamed of who she is and gains an inner strength and limitless potential just by understanding her ancestry.

Other than the physical manifestations discussed previously, such as skin color, Dekka's heritage lies in her blood. The way Alaki are identified is the gold coloring covering their arms and hands. In this way Dekka's similar to Ikenna because their blood is the key to a power the world around them fears. They also both share that fear of themselves and the power they possess. They each see evil in their ability, one way or the other. However, part of accepting your history is accepting your heritage, as the two are not mutually exclusive. Dekka becomes proud of the gold blood that runs in her veins as she realizes the truth about the power that she possesses and the ancestry that was kept from her.

Speaking of blood, as mentioned previously In *The Gilded Ones*, gold is the color of impurity. This is unusual as we know gold is one of our current coveted minerals and is well-known for the value it accumulates. This deliberate choice is to try and turn the ideas of wealth and value on its head. Gold lives on the inside of the Alaki and as a result, they are treated like property because they are seen as such. There are even quotes discussing how their blood is worth more than them as individuals or even warriors "Who will {The elders} drain for blood once I leave?" (Pg 54). It's ironic that the Alaki's blood has priceless value yet their lives have none.

Dekka and the other Alaki had to find their strength and their difference and become proud of who they are. Similarly, in *Legendborn*, our protagonist embarks on a journey where her personal history, is key in identifying her strength and identity. Both narratives underscore a

reclamation of power where what is initially perceived as a mark of difference or impurity becomes a source of profound strength.

Legendborn

Last but certainly not least, we have *Legendborn* by Tracy Deonn. Ending on *Legendborn* is a very strategic and unnecessarily sentimental move on my part. The creation for this entire thesis began in my reading of *Legendborn*.

In the book our main character, Bree Mathews, has just lost her mother in a tragic car accident. In an attempt to escape her overwhelming grief, she attends an early college program at UNC-Chapel Hill. During her first night on campus, she witness a magical attack triggering hidden memories associate with her mother and her death. In order to learn more, she infiltrates a secret society of students known as the *Legendborn*, descending from King Arthur and his 12 knights. The *Legendborn*'s purpose is to fight and kill demonic creatures known as the *Shadowborn* who are constantly trying to take over the mortal world.

In order to enter the society Bree partners with self-exiled Scion Nick Davis, the young man destined to be the next King Arthur. She enters the *Legendborn*'s trials to become Squire, a trainee paired with a Scion of the roundtable to support them through their magical endeavors, combat training, or be their protector.

Bree is despised the moment she tries to join the inner circle. Partially because she hasn't been training as long as the other pages fighting to be Squire, but mostly due to the color of her skin. On page 100, right after the trials begin Bree's gestured to by the speaker as she announces

their “most diverse class” knowing Bree was the only non-Caucasian person in the room. Despite her hot-tempered nature, Bree keeps her cool to learn more about the society. One of the most important aspects to them being the honing of their magic.

All members of the roundtable along with their descendants hold a magical ability called aether. Aether’s a lifeforce in any all things that’s manipulated by the roundtable and its descendants for a variety of supernatural uses like spells, barriers, weapons or armor. As Bree delves deeper into this world of magic on her own, she discovers she has her own magical abilities in connection to her ancestors known as Rootcraft. A powerful magic rooted in African American folk practices and spiritual traditions. Unlike Aether, Rootcraft uses herbs, roots, and other natural elements to cast spells, create charms, and invoke spiritual energies. It’s deeply connected to the Earth and ancestral spirits, drawing on the wisdom and practices passed down through generations.

Bree continues to move through the trials and eventually discovers her mother’s death was due to her involvement with the Legendborn. Her mother’s death was meant to sever Bree’s connection to her Rootcraft power (as it’s taught by a mother to her daughter). Luckily, Bree found her way to her birthright all the same along with a spiritual ability her mother also possessed. When the book comes to a close Bree is revealed as the true Scion and heir of King Arthur. The story of King Arthur had repeated itself once again.

In the 1800’s Samuel Davis was a slave owner who had impregnated Vera, Bree’s ancestor. She ended up giving birth to a baby and that became the secret Scion of King Arthur. Meanwhile, Samuel’s wife, Lorraine had been sleeping with his best friend Reynolds (the Scion

of Lancelot). Lorraine got pregnant by Reynolds and passed of the baby as Samuel's. Making Bree the true heir and owner of unequivocally power as someone who controls Aether as a Scion, is a medium due to her mother's bloodline, and has access to Rootcraft because of her ancestors.

All these types of power together equip Bree with a significant ability and helped her journey of self-discovery and acceptance within herself. Despite this, most of the Legendborn society denounce her as their leader because they see her inheritance as an "accident". "For bigots, it doesn't matter how or why I'm truly here; the fact that I'm here at all is wrong enough" (pg. 184).

Bree learns a lot about herself and her history throughout the novel. Her investigation into the Legendborn started as a quest in finding out what happened to her mother. Along the way she discovers more about who she is and what she wants to be. Bree's forced to confront her own fears and biases as she grapples with a legacy of magic she never asked for. This exploration of personal and historical identity is pivotal as Bree learns that her abilities are not random but are deeply rooted in her ancestry.

As Bree gains access to her power and knowledge of her ancestors she becomes more confident in her purpose and understands her responsibility to change. Moreover, when looking at Bree's heritage it is nothing different from any of our other protagonists. Bree is a proud black woman and as she grows to accept her magic, she learns to accept her blackness and the history alongside it. Her ability goes from being a fear to a tool of empowerment.

Bree's growth throughout the novel is marked by her increasing understanding of the significance of her heritage—not just the magical aspects but also the systemic injustices her predecessors have endured. As she uncovers the hidden layers of her family's past and the broader historical injustices that have been obscured, Bree gains a new perspective on her own abilities and the societal structures around her. Her exploration into the Legendborn society reveals not only the magical legacy passed down through generations but also the complex history of oppression that has shaped the experiences of her ancestors.

This deepening understanding motivates her to challenge and disrupt the longstanding biases within the Legendborn, which historically excluded or misused individuals like her. Bree's realization of the intertwined nature of her magical abilities and her heritage inspires her to use her powers in a way that seeks justice and reform. Her actions are not just for personal gain but are driven by a desire to rectify past wrongs and ensure a fairer, more inclusive future. This dual recognition helps Bree to forge a new path for herself, one that honors her history while challenging the established norms of the Legendborn society.

Connecting it all: Oppression, Symbolism and Race

The captivating narratives of Zélie, Ikenna, Deka, and Bree as explored in their respective novels not only delve into the struggles of identity and heritage but also reflect a broader critique of racism and oppression that mirrors American society. The protagonists in these stories face a world that fears and marginalizes them due to their unique abilities, which are intrinsically tied to their racial and cultural identities.

This discrimination is not just a backdrop but a central conflict that each character must navigate and overcome. The withholding of knowledge about their powers and heritage from Zélie, Ikenna, Deka, and Bree parallels the historical suppression of African culture and language during slavery. This loss of cultural identity was a means to weaken and control enslaved people, much as the characters in these novels are controlled through ignorance of their own histories. By connecting with their roots, these characters not only reclaim their personal power but challenge the societal structures that seek to diminish them.

The physical and magical differences of these protagonists serve as allegories for racial discrimination. The systemic obstacles they face can be seen as fantastical representations of police brutality, racial profiling, and other forms of institutional racism that disproportionately affect African American youth today. Their eventual rise against these oppressive systems parallels the ongoing struggle for racial justice and equality in the United States. By using fantastical elements authors are able to more effectively comment on real-world issues like slavery, colonialism, and systemic racism.

Racism shown through these magical aspects rather than a more realistic depiction adds empathy by offering an understandable perspective for non-minority readers to understand. *Legendborn* did the most with a more apparent look into the type of racial grievances modern African American face in modern day society. One of the biggest features addressed being slavery and the subcategories associated with it.

The author herself can even be quoted in her book saying “*Legendborn* addresses intergenerational trauma experienced by the descendants of enslaved people, the way in which

trauma can manifest between parents and children, and the legacies of racial trauma, oppression, and resilience.” (pg. 496). Slavery is the core to why Bree has the power of King Arthur. If Samuel Davis hadn’t abused his slave, Vera, she wouldn’t have been able to have his child or “rob” him of his power. That notion in itself is a powerful message. Bree and her family never asked for the power they carry but are blamed for the cause despite the true victim being their ancestor(s).

One of the most potent scenes in the book is when Bree sees the Legendborn’s wall of family history. “To be able to trace one’s family back that far is something I have never fathomed. My family only knows back to the generation after emancipation. Suddenly, it’s hard to stand here and take in the magnificence of the Wall and not feel an undeniable sense of ignorance and inadequacy. Then, a rush of frustration, because someone probably wanted to record it all, but who could’ve written down my family’s history as far back as this? Who would’ve been able to, been taught to, been allowed to? Where is *our* Wall? A Wall that doesn’t make me feel lost, but found. A Wall that towers over anyone who lays eyes on it. Instead of awe, I feel...cheated” (pg. 135).

The wall is one of the biggest and most identifiable symbols in *Legendborn* allowing for the symbolic fabrication of knowledge being essential in gaining power. Each member of the roundtable and their descendants knew their history the same way they knew the name. They are depicted in the book as starting as young as four or five and have a thorough understanding of where they come from and what their responsibility is to the Legendborn. Meanwhile Bree was desperate for anything about the people she comes from. African Americans still struggle to find their identity today. The market is so big that there is a specialized DNA ancestry test solely for

African Americans to discover their African roots in the hopes of feeling complete. Within this fantastical setting any reader is put in the same predicament as most African Americans and has the opportunity to either empathize or sympathize with Bree and the pain she feels.

In *Children of Blood and Bone*, colonialism is shown through the metaphorical and literal domination of Maji by the ruling class. That type of domination is reflective of historical colonialism through a variety of tactics, such as exploitation or cultural erasure. The exploitation of diviners in the book was both social and economic. From a social standpoint, the Maji were ostracized due to their distinctive white hair and subjected to physical and verbal abuse because of it.

Financially, the taxes are raised on diviners only monthly in an attempt to keep them poor and have an excuse to enslave them. Colonialism is also present when looking at *The Gilded Ones*, and the strict societal structure forced upon women, the suffocating ideas of purity established for women and the exploitation through militarization caused by political outcasting. Colonialism and systemic racism are deeply intertwined though as certain groups are privileged over others based on race, magical abilities, or other inherent characteristics. These established systems perpetuate discrimination and oppression, ensuring that the colonial legacies of control and exploitation continue to affect future generations. These narratives not only reflect historical realities but also serve as allegories for understanding contemporary issues related to race and identity.

One of the most interesting aspects of systematic racism within the novels is their use of a replacement “n” word as a way to dehumanize the minority groups. In *Children of Blood and*

Bone they call Diviners maggots as an allusion to bugs. The term "maggots" connotes something dirty, undesirable, and insignificant, implying that Diviners are less than human and thus undeserving of respect or basic rights. This kind of language is used strategically by the ruling class, particularly under King Saran's regime, to justify the brutal suppression of the Diviners and to maintain control over the kingdom of Orisha by instilling fear and hatred towards them among the non-magical population. In *The Blood Trials*, the term Akulu indeed means "black" in Khanaian. The use of this nickname for Ikenna is significant in the context of the story due to her darker skin tone and mixed heritage. In *The Gilded Ones*, the girls are referred to as Alaki or Gilded to otherize them and keep their status as outcast. In *Legendborn* Bree is referred to as a Onceborn meaning mortal and unaware of the truth but moreover degrades her for not being a part of their elite magical community.

In the real world, these books came out within five years of one another (2018-2022). The release dates of these novels coincides with a particularly intense period of American history, marked by extreme social and political unrest. This era witnessed a resurgence of movements advocating for racial justice, most notably the Black Lives Matter movement, which gained renewed momentum following several high-profile cases of police brutality, including the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. These events sparked nationwide protests and a critical public discourse on racism, systemic inequality, and the legacy of oppression against African Americans. Art imitates life and as a response each of these novels were born.

Collectively, these novels illustrate the potential of fantasy literature to offer profound cultural critiques and social insights. By weaving intense and sometimes harsh realities of the

real world into their fantastical plots, these authors offer more than mere escapism; they provide a perspective through which readers can engage with and contemplate the systemic injustices still prevalent in African-American communities.

As such, these books are not just stories; they are important cultural artifacts that reflect and address the significant racial and social tensions in America during a pivotal time of change and awareness.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, these authors embarked on a purposeful mission with their novels, aiming to engage deeply with themes of identity and the sociopolitical landscape of America. By leveraging the fantastical elements of fantasy—such as magic—they skillfully illuminate the African American experience, emphasizing the potent theme that knowledge is power. This is particularly resonant considering the historical suppression of African American history and heritage. Through their narratives, these writers celebrate Afrocentric features and cultural differences, fostering pride and representation that is often lacking in mainstream media. Their deliberate intertwining of cultural elements and fantastical storytelling not only reflects and informs but also aims to inspire future generations.

The exploration of racial identity and oppression within the realm of black fantasy literature is likely to persist as a method of healing collective ancestral trauma. This push for African American protagonists in fantasy—and beyond, into other traditionally eurocentric genres—highlights a broader movement towards inclusivity and representation. African Americans, long silenced, are increasingly determined to share their stories. Fantasy serves as a

particularly effective genre for these discussions because its inherent suspension of disbelief allows readers to engage with complex and challenging themes in a more accessible and emotionally resonant way.

Unlike direct narratives like Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, which confronts with its raw realism, fantasy offers a buffer of empathy and understanding, making it a uniquely powerful medium for exploring themes of race and oppression. This strategic use of allegory and emotional engagement within the fantasy genre ensures that these important conversations reach a broader audience, facilitating understanding and empathy in profound ways.

Ultimately, what is fantasy? More than mere escapism, fantasy is an opportunity for authors to authentically express themselves within a medium from which they had historically been excluded. Fantasy is not just essential; it is empowering. It offers a vision of the future where all voices are heard and valued.

Fantasy is essential, fantasy is empowering, and indeed, fantasy is the future.

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