SUBVERSION AND CRITICAL DISTANCE: BLACK SPECULATIVE FICTION,
WHITE PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS, AND ANTI-RACIST PEDAGOGY

By

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines representations of black lives in adolescent speculative fiction and explores what the genre offers to anti-racist teacher education. Situating my study at the intersections of literacy education and children's literature studies, I interrogate assumptions surrounding genre conventions adopted in multicultural education. I argue that the genre of black speculative fiction offer tools to the anti-racist educator because it tackles difficult issues surrounding systemic racism and privilege, yet does so in a manner that offers the potential for navigating white resistance strategies through the creation of literary spaces of inquiry. My framework, which theorizes the ability of multicultural speculative literature to critique systemic oppression, is built off two forces of the fantastic—subversion and critical distance. These competing and complementary forces provide readers with space in which to reflect on systemic oppression and hegemony.

My dissertation serves as a bridge between the fields of education and English literature. As such, the body of the text is organized into four discreet yet connected articles. The first two articles are literary analyses of works of black speculative adolescent fiction. In one study, I trace entwined junctures of neoliberal policies and contemporary slavery in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. I argue that Butler hails the genre of the parable, unveiled through a series of literary slipstages, to present readers with evidence of contemporary white perpetuation of systemic racism. In the second

article, I examine exclusion of transnational black youth from full US citizenship in Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch*. I argue that Okorafor rewrites US citizenship as a concept now requiring, not simply tolerating, full cultural and racial inclusion.

I then place these texts in the hands of readers, examining pre-service teacher discourses around these works of literature. I focus on student talk around race and privilege. In my third article, I report on a case study examining pre-service teacher discourse over *Parable of the Sower*. This study, based on data from teacher education classroom discussions and writing assignments, indicates that students can maintain rich conversations around risky topics in a way that complicates Haviland's (2008) notion of White Educational Discourse. The fourth article, based on classroom data from two teacher education courses that discuss Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch*, complicates the concept of "safe space" as implemented in classroom discussions surrounding race. I argue that critical distance in black speculative fiction creates not safe spaces, but spaces of inquiry where social justice-minded readers can raise issues and push back again racism with peers.

Most anti-racist scholarship that incorporates youth literature rests on the assumption that realistic fiction offers authentic representations of black lives and experiences. I trouble these assumptions through sustained focus on genre conventions and reader engagement with those conventions. My dissertation questions the limited notions of black lives created by overreliance on realistic genres and advocates for education scholarship that recognizes black futures, black imagination(s), and black innovations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

You are about to read a dissertation. Doubtless, you can find more interesting dissertations. You can find more brilliant dissertations. But this is my dissertation and there are no other dissertations like it. Now that it's finished, I kinda like it.

I call it my dissertation, because my fingers typed the words. But this document is the product of many lives, countless hours, small conversations, drinks over laughter, drinks over tears, drinking alone, and more than a few slaps over the head. The drinks were almost always distilled or brewed. The slaps were both literal and figurative. I was the subject of every one. Every one was well deserved. The slaps, not the drinks.

I find the acknowledgements section skirt the lines of science fiction. These are words that you, the reader, read first. I'm writing these words that you will read first at the end, after I've written this dissertation. I begin after the ending. I'm not sure why this is important, nor why I think it belongs in my acknowledgements, but I'm sticking it here anyway because I can.

In line with all good Acknowledgements sections, I need to say that I could never thank everybody. This statement is more true than anybody could ever know, unless, of course, you've written an acknowledgements section yourself. But this is also a convenient statement because I might not like some people who helped me with this dissertation and this disclaimer means I can leave them out. If you helped me and your name isn't here, it's most likely an error on my part and I apologize profusely. But it also might mean I don't like you. I guess you'll never really know.

I need to start by thanking the members of my dissertation committee. Laura Apol, my advisor, has been the best of advisors. Her support has been phenomenal and that's a

word I don't use lightly. She's sent supportive emails from Rwanda, made phone calls during book tours, and submitted last minute reference letters when her time would probably be better spent writing poetry. But Laura has done more than help me when I've needed. She has shaped me as a scholar, as a person, and as an artist. Because of her mentorship and the environment she created during my time as a student, I now use the word "moves" as a noun and "grapple" more often than she probably likes. I also have developed a habit of buying new books of poetry and bringing them with me to conferences. Where most people might read Dan Brown or Clive Cussler on the airplane, I read Saul Williams and Tracy K. Smith. Poetry is now my conference "airplane mode."

Scott Michaelsen has also shaped me as a scholar and a person. On our first meeting, when my colleague Michael Macaluso, now at Notre Dame, and I crawled into Scott's old office in Morrill Hall to interview him for a first-year doc student class project, I could never have known he would become my dissertation co-direction, an inspiration, and my friend. My conversations with him are always interesting. His patience is astounding considering my continuous and perpetual moments of what Samuel R. Delaney would call "rupture." He has introduced me to Soviet industrial music and told me about the strange phone calls he received from John Cage. For the record, he also shared with me the meaning of "throbbing gristle" while standing in line for a coffee in the Café Royale on Grand River Road, the site of many dissertation meetings. Most importantly, he has pushed me to become and be a real scholar. Rather than take the safe route and read only the scholars that would appear in my papers, he has pushed me to find the conflicts, dig into origins, agitate the easy, and revel in the uncertainties. As I left each meeting, I felt like he picked my up by my ankles while in a zero gravity chamber,

shaken my ideas out like pocket change, and left me to pick up the floaters. Our conversations are never easy, but always exhilarating.

My entire dissertation grew out of a project begun years ago in Django Paris' class on youth languages and literatures. If he didn't give me the freedom to play with ideas in my own way and give me the space to wrestle with my whiteness, this dissertation would never have happened. My work on culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogy grew directly out of learning under him. He introduced me to so many formative writers and thinkers: H. Samy Alim, Maisha T. Winn, and Jeff Chang among others. The later changed my life. His *Can't Stop Won't Stop* was the anecdote to growing up a white boy in northern Minnesota. I had no hip hop reference points so I had to read the book with YouTube open beside me. I'm still a white boy from northern Minnesota. But the writers that Django introduced me to forced me to contend with voices kept from me and voices I kept from myself.

Dorinda Carter-Andrews likewise shaped my awareness of who I am. Her class on Critical Race Theory gave me the tools to look at whiteness, the work of white scholars, and my own positionality. I cringe reading most studies about CRT written by white people and that's because Dorinda's course was so thorough I can spot bad CRT from good CRT. Her class was taught so well, I also realize that my last sentence needs scrutiny. Likely, good CRT scholars will read my work and cringe. Dorinda also allowed me to use her class to craft my research practicum, sending me along on my dissertation journey. Her class was one of the most formative of my career. If it weren't for Dorinda, I'd never have the courage to walk three blocks down Chicago's Michigan Avenue talking to Zeus Leonardo about Franz Fanon.

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I want to finish by thanking my wife, Elena (Helen) Aydarova. Her love for me is astounding as I can be a miserable sod when I'm at home, not in performance mode. She's put up with me, encouraged me, and helped me grow as a better person. Because of her, I drink more tea, know when to clip my toenails, and rather importantly, have become a cat person. Helen has also been my guide to get me through the doctoral program. As busy as she's been grueling over her own dissertation, she's always lifted me up during mine. During my doubts, she's offered the genuine encouragement I needed

to pick myself up and keep going (To be fair, I've rarely picked myself up. She's picked me up.). She's had faith in me when I didn't. She's also made spectacular efforts to help me develop as a scholar. I met Ebony Thomas because Helen encouraged me to email her when we were in Philadelphia. I got my first publication because she encouraged me to ask Scott to talk through my paper over the phone. Many of the fellowships I've earned and the mentoring events I've attended were only possible because I could look through her successful applications and figure out the process for applying. She's even the reason I got into graduate school in the first place. I failed on my first application but she encouraged me to try again, this time applying to study children's literature. I don't cite her scholarship here, but her brilliance shines through on every page here.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

In Nnedi Okorafor's short story, "The Magical Negro," the trope revolts. The story

begins with a typical scene from epic fantasy literature. Lance, a white blonde hero,

stands on the edge of a cliff looking out at his enemy, an army of evil shadows. The

hero's position is precarious. He knows how to use his sword, but not the magical amulet

resting on his chest. As the shadows bear down on him, he worries that he won't survive

the onslaught. At that moment, a "dark figure" as dark as the evil shadows appears, an

"African" wearing only a pair of black pants. This magical negro, never called a hero,

first holds back the swarm of shadows, then tells the white hero how to use the magical

amulet. Here is where Okorafor shifts the story. After providing the white hero with the

secret to the amulet, the shadows rip out the chest cavity of the African. To this point,

tropes remain prototypical. The scene adheres to typical fantasy rhetorics. Rather than

dying though, the black man, now with a hole in his chest, begins to complain. He

laments that multiple times he must rescue and guide; he faces the danger of the enemy

and the stupidity of the hero who still doesn't understand, even after explanation, how to

use the amulet; yet once again it is he, the black man, who suffers violence and death, not

the white hero. Rather than continue the cycle, he revolts. The African yells at the hero,

"I'm the mutherfuckin' Magical Negro, what makes you think I'm gonna tell you how to

use that damn amulet you been carrying around for two months because you too stupid to

figure how to use it and then fuckin' die afterwards? What world is you livin' in? Some

kinda typical fantasy world from some typical fantasy book? Like I ain't got no family of

my own to risk my life fo' and shit!"

In criticizing the white hero, the black man unbuckles the trope from the story, allowing this fantasy story to self-deprecate around the ridiculousity of its existence. But Nnedi's character goes darker than self-deprecation. His final sentence, suggesting he has both a family and a life, reminds that the sacrifice of black lives in a fantasy story for the comfort and advancement of the white "hero" is a heavy matter. Yet Okorafor does not end the story here. After hearing the African's complaint, the white hero is still lost, scared, and uncertain. Fed up, "The Magical Negro shook his head and said, "Had enough of this." With a wave of his hand, Lance fell from the cliff to his death. The Magical Negro listened for the thump of Lance's body on the rocks below. He smiled." Words are insufficient so the Magical Negro acts. He does not save the hero nor does he tolerate him. He exercises his own human-ness, taking action intolerant of his former role. Yet again, Okorafor does not end the story here. The Magical Negro turns to the reader (me), breaking the fourth wall and pointed out my own stupidity. ""Sheeeit," he drawled, looking directly at you. "You need to stop reading all this stupidness. The Magical Negro ain't about to get his ass kicked no more. Them days is ovah.""

Okorafor's story captures the revolt (I use this word in the positive sense) in the contemporary science fiction/fantasy (sff) community. Popular sff and the larger geek community (including comic books, video games, and the subcultures connected with them) are entrenched in paradigms of white heteronormative masculinity. The continued harassment of women gamers spotlighted by Gamergate and the hyper-sexualization of female superheroes suggest the fantasy world is entrenched in straight male ideals of sexuality and gender. A similar pattern exists across aspects of racial inclusion. The racist social media backlash against *The Hunger Games* films when Amandla Stenberg, a

young black girl, was cast as Rue is the most publicized event but it isn't isolated. Similar vitriol surfaced when Lenny Kravitz was cast as Cinna in the second Hunger Games film and when Idris Elba was cast as Heimdall, the Norse god in Marvel's film Thor. Authors of color, most notably black women, are pushing back through their writing. They are crafting powerful stories of alternative worlds, inverted social structures, and technological innovationscapes. These stories push social boundaries and thicken the genre. Nalo Hopkinson lambasts racist elements of the sff community and white conference scene through her acidic short story "Report from Planet Midnight," where an alien visits a conference session to lay bare the listeners' hypocrisy and hate. N. K. Jemisin, inspired by the Black Lives Matters movement, creates in her newest novel, *The Fifth Season*, a world where Friere's "the oppressed becomes the oppressor" is grounds for revolution. The novels of Octavia Butler and Nnedi Okorafor explored in the pages of this dissertation offer lens for containing, reworking, then unleashing conceptualizations of citizenship, economics, and racial norms.

What do stories like these offer the English education classroom and teacher education? In this dissertation, I argue that the genre of black speculative fiction (bsf), stories of science fiction and fantasy written by black authors that imagine new social and racial paradigms, and sff broadly offer tools to the anti-racist educator because the genre tackles difficult issues surrounding systemic racism and privilege, yet does so in a manner that offers the potential for partial circumnavigation or a blunting of white resistance strategies through modes of distance and spaces of inquiry.

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation lies at the intersections of critical literacy, anti-racist education, and children's literature studies. To begin, I examine two novels of black speculative fiction (bsf) from a literary perspective because very little scholarly work is dedicated to the genre. To give some perspective, the retired Vasser professor Deborah O'Keefe's book *Readers in Wonder* examined almost 200 children's fantasy novels by over 80 different authors. Only one author, Virginia Hamilton, was a person of color. O'Keefe's book is representative of children's and adolescent speculative literature scholarship. The need to front texts of black speculative fiction is a priority. Therefore, because so little work exists on black speculative fictions (and the larger category of multicultural fantasy), it is important in my dissertation to first examine the texts from a literary perspective. In other words, before investigating how a text is used in the classroom, I must take the preliminary step of undertaking my own rigorous engagement with that text as a reader and scholar.

While my primary scholarly roots are in children's literature, I also want to move beyond the texts alone and conduct an exploratory study in the classroom, seeing how multicultural fantasy works in the hands of readers, in this case pre-service teachers as readers. Therefore, a significant section of this dissertation will focus on classroom discourse around the bsf texts examined.

My dissertation consist of six chapters – an introduction, four chapters that function as discrete articles exploring textual manifestations and pedagogical discussions surrounding black speculative fiction, and a concluding chapter that examines threads of

connections across the discreet articles. This document also includes five, what I call, literary bridges.

In the introduction, I build a rationale for why I focus on bsf as a genre, and why I believe it addresses issues of structural racism and privilege in a manner suited for the anti-racist classroom. The introduction covers definitions of fantasy, speculation, and anti-racist pedagogy, a brief overview of black speculative fiction, and my conceptual framework of subversion and critical distance. In the first article (Chapter 2), I trace entwined junctures of neoliberal policies and contemporary slavery in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. In the second literary piece (Chapter 3), I examine conceptualizations of US citizenship in Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch*. Article 3 (Chapter 4), explores pre-service teachers' dispositions and modes of silence in discussing racism with literature. In Article 4 (Chapter 5), I complicate notions of safe space in the anti-racist classroom, exploring ways bsf can create literary spaces of inquiry where readers can investigate racism through critical distance. In the sixth and final chapter, I tie the four discreet articles together by grappling with the concepts of subversion and critical distance (from the framework), looking at ways the two forces influence the creation of a text and a reader's engagement with that text. I also discuss implications for anti-racist pedagogy. Between each of these chapters, I craft what I call literary bridges. Much like the anecdote from Okorafor's short story that began this proposal, I use excerpts from novels and short stories of bsf to connect texts and craft theory. Since little work exists on bsf, I use the texts themselves to shed insight on their role and build understandings of how the genre functions as a critical intervention in pedagogy, genre studies, and social change.

Scholarship on black speculative fiction and multicultural fantasy

Scholarly consideration of multicultural fantasy and science fiction (sf), including bsf, is sparse in children's literature studies. While studies of fantasy literature have been and continue to be well represented, they largely focus on white authors. A plethora of studies exist on *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Water Babies*, the *Harry Potter* series, and *His Dark Materials*. Scholarship does contain numerous studies on works by authors of color, though most focus on explorations in realistic or historical fiction. The intersection of fantasy written by authors of color is almost nonexistent, particularly in children's literature and education studies.

If works of fantasy by people of color are given scholarly consideration, they are usually limited to works of folklore. This tendency is mirrored in classrooms and award circles as well, at least in regard to children's literature. In the forty-five years of the Coretta Scott King award, the annual award for works of children's literature written or illustrated by an African American, the award has been handed out only twice for a work of fantasy, broadly defined. The first was for a book on African folktales, and the second for a book on southern U.S. folktales. Educational scholarship studying multicultural literature has criticized the fact that works by people of color, not just fantasy but works in general, that trickle into the classroom are disproportionately limited to folklore and traditional tales (Cai, 1998). A critique leveled at this trend is these works in isolation contribute to an exoticization and othering of people of color, minorities, and disenfranchised ethnicities. Multicultural literature scholars and activists call for more contemporary realistic texts of people of color in classrooms (Lafromboise and Griffith, 1997; Smith and Strickland, 2001; Colby and Lyon, 2004; Dong, 2005; Glazier and Seo,

2005), a laudable drive. Contemporary realistic texts by and about people of color are difficult to find in classrooms and bookshelves but a privileging of realistic contemporary texts at the expense of other contemporary genres does not fully solve the problem. (Thomas, forthcoming) I am not arguing that fantasy is better or more effective. I am arguing that fantasy is an important genre and a growing one and should also be considered in order to present a well-rounded, fuller picture of black lives, black experiences, black dreams, and black futures. To keep multicultural fantasy and bsf out of the classroom is to deny readers access to a dynamic facet of underrepresented people.

Much of the writing concerning fantasy and sf literature in education research draws little on fantasy and sf scholarship. I am hard pressed to find English education journals that talk about fantasy and quote key texts by Attebery, Suvin, or Todorov (the scholarship of Ebony Thomas and Farah Mendlesohn are a refreshing exceptions). In fact, one article in *English Journal* (Gallo, 2007) that is exclusively devoted to fantasy literature begins, "because I read so little fantasy and science fiction, I count on others to keep me informed of what's good in those genres for teen readers" (p. 118). Granted, Gallo's article was not an in-depth analysis of a fantasy text; rather, it was an overview of what the genre offers to the classroom. Yet, here is an author who admittedly is weak on the genre but is not afraid to offer fantasy book ideas to teachers, along with reflections on what the texts offer. His *under* reliance on solid scholarship results in weak insight and diluted conclusions. For example, when Gallo makes the claim that "speculative fiction may offer a truer version of reality than so-called realistic fiction" (p. 118), it is based off simplistic suppositions like, "strong underlying themes, such as the conflict between good and evil" (p. 118) rather than rigorous conceptualization found in the

scholarship of Saler or Mendlesohn who offer sophisticated explanations for the relationship between fantasy and reality.

This scholarship under-examination is pertinent as it stands in direct contrast to the contemporary proliferation of fantasy written by people of color. Two prolific, trail-blazing authors (though not the earliest writers) are Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler. Many authors influenced by Delany and Butler have carved their own niche in the fantasy world, garnering critical acclaim in the process. Nnedi Okorafor won the World Fantasy Award for her novel, *Who Fears Death*, the first person of color to win the award for a novel. N. K. Jemisin was nominated for the award in the same year. Nalo Hopkinson recently won the Andre Norton Young Adult Award for her novel *Sister Mine*. Charles Saunders and Balogun Ojetade sustain cult status and L. A. Banks wrote a popular series of vampire novels. The work and works of these authors are being published, read, and discussed widely but their popularity extends beyond growing readership. Many major fantasy and science fiction conferences include special panels on diversity and race issues. Articles have also been published in popular media, such as *Buzzfeed* and *The Atlantic*. Most of the discussion surrounding race and racism in fantasy and sf is happening in geek culture, specifically in the blogosphere and twitterverse regarding comic characters and video gaming. So far, this interest has garnered little concern in children's literature scholarship and education studies.

Critical Race Theory and anti-racist education

Because issues of race and marginalization are central to my study, I draw heavily on Critical Race Theory (CRT). The roots of CRT are found in Critical Legal Studies. Pioneered by law scholars such as Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado, CRT aims to

critique the assumed neutrality of the US legal system which, in theory, applies and interprets the law with equality but, in reality, is applied unequally across different races. Since its inception, CRT has moved into the field of education through the work of, among others, Lisa Delpit and Gloria Ladson-Billings. In the field of education, CRT has helped scholars reexamine White supremacy in student achievement (Taylor, 2006), funding (Aleman, 2010), discipline (Brown, 2013), teacher and student perceptions (Brown, 2013; Huber and Cueva, 2012), classroom instruction and interaction (Haviland, 2008; Picower, 2009), policy implementation (Chapman, 2008; Urrieta, 2006), and a host of other areas. CRT postulates that racism is endemic (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012; Carter Andrews and Tuitt, 2013), always adapts to maintain white supremacy (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012), and that people of color (including students, communities, scholars, and authors) bring unique insight to discussions of race and racism (Ladson-Billings, 2009). These principles shape my stance on anti-racist pedagogy and my approach to scholarship on anti-racist education in literature instruction.

I view anti-racist education as a stance taken to call out acts of racism (implicit and explicit) in the classroom, raise awareness of structural issues that influence or allow implicit racism, and push students to self-reflect on their own positions they hold. "If we come to see racism (or sexism, classism, heterosexism, etc.) in our classes, it is our obligation as ethical and culturally implicated agents in the world to find ways of examining and resisting the dominating influence of whiteness. We do this work because, as Peggy McIntosh (1995) argues, now that we see whiteness functioning in our lives, we are "newly accountable" (p. 189)." (Hytten & Warren, 2003, p. 70). In both my

scholarship and my teaching, I posit that failure to pursue anti-racist initiatives is educational malpractice.

Literature in the anti-racist classroom

Studies that examine white student discussions over multicultural literature tend to speak positively about the experience. What I find problematic about many of these studies is the glossing over of troubling responses, either through ignorance in noticing the troublesomeness, or through pandering to sanctioned narratives of racial harmony. A prime example of the type of discussion around multicultural literature and the scholarly glossing over is Glenn (2012) who used multicultural fiction as, what she calls, "counter-narratives" (p. 326) with white readers. She claims her white students found common ground between themselves and the black characters in the texts. One white student responded to a book on the iconic rapper Tupac Shakur by saying she realized she "shared in the culture of the narrator," a poor black girl. Glenn attributes this connection to the student resonating with "the deeper connection [of] being a kid who loves to play with friends" (p. 335). Such a conclusion, however, misses the thrust of critical race theory scholarship on the counter-narrative. I cannot help but interpret this student's response differently than Glenn. I see it as another example of white students avoiding difficult discussions by affirming sameness with disenfranchised people groups rather than engaging with difficult issues raised in a counter narrative. This reader does not share the narrator's culture. For a white reader who claims to be "middle/upper class" (Glenn, 2012, p. 335) to say she connects with a poor black girl largely misses the point of the text and certainly misses the point of the counter narrative. Instead, she enacts a resistance strategy that allows her to ignore racism since she claims she and the narrator

are the same. Rather than this student recognizing her own privilege, she declares

sameness in order to side-step her own complicit engagement in systemic racism.

Where I find fantasy literature beneficial is in its minimized offering of a

necessity for avoidance. I argue that the desire to look for sameness we see in Glenn's

students is minimized when reading literature of the fantastic. There is less impetus to

connect to the global village or to espouse mantras that are considered correct or

politically correct. The need to offer white-washed platitudes such as, "race isn't

important, we are all human," is absent when the characters are aliens or fantastical

creatures, even though the issues addressed are connected to a contemporary world.

Going back to Glenn, one of her readers dismissed the story because, she claimed, "I

don't have personal connections with anyone who is Latino/Latina" (p. 342). Would this

even be an issue when reading a fantasy text? I recognize that fantasy literature does not

erase this desire to find sameness, but it negates the impetus. There isn't the desire to

search for sameness in a Farengi that there is in a tourist style of multiculturalism

prevalent in contemporary schooling; the desire to build a psychological wall when

considering racism against Farengis is not as crucial to white supremacy.

Conceptual Framework: Fantasy as mode

The way fantasy creates this distance between the reader and the text is woven

into the fibers of the genre. In order to look at those fibers, it is important to reconsider

the use of the term *genre*. The history of science fiction and fantasy scholarship contains

long and numerous contestations over defining it as a genre. Determining which texts are

fantasy and which are science fiction becomes tedious and slippery. Such conversations

are outside the scope of this paper. Because of the fickleness of and gray areas within the

genre as a whole, I choose instead to draw on fantasy as a mode rather than a genre. Jackson (1981) calls a mode a list of features falling on a spectrum. In other words, there are degrees of fantasy, or elements of the fantastic, that show up in stories. Thinking of fantasy in terms of mode rather than genre alone allows me to use the term more broadly. Hume (1984) fleshes out the idea of a broader conceptualization of fantasy when she says there are two ends to the spectrum, fantasy and mimesis. According to Hume, very few texts contain no fantasy, and a text with no mimesis is incomprehensible. Instead, there is an interplay between these modes or "impulses" (p. 20). While fantasy as a mode can be thought of in terms of textual features or stances drawing on the fantastic end of the spectrum, I find it problematic, or at least distracting, to claim that a certain type or number of these stances then qualify a text as fantasy while a different number results in a separate genre. Building off Jackson and Hume, I will look at aspects of the fantastic that appear in texts rather than separating out certain texts that do not measure up to just-less-than-arbitrary standards of fantasy. Taking this position allows me to examine a larger range of fantasy subgenres, including science fiction (one reason why I sometimes use the terms *speculative fiction*, *fantasy*, and *science fiction* interchangeably). More importantly, this allows me to answer questions such as, how does fantasy function in a way that offers potential for anti-racist pedagogy? And, what features of the fantastic make the potential possible and allow it to take root?

Fantasy as mode propels two forces of the fantastic that allow the texts to offer curtained critiques—subversion and distance. The fact that fantasy literature reflects our world as much as the fantastic one of the text is an idea supported by many fantasy scholars and writers. One example, though there are many to choose from, is *The*

12

Chronicles of Prydain author Lloyd Alexander, who said in his Newbery acceptance

speech, "At heart, the issues raised in a work of fantasy are those we face in real life" (p.

381). While the concept is debated, it is not contentious. Mendlesohn (2010) agrees,

saying "science fiction is as much an argument with the present as it is an argument for

the future. If Asimov writes about robots, he probably has the race question in mind" (p.

137). Mendlesohn, who largely practices a traditional form of genre delimitation, goes on

to argue that Malorie Blackman's *Noughts and Crosses* is not fantasy but allegory

because the lines between what is written and what it reflects is too close. Tolkien

himself famously said that a reader cannot make the simple comparison between the ring

of power and the atomic bomb. Fantasy is too complex to reduce to a corollary of texts

reflecting life. While fantasy does not directly reflect our reality in a one-to-one

relationship, it can shed light on our own reality because it is often critical of the taken-

for-granted. As McCafferty (1990) says, fantasy helps us see our reality "in sharper relief"

(p. 4). Yet the influential sf author Samuel Delany reminds us that the relationship

between fantasy and our reality is, once again, complex. It should not be boiled down to

one-to-one correspondence nor to the shallowest of metaphors. Speaking about his

fantasy text, *Neveryon*, Delany claims his alternative world is a "model."

> Clearly the Neveryon series is a model of late twentieth-century (mostly urban) America. The question is, of course: What kind of model is it?
> This is not the same question as: Is it accurate or is it inaccurate? Rather: What sort of relation does it bear to the thing modeled?
> Rich, eristic, and contestatory (as *well* as documentary), I hope.
> (Return to Neveryon, p. 286)

Here, Delany lays bear the tensions surrounding his exploratory world. *Neveryon* reports, as a documentary. But that reportage is not simple fact dressed up in sword and sorcery clothing. He contradicts and resists what we know. The model is not a basic reflection. Racism exists in his alternative world, but racial dynamics are part reflection of our own contemporary world (or more accurately, a reflection of New York City at the height of the AIDS epidemic), part vision of what could be—a society freed from traditional hegemony.

        Subversion. I argue that fantasy allows social reflection first, because the mode, according to Jackson (1981), is subversive. Building off psychoanalytic theory, she distills the concept of subversion to two alternating, competing, and complementary forces: revealing and expelling desire. The fantastic reveals desire, "trac[ing] the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent' (Jackson, 1981, p. 4). Desires, according to Jackson, can be revealed in two primary ways in fantasy. One way desire is revealed is through calling it out or by simply portraying it. Fantasy calls attention to social ills, pointing out what society does not want to see. Hunt and Lenz (2001) give an example of subversion when they examine touchtone texts of children's fantasy. In their analysis, they pull out a thread (among many) that works like *Peter Pan, The Wind in the Willows,* and *Winnie-the-Pooh* portray and value a male-oriented society. Jackson's concept applies here as the texts reveal a heteronormative, white male social organization, one which power holders value and maintain. Revelation of desire is also manifested in fantasy through implications of reminiscence. Tolkien's *LOTR*, for example, speaks to longing for a pre-industrial age. Returning to Hunt and Lenz (2001), they find this desire in other works of fantasy, like

Morris' *The Wood Beyond the World* which is based on a medieval European world though the text was written in the late 1800s. To them, "this suggests a regressive element, a romantic yearning (by adults) for earlier 'innocence', for an alternative world where motivations, actions, needs and gratifications are simpler and more direct than in the desperately complex and subtle real world" (p. 4). In other words, the fantasy of Morris and by implication, according to Hunt and Lenz, the fantasy genre in general because of Morris' historical significance, reveals desires of longing for a better time.

Pulling and intermingling with the revealing of desire, fantasy, in Jackson's terminology, "expels" desire. According to Jackson, this happens when the "desire is a disturbing element which threatens cultural order" (p. 3). Jackson's use of "desire" here may confuse outside of psychoanalytic work. When applied to my study, speaking of expelling desire becomes unhelpful. For my framework, I adapt Jackson's terms of expelling desire, instead thinking about fantasy as a critique of the social concerns it reveals. Fantasy allows for labeling the uncouth and a peeling back of the façade to show what disturbs underneath. Dystopian novels illustrate this concept. Collin's *Hunger Games*, for example, critiques authoritarian government and a possible end result of over-infatuation with reality television. Westerfield's *Uglies* series questions the emptiness of beauty standards and misapplication of scientific experiments. Social critique shows up in non-dystopian literature as well. An example from popular contemporary children's literature is the oppression of the house elves in the *Harry Potter* series. Not only does the text portray the injustice inflicted on the elves, but it also points to the inability of those from the dominant culture (the wizarding world of *Harry Potter*) to recognize the

wrongs they are committing. Only Hermione speaks out in support of the house elves. Other key characters, including Harry, Ron, and Dumbledore brush over the situation.

Fantasy as mode allows these two forces to push and pull, yet often the two forces muddle when considering texts that touch on complex issues of social injustice. Le Guin's classic, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, has faced criticism for presenting a male oriented power structure. In response, Le Guin (qtd. in Hunt and Lenz, 2001) responded "Authority is male. It's a fact. My fantasy dutifully reported the fact" (p. 3). Her text speaks to revealed desire in that it reflects hegemonic dominance as enacted and perpetuated by male power holders. In other words, it reflects the desires of the male, bourgeois class. At the same time, her text critiques that hegemonic dominance in that *Earthsea* is critical of that supremacy and the "facts" that rule her fantastical world. The weakness in Jackson's model is that it is built on white notions of fantasy. Bsf does indeed reveal and critique social orders, yet it takes fantasy and speculative fiction further as it rewrites and reimagines those social orders.

The same muddling of the two forces occurs in black speculative fiction as it brings the revealing and expelling desire together in a way that is complementary, melding and expanding. However, texts of bsf can go one step farther in its level of speculation intended to expel. It does not just report systemic oppression as Le Guin's does. The texts are not confined by "facts." Instead, bsf can use the alternative world or shifts to our own world to upend the fact, reaching new insight. Delany's *Neveryon* series does not critique injustices surrounding racialized systems of slavery that are historical U.S. "facts." Instead, he is able to reimagine a slavery economy by allowing fantasy to upend our facts and recast them into one that fits the world of Neveryon. There, slavery is

as violent and intolerable as in our world, yet the racial dynamics are bent with both white and black cultures and characters enslaving and being enslaved. Okorafor's "The Magical Negro" works much the same. Her story ridicules the trope of the Magical Negro but intensifies the critique when it takes agency by rewiring the trope and the genre.

      Critical Distance. The subversive aspect of fantasy is tempered by a second marker of the mode—critical distance. A number of scholars have recognized that fantasy texts employ buffers or distance between its subject and our reality. As Yolen (1986) says, "fantasy books deal with issues as thoroughly as realistic fiction—but one step removed" (p. 88). She posits that this "step" comes in various sizes, from the vastness of an alternative world to the suggestion that there are Borrowers in the cupboards. To flesh out the idea, Yolen connects the "step removed" to masks worn in Venetian balls. The wearing of a mask signified to the wearer that they were playing a game and it signified to others playing the game that social boundaries did not apply to the person under the mask. In other words, the mask acted as a get out of jail card. Venetians knew, according to Yolen, who was wearing the mask, but a masked attendee was not held accountable. When Yolen pulls her analogy back to fantasy, I find her argument uncomfortable. She says that "adults who write the books [of fantasy] understand that beneath the [mask] there is a very real [person]. It is the children who do not always understand the convention" (p. 89). I find this a condescending view of child readers, a view problematized by teacher and scholar insight into reading with children.

      Mikkelsen's (2005) analysis of discussions over *The Hobbit* with two young male participants, aged seven and nine, would support my discomfort with Yolen's statement. The children of Mikkelsen's study, often of their own volition, would connect their

reading with the real world. For example, she tells of one moment where "Mark also wondered why the Elf King did not share in the profits [of the dragon's treasure]. Vinny remembered that the hobbit and Gandolf were friends of the Elf King and theorized, in sociocultural terms: "It's like if we had beat Russia and ruled communism, we would rule it with England 'cause England would help us too" (p. 121). The participants then go on to have a relatively sophisticated discussion (for 7 and 9 year olds) on WWII history and international economics. Mikkelsen concludes by saying, "quest fantasy, which involves epic battles between good and evil, was providing important opportunities for discussing historical events and debating personal/ethical choices, as they arose naturally and spontaneously in our conversations" (p. 121). Rather than these children failing to recognize the reality behind Yolen's mask, they lifted up the mask to peek underneath and could talk about the face they saw.

Saler offers a more useful term for the "step removed" in fantasy: "critical distance" (2013, p. 169). Saler deals with adult readers and literature rather than children but he does, like Yolen, recognize distance the mode of fantasy affords. Elements or tropes of the fantastic, such as alternative worlds, unearthly characters, or reconfiguring of the functional ground rules of reality, place space between the concept or issue being raised and the pain or discomfort the issue dredges up. What Yolen calls "step[s] removed," I call layers of critical distance. Saler words this anecdotally when he says, "while it might be inadvisable to discuss politics or religion in a bar, debating them in the context of Mordor provides the critical distance that eases the airing of differences" (p. 19). Saler's use of the word "ease" causes concern when placed in the context of anti-racist pedagogy. The question of safety or ease is one I address more directly in article

four. However, the spirit of Saler's idea is useful in that critical distance creates a space for difficult conversations. Painful, critical assertions are raised (read—subversion), yet the textual otherness creates what I will call a *space of inquiry*. When I began this dissertation almost two years ago, I proposed that critical distance allowed issues like privilege and racism to be held up to the light like a color slide, showing the negative in relief while buffering, to a degree, psychological *finger pointing* and the raising of resistance walls so often occurring in discussions around race. However, as I worked through my ideas, read works of speculative literature, and worked with students reading the literature, I realized critical distance is complex and knotty when readers enter into those spaces of inquiry.

Scholarship that has considered this distance has treated it as neutral, where I consider it positive. However, there are also likely drawbacks to engaging with difficult issues through critical distance. My students tend to exhibit inexperience with fantasy. If readers are unfamiliar with tropes and scenarios of fantasy, there is the possibility that readers can miss the critical issue at hand. This complexity raises a series of important questions that have not been thoroughly explored in the research. How does critical distance draw the reader in or wall her out? What textual elements create critical distance and how do pre-service teachers as readers approach these elements? How might black speculative fiction complicate the system and functions of critical distance?

Article Overviews

Article 1: Slipstages of the fantastic: Neoliberalism, contemporary slavery, and canonical dystopia in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. The first article is a literary study of the representation of neoliberal slavery in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (*PS*). While Butler did not explicitly write for a young adult audience, her books can and have functioned as crossover books. Some of her texts have appeared in high school classrooms, and the education scholar Thomas (2003) recommends Butler's books for young adult readers. I choose *PS* because, in contrast to a number of other Butler texts, like *Kindred* for example, *PS* is a coming of age tale. This dual young adult nature, that it is a crossover text and a coming of age narrative, allows the text to fit into a children's and young adult literature discussion.

The text is a dystopic account of a young black woman, Lauren, who is forced to flee north with a diverse group of companions to begin a stable life. The story is set in a near future California, wracked by extreme climate change, a deprivation of natural resources, and a neoliberal government that has gutted social safety nets and privileged the executive class. In the article, I argue that Butler equates the effects of neoliberal policies on the disenfranchised with slavery. The text does not, in the traditional sense of the dystopia, present a what-if account that illustrates the natural outcome of unrestricted neoliberal policies. Instead, I argue that *PS* hails the genre of the parable to illustrate a modern reality. In my reading, I use the metaphor of the theater slipstage, a mobile theater stage slipped onto and in front of the mainstage to allow for quick stage changes and to hide what sits behind, to examine Butler's layers of critical distance between the

subject of contemporary, rather than potential, slavery. I also discuss implications of Butler's label of slavery rather than neoslavery.

My decision to examine Butler stems from her influence on black writers of fantasy. Butler herself tells of meeting a black student at a Michigan conference "who told [her] she had thought about writing SF but didn't because she had never heard of any black SF writers" (McCaffery, p. 61). This phenomenon is not new to black writers nor to sf. Darren Chetty, a UK based hip-hop educator, has pointed out that children of color in schools do not write stories about characters of color. Because they do not see characters of color in books and they do not see authors of color on their library and classroom bookshelves they do not, it seems, see characters of color belonging in books. Butler is an author whose work has pushed against this with success.

I also work with Butler because of her specific dealing with racism in her texts. There are other influential trailblazers in the field of black science fiction and fantasy, like Charles Saunders and, notably, Samuel R. Delaney. Butler however is more likely to be taught in schools where Saunders is too much of a cult figure, lacking the recognition needed to be brought into schools, and Delany does not write young adult literature. In my own university courses I teach, I have met students who have read Butler in high school and I myself teach Butler in my undergraduate class. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I have never met a student who was taught a Delaney text. Both Saunders and Delaney touch on race, though I feel they do not explicitly delve into issues of race with the tenacity of Butler. Saunders creates a new adventure series and Delaney explores gender, sexuality, and economics.

**Article 2: Possibilities and limitations of the fantastic: Racial exclusion and
reimagined citizenship in Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch*.** My second literary
exploration focuses on representations of globalized citizenship in Nnedi Okorafor's
Akata Witch. In my second discrete article, I argue that Nned Okorafor's children's novel,
set in Nigeria, stakes a claim for full inclusion of people of color into the fold of U.S.
citizenship by reimagining the citizen as one who embodies hyphenated identities. As
already mentioned, Okorafor is an important contemporary figure in bsf. While her adult
book *Who Fears Death* is her most famous work, I find her children's fiction as powerful
as her adult works though the former has not yet received scholarly consideration. This
piece contributes to children's literature scholarship as it makes connections with under-
examined contentions in the field regarding contemporary citizenship and racial
inclusion/exclusion. Few studies examine citizenship in children's literature and only a
handful considers contemporary accounts. More importantly, my study extends
examinations of citizenship by focusing on race, an element missing from most previous
studies.

The novel tells the story of Sunny, an albino Nigerian-American living in Nigeria,
and her battle with Black Hat, a serial killer preying on local children. Another important
character I examine is Sasha, also African-America, who works with Sunny and two
other Nigerian children in fighting Black Hat. Sunny and the three children practice juju,
presented in the novel as a type of West African magic. I choose this novel first, because
of the background of Okorafor—a Nigerian-American whose work often touches on
difficult issues surrounding race, gender, and identity. She is also a critically acclaimed
author, winning numerous awards in Africa and North America, including the prestigious

World Fantasy Award for her adult novel, *Who Fears Death*. Yet her texts have, so far, largely escaped scholarly consideration. I also focus on *Akata Witch* because it most explicitly deals with U.S. citizenship in limbo, touching on the connection with U.S. and Nigerian identities and the cultural exclusion between those identities.

In the article, I first consider how *Akata Witch* seems to reinforce the idea of exclusion by being denied access to Cohen's (2005, 2007) two types of citizenship assimilation: political and cultural. Both Sunny and Sasha tell of experiencing racism in the US in both the human and magic communities, which speak to Cohen's concept of political exclusion. But both characters are also shunned in Nigeria for being "*black American[s]*" (p. 58), explicitly indicating they are denied cultural inclusion because of racialized difference. Second, I will argue that the text ultimately overturns these initial indications of exclusion by crafting Sunny as a model for citizenship which recenters racialized and hyphenated identities as full citizens. I finish the article by exploring the role of genre in the text, mining the possibilities and limits of the speculative genres in exploring social problems.

The next two articles mirror the first two as they examine pre-service teacher discourse around the earlier novels. Where article one investigates Butler's novel, article three examines reader conversations around that novel. Article two investigates Okorafor's novel and article four looks at pre-service teacher discourse on her text.

Before I move on to the education studies articles, I want to make a note about my inclusion of these two distinct authors. These two articles do not function as a comparison. As I include texts by these two authors, I want to be clear that I recognize the extent of their stylistic differences, author background, and focus. Samuel R. Delany

and Okorafor have both, in different venues and formats, criticized their continual comparison or pairing with Butler. Their conclusions are that systemic racism within the fantasy and sf field place them together simply for their similarity in skin tone. I place these two authors, Butler and Okorafor, together in my dissertation only because the format of discrete articles allows it. I fully recognize that Butler as an individual writer who focuses on issues of racism in the U.S., usually through a sf setting, can not be compared to Okorafor, who is an individual writer focusing on inter-cultural contact and Nigerian spirituality through a fantasy setting. Each text tackles unique aspects of oppression, which is why they were selected.

Article 3: White pre-service teacher engagement with black speculative fiction: Insight into talk about race and teacher dispositions with Octavia Butler's Parable of the Sower. After conducting a literary investigation of Butler's book in a previous article, I then analyze student writing and discussions of the book in an undergraduate young adult literature course. In my third article (chapter 4 of the dissertation), I move to the teacher education classroom where I conduct a case study examining pre-service teacher discourse on *Parable of the Sower*.

For this article, I explore the following questions:

1. How do my students engage with issues of racism and corporatization in *Parable of the Sower*?

2. What role does the genre of black speculative fiction play in my students' reading of the novel?

Research into white student talk on race indicates classroom discussions are fraught with difficulty, including anger, silence, discrimination, harassment, and dilemmas (Cabrera, 2014; Haviland, 2008; Thomas, 2015). One of the initial problems critical educators face is unresponsiveness or modes of silence enacted by white students (Haviland, 2008). In the contemporary U.S., race neutrality is the assumed foundation for white citizens. When asked to discuss racism, many white students respond with apathy, disinterest, or opposition. Because traditional lectures and passing of information does not address white racism in the classroom (Sleeter, 2008), it is important to get white students to talk. In this article, I explore the potential of critical distance in enabling conversations about race. I do this by examining how students enact silence when writing or talking about Butler's book. Since her text is imbued with critical stances on racism and its contemporary ramifications, it offers multiple opportunities for discussion (or bypassing of the discussion).

Data was collected from classroom conversations and written assignments from an upper level course that focuses explicitly on issues of diversity in children's literature. I also gather information on students' background experience, reading background, and reading strategies regarding fantasy literature. Data sources include written assignments, transcribed audio recordings of class conversations, field notes taken during small group discussions, and instructor reflections from class discussions. For the written assignments, students wrote a 1500-2000 word paper exploring an issue of diversity raised in the text. Since students were explicitly focused on these issues because of the nature of the course, analysis of the writing assignments give me insight into which topics students feel are less threatening and which topics they still want to avoid. Audio conversations were

transcribed and both audio and written data were analyzed by constant comparative analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and reflexive journaling (Janesick, 2004) to find and refine themes and establish patterns in the data.

This article was written for submission to a practitioner journal. Since I have multiple articles in this dissertation, disseminating the findings for this study through a practitioner journal allows me to reach a wider audience and to advocate for greater inclusivity of black works of literature in the classroom. Because of the audience for the practitioner journal, the writing style is less formal, including shorter paragraphs and more explicit focus on the pedagogical moves incorporated into this classroom study.

Article 4: Spaces of safety, spaces of inquiry: Black speculative literature and complicating notions of safe space. The fourth and final article (chapter 5) takes a more in-depth look at what black speculative fiction offers regarding anti-racist pedagogy. Based on classroom data from two courses that discuss Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch*, this article complicates the concept of "safe space" as implemented in classroom discussions surrounding race. At the heart of this article are the processes readers partake in when reading literature. How does a speculative novel create critical distance and how do readers enter into that space of distance? In this article, I argue that critical distance in black speculative fiction creates, not safe spaces, but spaces of inquiry where social justice-minded readers can raise issues and push back again systemic racism with peers.

The call for safe spaces in education is often assumed. Students are expected to be free to share their thoughts and engage with issues in an environment of security. In this article, I first explore the history and trends regarding safe space as both a physical and psychological necessity. However, there have been recent calls to complicate the notion

26

of safe space as the pursuit of comfort can hamper the goals of liberal education. I explore some of the ways that black speculative fiction with its fluctuation of subversion and critical distance can further complicate and extend the concept of safe space.

The data is drawn from two sections of children's literature courses I taught to pre-service teachers. Data consists of student discussions and written responses to the text *Akata Witch* by Nnedi Okorafor. The written data consists of responses to two sets of prompts: students submitted a 300-400 word journal of initial reactions to the text. After class discussions, students submitted a 400-500 word reflection on the text in light of the small and group discussions. The small and group discussions were transcribed and all data, written and recorded, were analyzed through initial open coding (Gasson, 2003), noting initial trends and themes. I then used constant comparative analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) as I refined themes.

Dissertation Conclusion: Playing in critical distance

The final chapter of my dissertation, is a conclusion consisting of three parts. First, I flesh out the findings from my classroom studies (Articles 3 and 4) by bringing in a selection of data that could not be included in my articles. This first section helps contextualize some of the issues from my classroom studies. Second, I explore the contrapuntal forces of subversion and critical distance as it connects to discussions in literacy and education. Here, I put the ideas of Farah Mendlesohn and Darko Suvin in conversation with Rudine Sims Bishop, the literacy scholar who proposed the popular reading metaphor of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. Finally, I muse on the role black speculative fiction plays in pre-service literacy teacher training and their pedagogical content knowledge.

Bridge: Thunder! Thunder! Thunder! ThunderCats! Ho!

The standup comedian Lavell Crawford loves *ThunderCats*. It's his "favorite cartoon" (Comedy Special, 2014). *ThunderCats*, a tv series about anthropomorphic cat-like aliens, was one of the most popular cartoons of the mid to late 1980s. In a comedy show before a mostly black audience in St. Louis, Crawford mentioned the cartoon during a story about staying home alone after school. In the story, he would lock himself in his house, pour a glass of chocolate milk, and watch *ThunderCats*. When he mentioned the cartoon in St. Louis, he said the title, said it was his favorite cartoon, then put the microphone close to his mouth and in a deep theatrical baritone chanted the opening lines to the introduction.

"Thunder! Thunder! ThunderCats! Ho!"

"Thunder" is chanted, one after another like a gong. "ThunderCats" is spit sharper, like a two-round burst from a pistol. "Ho" is a battle cry, the 'o' held long like a paratrooper shouting it out as she jumps from a plane. Crawford performs this intro perfectly, following it with a twangy beatbox rendition of the show's ensuing guitar music. This 80's allusion should be a banal interdiction in Crawford's tale. The comedy in his story comes when people arrive at his door. However, the crowd invites themselves into the story as they use the cartoon about aliens to participate in a beautiful moment of community. When Crawford gets to "Ho!," the audience joins in. The battle cry is sustained in joy and concludes in rapture. I never watched *ThunderCats* when I was young. I'm sure many in the St. Louis audience didn't either. But certainly enough did. An audience and a performer bonded over science fiction.

Science fiction and fantasy does more in the black community than connect an audience. US Black artists have drawn on the speculative to reframe and resist the status quo for decades.

- George Clinton's funk band Parliament broadcast from space in the album *The Mothership Connection*.
  - "Coming to you directly from the Mothership/Top of the chocolate milky way."
- The great jazz artist Sun Ra claimed he was an alien from Saturn. In his film *Space is the Place,* he mystically appears in alien dress to a roomful of black teens who doubt he is real.
  - "How do you know I'm real?," Ra askes them. "I'm not real. I'm just like you. You don't exist in this society."
- The poet Saul Williams uses ghosts to riff off a black protest at the White House
  - "Now if black ghosts/dance do native/ghosts read wind?
  - "That moment/you realize/your imagination's/been colonized/by self-same/bull-shit that made/oblivious maidens/ghost-twerk/in Victorian corsets."

I could continue. The Pulitzer Prize winning poet Tracy K. Smith conjured David Bowie and Stanley Kubrick (director of the film *2001: A Space Odessy*). The MoMA recently installed an Afrofuturist exhibit curated by King Britt. The pop singer Janelle Monae references androids. The Detroit-based electronic duo Drexciya reclaimed the Atlantis myth, reframing it as an underwater city populated by black slaves who didn't

survive the Middle Passage. These speculative elements help reframe racial issues and decenter whiteness, even when black writers and artists incorporate white science fiction and fantasy into their art. If I may be so provocative and riff off Audre Lorde's dictum, they use the master's future and fantasy to dismantle the master's dreams and visions.

Octavia Butler is an iconic and foundational artist among black speculative artists. Her work draws on the spectacular, rewrites the speculative, and resists the white hegemonic status quo. It seems only fitting that the body of my dissertation begins with her.

Slipstages of the fantastic: Neoliberalism, contemporary slavery, and canonical dystopia
in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*

At the time of the 2014 NFL combine, where prospective professional football players attempt to increase their likelihood of being drafted to a professional team through a series of athletic feats performed for scouts and coaches, a photo comparing the combine to slavery made the social media circuit. The photo is divided into four corners. The top left corner contains a historical print of a slave auction where a potential buyer, a white man in a suit smoking a cigar, takes measurements of a black slave naked save for a white cloth around his waist. Directly across from this drawing is a photo from the 2014 combine, where a white man in khakis and dress shirt takes measurements of a young black athlete who is naked save for his Under Armor shorts. In the bottom left corner is a painting of black slaves walking in a line, bound together by wooden harnesses around their necks. Across from the painting is a photo of three shirtless black athletes standing against a wall. The three are watching something off to the left, not contained in the photo.

Professional sports, largely owned and operated by whites, are open to critical inquiry regarding the profiteering resulting from the use and abuse of the black male body. Valid questions can and should be raised pertaining to issues such as funding of college sports (the money paid to students vs. the profit gained by university athletic departments) and people of color in leadership positions (over 70% of NBA players are black [Lapchick 2] but Michael Jordan is the only black majority owner of a team [Lapchick 7]), among others. Yet the comparison of the combine to bona fide slavery is questionable. It is not difficult to imagine the problems associated with connecting 400 years of chattel slavery and its well-documented list of atrocities with a professional sports system that young athletes dream of entering. Regardless of

the problems, such comparisons have been made and they are not new. Over ten years ago, *New York Time*s contributor William C. Rhoden wrote *$40 Million Slaves*, claiming that white organized and operated sports operate like plantations.

I use the analogy of the NFL combine to raise questions surrounding manifestations of contemporary slavery and the ramifications of contemporary comparisons to slavery. Individuals and ethnic groups are routinely taken advantage of in and out of the work place. Oppression of disenfranchised peoples are real and painful. Yet how is the cause of activists furthered or hindered by equating a black worker with a black slave? How is the memory of slavery, already white washed in media and school curriculum, tarnished by such comparisons? What does slavery, if it still exists, look like today? What are the ramifications of labeling a contemporary problem *slavery*?

Douglas Blackmon, *The Wall Street Journal* Atlanta bureau chief, makes a compelling case that slavery in the U.S. did not end at emancipation, but continued all the way up to WWII. His book, *Slavery by Another Name*, explores the intertwining of corporate industry and slavery in the U.S. south, extending an investigation into holding U.S. corporations accountable for profit from slave labor in the same way German and Austrian corporations were held accountable for profit from Jewish slave labor (3). Blackmon examines judicial gerrymandering that allowed thousands of free blacks to be arrested on trumped up criminal charges, fined a range of court fees, then sold to a corporate industry who paid the court fees in exchange for a set period of hard labor. The result was a system of slavery where black citizens were arrested according to economic flows rather than criminal trends and held in worse than slave-like conditions. Blackmon argues that Jim Crow segregation is an ill-fit name for the post-emancipation time period, and instead offers a new name - the Age of Neoslavery.

I see complexities surrounding Blackman's inclusion of the *neo* prefix. If the crime fits the bill of slavery, why distance the act from the crime through the additional prefix? Yet, I also recognize that a heavy weight circumscribes the event of naming an action as bona fide slavery. It is one thing to say something is *like* slavery and quite another to say something *is* slavery. Blackmon himself waivers in his own book, calling it slavery and neoslavery intermittently. I believe, however, that Blackmon does find the sanctioned practice of buying and selling convicts as practiced post-emancipation bona fide slavery. In his introduction, he calls the convicts "slaves in all but name" (2) and in his epilogue, he claims "that slavery, real slavery, didn't end until 1945" (402). I find then that his attachment of *neo-* softening the term, offering a demarcation between the bona fide slavery that ended at the Civil War, a slavery recognized by America and Americans, and the bona fide slavery that Blackmon believed ended when black GIs returned from Europe and the Pacific, a slavery denied or ignored in the US imaginary. Blackmon is unashamed and unapologetic in his condemnation of post-Civil War slavery, yet he also believes slavery is now abolished. "The final chapter of American slavery is buried" (4). Is it? If slavery could exist after the Emancipation Proclamation, then I believe it could still exist today. *Parable of the Sower*, Octavia Butler's American dystopia, tackles these issues like Blackmon, speaking to the naming of slavery hinged on corporate complicity.

Butler's dystopia, published in 1993, follows Lauren, a young black woman who lives in the relative security of a walled compound situated in a near-future California. Outside the wall, a nightmare of poverty and violence pervades. Lauren must flee her community with two others and join a mass of unnamed victims heading north to Canada, the new Promised Land where work and safety are still available. On the journey, she begins writing *Earthseed*, her own scriptures for a new religion.

This paper extends and reimagines Butler's work by recasting *PS* as a canonical dystopia with a layered but unambiguous critique of neoliberal sanctioned slavery in the U.S. This initial critique, I argue, acts as a labeling of overt, contemporary slavery. I call this an extension because scholarship often narrowly reduces Butler's body of work to a consideration of race and gender (McCaffery 55), a reduction McCaffery claims limits Butler's role as a critical author. "Butler's best work, for all its vivid particularities and subtle treatment of psychological issues, transcends narrow categorization as "black" or "feminist"" (55). McCaffery's claim advocates for an expansion of Butler readings, a claim I respect. Simultaneously, I want to recognize that Butler's work in gender and race maintains a level of academic and literary power that cannot be called limited or reduced, even when in isolation. *PS* explicitly deals with racial hegemony and the oppression of women, doing so successfully. Yet in agreement with McCaffery, I will examine how the text also speaks to wider issues resulting from the interplay of class, neoliberal economics, and politics. This expansion, I argue, enriches her work in race and gender.

Dystopia and slipstages of the fantastic

I use Baccolini and Moylan's contrast of *critical dystopias* and *canonical dystopias* to reframe *PS* as a canonical rather than a critical dystopia. In a canonical dystopia, according to Baccolini and Moylan, ambiguity or the lack of ambiguity plays a key role. Zamyatin's *We* and *1984*, both canonical dystopias, dissolve ambiguity with the protagonist's demise. Dystopia then becomes didactic as the protagonist succumbs to the dystopic force. Critical dystopias on the other hand, largely rooted in 1990s interrogation of millennial capitalism (4), have open-ended conclusions. *PS* seems to fit neatly in the critical dystopia paradigm. The text is constructed within Baccolini and Moylan's "historically specific" (7) time frame and Lauren's role in setting up Acorn as a community "rejecting the traditional subjection" (7) of the hegemonic society

situates it in a critical framework. Scholars such as Miller have labeled *PS* as a critical dystopia which allows us to "work through [postmodern dystopic elements] and begin again" (337). Baccolini and Moylan would back this up, particularly in regard to the ambiguity of the ending. Since we do not ultimately know what happens to Lauren, the text leaves hope in the ambiguity. According to the critical dystopia framework, the implication of *PS* speaks to the impending reality of its context. A change in contemporary reality prevents the future pictured in the text. This seems to apply to Butler's text as we are left, not necessarily with a happy ending, but at least the possibility of a bright one – for the protagonist. I argue, however, that the text rests on this parabolic assumption to act as a curtain, temporarily masking the true purpose. In other words, the text postures as a critical dystopia. A turning of the gaze from the protagonist Lauren to the subject of *PS,* the unnamed masses outside Lauren's walls, allows the canonical dystopia to effloresce. The situation for the masses in the text is not ambiguous. They, living in a neoliberal utopia, are crushed by the dystopic force. For those unnamed characters, there exists no hint of relief and no ambiguity concerning their future. Here, the text stands as a canonical dystopia, the didacticism wrapped in a parable.

In this paper, I use the analogy of a slipstage, a mobile theater stage slipped onto and in front of the mainstage to allow for quick stage changes and to hide what sits behind, to represent the distancing that fantasy and science fiction (sf) allows. Rabkin acknowledges that speculative worlds, including dystopias, add a level of distance to reality and that those worlds "come alive for us as alternatives to the real world" (qtd. in Hunt 8). The alternatives, created by fantastic/alien characters, reality-bending plots, future settings, or technological diffractions act as distancers that temporarily shield the alternative of the text from the real of the world. Butler, I argue, implements dystopic distancing like textual slipstages which can be pulled back,

revealing layers, each with their own intricacies and hidden revelations. "One of the greatest strengths of SF, then, is its capacity to *defamiliarize* our science fictional lives and thereby force us to temporarily inhabit worlds whose cognitive distortions and poetic figurations of our own social relations—as they are constructed and altered by new technologies—make us suddenly see our own world in sharper relief" (McCafferty 3-4). I see *PS* defamiliarizing through the future dystopia in order to reveal our present world, as McCafferty says, "in sharper relief."

I argue the text of *PS* is layered as in a series of slipstages which can be rolled aside to reveal another stage, or slipstage, behind. Each layer hides a new set of objects and subjects of critique. The critical dystopia condemning neoliberal policies acts as the first slipstage. Pulling aside this textual slipstage of neoliberal society reveals another slipstage—dystopia with a developed system of slavery. The dystopic setting as a slipstage masks what I call the main stage of Butler's text—a critique of contemporary, not conceptual, slavery. In other words, I argue that the dystopia is a clear condemnation of a real, contemporary atrocity – actual slavery in the present day. Butler incorporates a textual slipstage in *Parable of the Sower* to craft a canonical dystopia which critiques neoliberal philosophy in general, neoliberal economics in particular, as well as contemporary, white, neocolonial slavery.

Neoliberalism as context for *PS*: Austrian economics to libertarianism

Before examining neoliberal dystopia as the first slipstage, I want to present a brief explanation of neoliberalism as an economic philosophy in order to contextualize the critique *PS* offers. Neoliberalism, an economic philosophy engrained in the modern market, pushes for pervasive commodification of goods, expansion of commodifiable objects, deregulation of worker and environmental protection laws, and inherent trust in the efficiency of the market (Harvey 2). Growing out of Austrian economic theory brought to the U.S. through economists

such as Mises and Hayek, neoliberalism took the Austrian "intrigue [of] the dynamic and unpredictable change inherent in markets" (Vaughn 2) and shifted it into the political realm, appearing in the U.S. as libertarianism. Where Mises argued that everything, even time, can be economized, neoliberals argue that everything can be for sale, a critical difference. Where Austrian economists examine the market to learn, neoliberals formalized a rigid, formidable system meant to control the market. The former is passive and observant; the latter is active and manipulative. Neoliberalism, a bastardization of Austrian economic theory, switched the focus on the theoretical into the libertarian realm of the political. Where Austrian economics revel in always changing, shifting "people's preferences" (Vaughn 80), neoliberalism has become a prescriptive regime.

The shift from Austrian economics to neoliberal libertarianism took decades to develop but then snowballed swiftly. Two Nobel Prize awards capture this rapid development. When the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek won the Nobel Prize in economics in 1974, he shared the award with Gunner Myrdal, a leftist. The two recipients reflected two conflicting, arguably balancing, economic positions. But this balance was short lived as libertarianism began to take over. Only two years later in 1976, Milton Friedman, a staunch neoliberal and critic of Austrian economics, received the Nobel Prize. He was the solitary recipient. These contrasting Nobel Prizes reflect the division between libertarianism and Austrian economists who likely saw the former as a devolution rather than an evolution.

Harvey points out that shortly after Friedman's Nobel prize, the neoliberal force gained significant political clout with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and that of Ronald Reagan in 1980 (1). The groundwork of neoliberal reach captured in relief by *PS* was beginning to solidify. Reagan, a person Butler had little respect for (McCaffery 67), was a staunch

popularizer of neoliberal policies in the U.S. It was through his work and that of his contemporaries abroad that led neoliberalism to the point of, according the Harvey, now becoming "hegemonic as a mode of discourse" (3). Harvey claims that the situation shifted so dramatically from the previous decades of Kenesian economics that, by the time U.S. president Bill Clinton was elected to office, the same year in which Butler published *PS*, "both Clinton and Blair could easily have . . . said 'We are all neoliberals now'" (13). Three years after *PS* was released, the world had reached the point where "the net worth of the 358 richest people . . . 'was equal to the combined income of the poorest 45 per cent of the world's population—2.3 billion people'" (Harvey 34-35). It is this economic reality that sets the stage for the writing of *PS*.

The first slipstage – neoliberal dystopia

In *PS*, Butler creates a dystopic California wracked by climate change and extreme, pervasive poverty. California only gets rain once in five or six years while the Gulf coast is pillaged by storms that "kill . . . from Florida to Texas and down into Mexico" (Butler, *Parable* 15). In between, on the coasts of "Mississippi and Louisiana" (53), water is plentiful but poisoned; poor people (the rich are not mentioned here) are dying from cholera. People either live in corporate owned cities (only possible in an extreme neoliberal society), small walled compounds, or on the street where wild dogs and piles of bodies are found. Theft and murder are daily if not hourly occurrences and cannibalism occurs with greater frequency. Most of the US population is reduced to animalistic behavior, surviving in "pack[s]" (182) and killing people who are suffering in pain, like euthanizing a wounded dog. This is the normal for the masses.

Within this chaos, surprisingly, a working government still exists. The policies and out workings of this government pull the text into the realm of the neoliberal dystopia. "Federal, state, and local governments still exist – in name at least" (328). There are even presidential

elections held. Only mentioned by name in the text three times and never seen in person, the newly elected President Donner operates under a neoliberal agenda. He promises to cut the space program because it is "wasteful, pointless, [and] unnecessary" (27). He also promises deep cuts to social institutions in a land where such institutions already appear nonexistent. Privatization of communications, and intense deregulation in order to "suspend 'overly restrictive' minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection laws" (27) are also on his political and economic agenda. The setting displays all the key features of neoliberal capitalism. While the outcomes in the text have progressed to neoliberalism's exaggerated end, the language differs little from that of contemporary political speak.

Through the course of the book, the text of *PS* works to implicitly dismantle and critique the viability of many of these neoliberal positions and assumptions, superficially placing the text into the category of the canonical dystopia. The text spends significant energy addressing Neoliberalism's promotion of deregulation as a means of promoting a vibrant market. *PS* illustrated how neoliberalism instead promotes *re*regulation, a practice that ultimately protects corporations and oligarchs by giving them legal safety to freely build economic monopoly and privilege. The move from Austrian economics and its fixation on the beauty found in the chaotic changes and shifts in the market to a neoliberal agenda that seeks to "restor[e] or reconstruct . . . the power of economic elites" (Harvey 19), allows and even expects interventions to protect class (and implicitly racial) hegemony. Neoliberalism functions through a system of contradictory pulses, where "principles are either abandoned or become so twisted as to be unrecognizable" (19). The free market is only free for power holders. Corporate clout used to bully small businesses and independent farmers does not contradict neoliberal views, at least according to neoliberals.

President Donner does not simply remove old laws. He has to first "get laws changed" (Butler, *Parable* 27). This reregulation is illustrated through the corporate takeover of "formerly public land" (119) in order to "dominate farming" (119). It is not deregulation that allows this land hoovering. The *de-* simply façades a false picture of economic freedom. In fact, intense regulation comes after "legal wrangling" (119). This legal rewiring allows "agribusiness conglomerate[s]" (287) to buy acres "for pennies" (119). Now-legal land grabs become possible through corporate bullying and (il)legal clout. "The market, depicted ideologically as the way to foster competition and innovation, became a vehicle for the consolidation of monopoly power" (Harvey 26).

Particularly interesting in *PS,* land purchase is denied, or at least bureaucratically hidden, to the general public. Corporations buy acreage for miniscule fees but a lone survivor who finds $1000 rolled up in a dead man's boots is cautioned that the money will only last for two weeks "if she [is] careful (Butler, *Parable* 312). Theoretically, that money could be used to buy land and grow food for personal use. If a corporation can buy land for a pittance, why can a person with a handful of cash not buy a couple acres and live? Corporate land grabs illustrate Butler's use of economics to enrich her ideas around race and gender. Implicit here is the unspoken privilege, racial, economic, and gendered, which places the white male minority (Donner and the corporate power holders) in position to acquire resources for cheap while those excluded from privilege are denied access or forced to pay exponentially more.

Neoliberal regulation and Butler's critique of that regulation also appear in the novel through the representation of small business. "Unlicensed business[es are not] legal" (Butler, *Parable* 18) but they still proliferate. In a neoliberal market, a government required license represents executive interference, but here the license maintains corporate power. One family in

Lauren's compound turned their living room into a micro movie theater, courtesy of the only surviving television in the community and the sale of homemade snacks. Another family in the compound raises rabbits to sell meat and pelts on the streets. Though prolific, small businesses have degraded in *PS* from the stalwart of the US middle class to mangy subsistence survival on the fringe of legality and safety. For example, water peddlers, private individuals selling water on the street, are routinely murdered. They sell toxic water but are left alone by the police since they "sell . . . to squatters and the street poor" (17-18). Privatization (a stalwart of neoliberalism) without regulation degrades from the tragic to the disastrous for the disenfranchised.

Public services that do exist, namely police and fire departments, have become either private, corrupt, or often both. Police are grouped with gangs—"a badge [was] a license to steal" (316). These organizations now operate as mercenaries. Both fire fighters and police officers charge fees high enough to dispel calls for help and when they are called, often "never help" (114) and usually "[make] a bad situation worse" (114). This damning critique creeps into Lauren's verses for her new religion. "Apparent stability disrupts,/as it must" (103). Stability is "apparent" when the means of service is available, like the police and fire services or a national and local government, but the means do not actually serve. Such stability "must" fall apart. On the surface, the corruption of the public sector reinforces the idea that big government failed to help the people, a pillar of neoliberal thought. Here, the government employees function as a social bane rather than a social service. Butler walks a delicate line, making concessions to neoliberal philosophy in order to resist dredging the dystopia into caricature. Butler avoids casting neoliberalism as pariah. The private guards, like those that work for the protected market Hanning Joss (174) or the corporate towns (138), are reliable—a move of acquiescence to neoliberalism. The concession, however, spotlights a clever façade. Scratching off the crust of

41

political spin, the dichotomy becomes not private/public as neoliberalism would attest, but ultra-wealthy/poor. The private guards from the wealthier corporations like Oliver (now a corporation) and Hanning Joss remain free from corruption while those from smaller businesses operate "as power-drunk as scavengers" (241). *PS* shows a private sector as fragile as the public. The private/public divide dissipates as both private guards and fee-charging police are later grouped together as people "bent on destroying" (246) after a disaster rather than restoring order. Under neoliberal economic practice, the difference between the public and private diminishes, particularly in regard to corruption.

The second slipstage – neoliberal slavery

Sliding aside the slipstage of neoliberal critique reveals another issue the text indicates results from neoliberal philosophy: neoliberal slavery. In my initial reading of *PS*, I have shown a text that portrays a critical dystopia on the surface, one which explores the ramifications of neoliberal economics. That the critical dystopia, however, is crafted as a slipstage of the fantastic. Pull it aside, and slavery materializes as the focus of critique. Rather than slavery being a tangential or additional issue to neoliberal economics, I see the two inherently connected in the text.

The slave narrative is overt in *PS* – once the slipstage has been pulled back, ignorance or avoidance of the reference is impossible. Butler hints at slavery when she connects her text to the 1960s and 1970s reclaiming of Afro-centric identities. Lauren's and Bankole's grandfathers changed their last names to Afro-centric ones (230), an act of resistance to reclaim a stolen identity. The reclamation, however, still speaks of pain. The Yoruban names Olamina (Lauren's last name) and Bankole (Lauren's partner goes by his last name) were chosen by grandfathers, but neither grandchild knows what their name means or why the name was chosen. The act of

resistance was cosmetic, an fleeting signifier more than a discovery. This brief mention of racial agency harkens back to the original crime of slavery that led to the identity theft. The reclamation of an Afrocentric name is a choice to return to an identity stolen by white-driven slavery, yet the reclamation did not have lasting effects beyond two generations.

Early in the novel, slavery is an allusion more than a reality. The group of survivors travel North, which *could* be (at least early in the novel), a reference to slaves traveling north to escape slavery. Lauren also teaches one of her companions to read, something "slaves did . . . 200 years ago" (218). But this reference feels more like a connection Lauren makes with history than a realization of her situation. Her comment "of course" (218), almost hints of a smile on her face; she has a minor epiphany, like a child finding moss on a tree trunk and smiling because she's found north.

Softened references to slavery continue with the corporate towns. When Cori, Lauren's stepmother, calls the corporate owned town Olivar to inquire about work, Lauren realizes "when you add everything up, it's clear . . . they couldn't earn enough to meet expenses" (120). Lauren muses on the "old company trick" (121) that results in "debt slavery" (121). The addition of the adjective *debt* mutes the term, shadowing the reference and implying a form of neoslavery, rather than strict slavery. Though she refrains from using the term neoslavery, Hee-Jung Serenity Joo, who writes about neoliberalism in Butler's *Parable* series, hinges her paper on the neo-, arguing *PS* reflects *neo*slavery, a new slavery which is distinguished form the old form of slavery (293). I argue the text is more provocative, calling neoliberal practices the implementation of bona fide slavery. While Lauren's father, rightly suspicious of Olivar, thought slavery was a possibility only in the "future" (Butler, *Parable* 184), people were being bought and sold and swapped. Lauren's relative class privilege, with its protective walls, meager finances, and food hid the

reality of slavery outside the compound. Their travel north was a journey of revelation. They were not slaves escaping to the North; they were traveling north and discovered slavery.

The discovery of the slave Emery, a key though minor character in the novel, functions as the Rosetta Stone to the subject of slavery in the text. Slavery is no longer danced around, but named and examined. When the group first finds her, the text describes her as a "debt slave" (288). The adjective still lingers. But a page later, Lauren interrupts her recount of Emery's escape story with the clarification, "slaves learned things like that" (289). The adjective quietly slips away and the book changes irreversibly. The story moves beyond post-apocalyptic survival, no longer a neoliberal cautionary tale. The first slipstage is brushed aside. The book becomes a work of "critical fiction" (hooks 57) that reinforces the explicit connection between neoliberal capitalist policies and racism articulated by TNgugi we Thiong'o and others. Working backwards in the story, the softened references solidify. We see Emery's boys were sold (288), no different from slave masters breaking up families for capital or control. The word "masters" (289) stands out now as well. Emery did not have a boss or a foreman, but instead a master, a clear connotation of the ownership entailed in slavery.

Working forward from this revelation, the novel is not a slave narrative (Lauren herself was never a slave) but an open condemnation of modern slavery. While Butler does not believe her works generally tackle the issue of slavery, she admits it "may depend on what we mean by slavery" (McCaffery 56). In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Butler extends the idea of slavery to a more encompassing definition. She tells an anecdote of a neighbor family living under an abusive father. Even though she "could actually hear the blows landing," (56) she also realized the children were trapped in a situation where calling authorities or flight would only result in harsher abuse. That situation was, for her, a realization. Slavery was "humans being

treated as if they were possessions" (57). This definition, given by Butler one year before she published *PS* and likely while she was busy composing the text, shapes the discussion around the workers in the corporate towns and the factory slaves. The people in the slave factories are not treated "as if," but legally as possessions. Emery has her children sold to pay her debt. People are bought and sold in *bona fide* slavery.

Two pages later, the group is joined by Grayson and Doe, both referred to immediately as "slaves" (Butler, *Parable* 291). The adjective *debt* completely disappears from the conversation. Later, the text informs the two "escaped slavery" (323). Slaves like Grayson and Doe are beat which is why, Lauren explains, the escaped slaves "show the tendency to drop to the ground and roll into a fetal knot when frightened" (291). The journey north, never a simple connection to history or a minor epiphany of a teenager, is a mission. Lauren names the group "the crew of a modern underground railroad" (292).

The novel now calls out corporations, the modern plantation owners, as the instigators of slavery. Factories replace plantations. The master of the boardroom replaces the master of the manor. The free market darns a guise for neoliberal slavery. Character transitions from free to slave begin subtly. Factory workers fortunate enough to get jobs earn company money; the fees for room and board are higher than salaries; indentured servitude results, followed by full slavery. Once again, the character Emery captures this transition. At first, Emery and others with her lived under "normal" (287) conditions. They were paid in food and housing, they wore "hand-me-downs" (287), but they were "dreary, but normal" (287). The shift to slaves comes via a land take-over by an "agribusiness conglomerate" (287) who follow the pattern established in the corporate towns, eerily reminiscent of modern corporate bullying. Emery immediately falls into debt to the company and kept in debt because of laws that protect the corporation over the

worker. But the slave factories go further than the corporate towns. The workers are now property, and laws allow children of property to be sold. When the market is god, money is idol and markets are not reigned in by morality. Sex slavery is business, children are commodities, and the one naturally feeds the other. The sale of Emery's sons pad company coffers while paying off *some* of her debt. The capital raised through the sale is insufficient to purchase her freedom. What makes this situation particularly painful is Emery's initial position. The text remains silent on whether she lived off the land with a community or she worked for a small business, but she still worked. The corporate takeover resulted in almost absolute depravity for previously stable workers. Again, this harkens to neoliberal policies that left once thriving employed communities like Detroit and Flint scraped shells.

Corporations taking over cities like Olivar institute systemic debt slavery. But Olivar and places like it still stand apart from poor communities and communities of color (often equated in the text). Olivar is "an upper middle class, white, literate community" (118). Through corporate takeover, they become lower class enclaves of white privilege. "Somewhat richer . . . communities are getting help" (119). Lauren's father says corporations want these types of communities rather than their community of Robledo, a place, "too poor, too black, and too Hispanic to be of interest to anyone" (120). The relative safety of Olivar remains out of reach to people of color as well. Lauren's father "doubt[s] that Olivar is looking for families of blacks and Hispanics" (122). The white people of Olivar are not slaves; at least, "not now" (121). And they do not want people of color in their town.

The great atrocities of racial violence, legally sanctioned ones, happen in the slave factories. These factories "were supposed to provide jobs for that northward-flowing river of people" (324). The "were" implies intention of relief. Despite espousing personal economic

liberty, neoliberal economics serve the elite, not the masses. Factories designated as a job report

stopgap mutate into factories strategically set up to feed off the desperation of travelers headed to

Canada's Promised Land. In the factories, there are two types of jobs: "slave and slave drivers"

(323). Slave and slave drivers pull the story into an examination of white supremacy and

hegemony. The companies "like white men to be drivers" (323). People of color, by implication,

are the slaves. Even among the desperate, white privilege maintains hegemony, giving positions

of power to desperate whites, positions which keep people of color in line and working harder.

Emery, as the most diverse person in the text, becomes the embodiment of all people of color

suffering from oppression. It is no accident that she is the first one revealed as a slave.

It would be fallacious to cast *PS* as a simple condemnation of U.S. slavery. There is no

power in condemning what is almost universally condemned. Her text, however, does point to a

key difference between historical US slavery and neoliberally instigated slavery. In the 350 years

of North American slavery, the black slave body served as an economic investment. A slave

brought capital to the master through labor and through reproduction. But in Butler's *PS*, people

hold no value; slaves are "throw-aways" (324). This economic shift aligns with Blackmon's

findings on post-emancipation slavery. Southern industries did not need to reproduce slaves or

provide medical attention because a steady stream of convicts were always available. All a

timber baron or mine owner needed was a black man walking home from work and a duplicitous

loitering charge. Neoliberal economic policies in *PS* have created similar conditions, where the

purchase and reproduction of slaves are obsolete practices. Desperation leads to the masses

begging for slavery, figuratively holding out their hands for the chains to be placed on their

wrists in spite of future job prospects that promise chemical poisoning and mutilation by factory

equipment (324). For every worker killed, an army of desperate wait outside the factory, preferring slavery to cannibalism.

These policies and the atrocities set in place to bring them about, reach much further than the local in the text. Lauren and her group chase the promise of Canadian jobs and rain. Even the environment forgives in the North. Canada, cast as the Promised Land, is built on a shambolic promise. A market that trumps morals allows economic forces to architect Canada as a profiteer from slave factories. The goods produced by slaves in the US are bound for Canadian and Asian markets and consumers (324). Ultimately, slavery serves millennial capitalism. Beneath the pure reputation of Canadian hope festers an underbelly rank with the taint of corruption and profit off the desperate and broken. The text remains silent on whether that taint is earned through activity or complicity.

The main stage – contemporary slavery

At this point, I have worked through the text, indicating where and how the text implies, presents, exposes, and critiques neoliberal policies and the resulting slavery. I have not yet shown, as my introduction claims, that the text is more than a critical dystopia pointing out the danger of neoliberalism. In order to illustrate how *PS* is more than a critical dystopia pointing out an inevitable future save changes today, it is important to notice that Butler does not simply tell us that changing neoliberal policies today will stave off economic collapse and human slavery in the future. Instead, *PS* works as a canonical dystopia that forces an examination of the economic present and, for me as a white reader, my complicity in social and economic atrocity.

Lauren's partner Bankole muses, "In the early 1990s, while I was in college, I heard about cases of growers doing some of this – holding people against their wills and forcing them to work without pay. Latins in Califonia, blacks and Latins in the south" (292). The phrase "in

the early 1990s," penned in a book published in the early 1990s, situates the text into contemporary critique. "This" refers to slavery, attributing the label to human rights violations against migrant and poor workers of color. The events in the text occur in the author's present. I argue that through this placement in time, it is apparent the book is not nor ever was a prophecy. It is a present social critique. The second slipstage is pulled aside and the main stage of contemporary slavery materializes. By hiding its purpose for most of the book and laying the critique under two textual slipstages, *PS* forces the epiphany and follows by, for me as a white reader, the slowly pressing responsibility – a curtain of cognition that closes on the act of ignorance. I have no choice but to grapple with a reality which, for so long, I have silenced.

PS raises the issue of slavery head on and offers compelling implications on modern slavery and neoliberal policies, particularly for white readers. Adapting Morrison's picture of seeing the fishbowl (17) helps me visualize my experience reading through *PS*'s slipstages. A white person recognizing white privilege is like a goldfish seeing the glass of the fishbowl. The visible outworkings of the social construct of race encompass society like a fishbowl. White people, because race and racism affect them less overtly, have a difficult time seeing race. Systemic white hegemony allows much of the U.S. to function according to white norms making that hegemony feel normal to whites. I refract Morrison's metaphor, looking not at the contents of the fishbowl from outside but living within the contents surrounded by the unseen glass. A fish in a bowl sees the world in the bowl, believes it is natural, but does not see the glass that contains the water. A fish that finally sees the glass itself, however, cannot ever see the world the same. When white privilege finally becomes clear to a white person, they see the glass. They cannot live life in ignorance (except through denial) anymore. *PS*, through the gradual removal of textual slipstages, reveals the fishbowl.

I want to be careful here as I intentionally break a writing rule and mix metaphors. In this paper, I argued that *PS* employs textual slipstages of the fantastic to hide and layer revelations. The first is the slipstage of the neoliberal society which reveals a critique of contemporary neoliberal slavery; the second is the slipstage of the future setting, which when pulled aside reveals the main stage of a critique of slavery in the contemporary world. When the slipstages are pulled aside and the subject under condemnation sets, the reader does not just see the fishbowl. Butler's textual construction places the glass in such a way that the reader crashes headlong into it. The white reader sees the accusation and gets a broken nose in the process. The question for the white reader becomes, does the broken nose result in a triggering of a recognition or a retracting into denial?

The memory of slavery germinated and gestated in the contemporary white imaginary is webbed with the taint of white washed agendas. On a recent vaction to Hilton Head Island, the tour guide, a retiree originally from Massachusetts, pointed out that slavery was "awful" and "horrible," but the slaves on Hilton Head Island were treated better than slaves in other areas of the south. The next day, I visited Savannah, Georgia where another tour guide, born and raised in Savannah back to five generations, wanted to point out that slavery was "awful" and "horrible," but the slaves in Savannah were treated better than other areas of the south. The two anecdotes emblamatize U.S. white tendencies to recognize the necessity of paying lip service to atrocity while denying the taint to rest on our shoulders. If a guide from Massachusetts and a guide with deep southern roots could both recognize that their area of the country was different, what do people in the other areas of the country say? Does anybody openly admit that slavery was awful and horrible in their part of the country? How many admit their complicity in modern slavery and oppression? What is the role of literature in addressing these questions? What effects do

arguments like the NFL combine comparison and *$40 Million Slaves* have on activism and the white imaginary? *PS* does not hedge or waiver in its condemnation of contemporary slavery. Is this a text that "compels," as bell hooks (57) says? What role does the canonical dystopia play in compellation?

In *Slavery by Another Name*, Blackmon names mega-corporations that, often through mergers, have benefitted from slave labor, even after the Civil War. The list may surprise, including Coca-Cola, U.S. Steel, and Sloss Industries. Less surprising is these same corporations' refusal to consider their role and benefit from slavery, enacting what I call intentional amnesia and what Blackmon calls a "mythology most white Americans rely upon to explain our past and embroider our future" (384). An intentional amnesia matches the white American amnesia, which refuses to consider, much less acknowledge, past atrocities the amnesiac ostensibly played no part in. Blackmon spoke with wealthy individuals who "knew nothing of the real history" (388) of their corporate involvement in slavery, yet were adamant that "no significant abuses of African Americans had ever occurred at [their industries]" (388). Blackmon says, "I also discovered an unsettling truth that when white Americans frankly peel back the layers of our commingled pasts, we are all marred by it" (394). I believe *PS*'s dystopic slipstages of the fantastic pull back the layers for us—layers not of commingled pasts, but of complicit presents.

The message of a prophet, including the message of a parable, is cast out but needs receptive ground. *The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.* It is wise to remember that, among the messages of the prophet, a parable is a story told to illustrate a present reality, not a prediction about the future. The biblical model of the prophet, an image called up by the reference to the biblical parable of the sower and Lauren's religious background,

did more than just tell the future. Prophets also condemned the sin of the present. Butler as

prophet tells us a parable, as the title suggests, that was never about the future. It is a judgment

about the present.

Bridge: This is how the world ends

N. K. Jemisin's newest book *The Fifth Season* begins with the end of the world. Technically, it begins with two ends. At the bottom of the first page, the narrator provides "context" (p. 1) by zooming out over the land ironically called The Stillness, then zooming in to the land's capital city Yumenes, then to an unnamed man "who will matter a great deal." (p. 4) We later find out his name is Alabaster, an orogene which is a human who can harness the elements of the land. Orogenes are powerful but still controlled by another group of humans called the Guardians. Orogenes are also ostracized and feared by the rest of the human population. In the beginning though, before the reader knows this information, we are told "He knows that he is not, and will never be, one of them." (p. 4) Alabaster is and always will be excluded.

But Jemisin's novel begins a few paragraphs earlier with another ending. This time, Jemisin offers "a personal ending:" a mother mourning her dead child. The mother covers her son "with a blanket—except his face, because he is afraid of the dark." (p. 1) This personal ending is also a moment of confusion and anger. As the mother sits "numb" over her child, she thinks to herself "*but he was free*." His freedom and his death are at odds. The mother resolves the conflict herself when she realizes "*he wasn't* [free]. *Not really. But now he will be.*" In a violent death, the boy was killed by his father when he learned that his child was an orogene, a mother's thoughts speak to the hollowness of purported freedom.

But Jeminsin's novel begins even earlier, with the dedication. Seventeen black words rest on a page of white space. "*For all those who have to fight for the respect that everyone else is given without question.*" *The Fifth Season* is couched from before the beginning in struggle and privilege. It takes little imagination to see Jemisin recognizing the struggle of people of color,

people who are always ostracized and do "not, and will never" belong in the status quo, yet resist because they know they "matter a great deal." Belonging, inclusion, occurs through shifting the balance of who is given what "without question." In an interview on Wired Magazine's podcast, Jemisin tells that her inspiration for the novel was the Black Lives Matters movement. As her novel is only the first book in an as-yet-uncompleted series, it is not clear how or even if Jemisin reshifts exclusion.

Nnedi Okorafor, does offer a shift of the status quo when she presents a vision for a revised US exceptionalism in her children's fantasy novel, *Akata Witch*. Okorafor investigates who is given respect, how, and why? She mines these same issues of racial exclusion and revision of the status quo as Jeminsin.

Possibilities and limitations of the fantastic: Racial exclusion and reimagined citizenship in
Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch*

It is not uncommon for literary critics to ascribe the endearing, though problematic, descriptor
The Harry Potter of Nigeria to Nnedi Okorafor's children's fantasy novel *Akata Witch*. The
problems arise from associating a white-authored fantasy as a frame of reference for a black-
authored text, one that resists the white hegemony of much fantasy literature. However, the two
texts do share a number of similarities which make the comparison, while problematic,
understandable. The protagonist of *Akata Witch* is Sunny, an albino Nigerian-American girl who
discovers late in adolescence that she has magic, or juju, ability. She joins three other children,
Earlu and Chichi who are Nigerian and Sasha who is African American (from Chicago's South
Side), to undertake rigorous training in magic arts under the direction of juju "scholars." The
four children must study together to prepare to battle a Voldemort-type character called Black
Hat. On the surface, the fantastical tropes such as learning juju in a school setting and using
magical implements like potions, spells, and wands (juju knives in this case) validate the
comparison. However, a closer read shows the text resists the subtleties and implicit biases
inherent in much white or color-blind fantasy. As a black writer composing a story of West
African juju wielded by black characters, Okorafor resists the assumed whiteness and tokenism
found in much children's fantasy literature.

As powerful as her reenvisioned fantasy is, she also crafts a text that takes a critical
stance against contemporary social issues, particularly the racialized exclusion of black subjects
from cultural assimilation into the US. An argument between Sasha and Earlu illustrate the
nuance with which Okorafor's fantasy examines these issues. Earlu accuses Sasha of coming to
Nigeria because he was in trouble in the US and of hiding the fact from the other children. When

he pushes Sasha to "tell [the children] why you're here," (58) Sasha calls Earlu a "self-righteous African." Earlu retorts, "troublemaking black *American*." (emphasis in original) While Earlu means *American* as an insult, it is worth nothing that *black* stands as an unintentional qualifier of Sasha's US citizenship. He is not called a troublemaking American but a troublemaking *black* American. The word black becomes a marker of difference, where white is the implied norm. Even though Sasha is surrounded by black Nigerians, a black Nigerian reminds him that his blackness excludes him from his home country.

This rich excerpt suggests the complexity of issues Okorafor's text can entertain. It also highlights the capability of fantasy literature, black fantasy in particular, to critique social issues. In this paper, I explore some of the possibilities and limits of the fantastic through *Akata Witch*. Specifically, I examine her use of the genre to critique racial exclusion of black subjects in the US and to reimagine new forms of inclusive citizenship as a solution to that exclusion. I first argue that Okorafor takes a critical stance against the problem of racial exclusion of black subjects from full civic belonging in the US. I show how this critique of US exclusion extends from the contemporary US to her fantastical universe. Second, I explore Okorafor's proposed solution, which I argue is a recentering of racialized subjects and hyphenated identities as inherent members of US society. Finally, I examine the role fantasy and the fantastic play in the ability to reimagine social issues by grappling with the limits and implications of Okorafor's new model of citizenship.

The problem of citizenship exclusion

Many scholars of speculative literature, including the genres of science fiction and fantasy, attest to the fact that the genre engages with heavy social issues. For example, the children's literature scholar Farah Mendlesohn (2010) says "science fiction is as much an

argument with the present as it is an argument for the future. If Asimov writes about robots, he probably has the race question in mind." (p. 137) Fantasy is no different here. When Tolkien writes about the destruction of the shire, he probably has the question of industrialization in mind. When J. K. Rowling writes about house-elves, she probably has the question of slavery in mind. Okorafor follows this trend as she explores cultural assumptions surrounding race, racism, and citizenship.

Okorafor addresses many of these issues in passing. Because the novel is fantasy, magical battles between children and masquerades from the underworld overshadow her parenthetical but powerful moments of social critique. One of these moments include the following criticism of systemic racism in the US. Despite its mundane prominence in the text, it would be erroneous to ignore the importance of this short commentary. Sasha, the African American male tells the other children why he is in Nigeria. A Chicago native, Sasha was sent to Nigeria as punishment for using juju to assault a police officer. In Sasha's account, he was defending a woman of color from the officers' abuse. Rather than receiving punishment, however, the Nigerian visit provides Sasha with guidance and mentorship, comforts often not afforded a young black male in the US where the judicial system tends to be unforgiving. Okorafor uses this back-story to position Sasha in perpetual outsider status. She comments on US exclusion of black subjects as Sasha, in need of mentorship, does not find it in the US even though it is his place of birth. Mentorship and belonging accompany Sasha only outside of the US.

His experience is reminiscent of other transnational black youth who felt excluded from US society. The celebrated children's author Walter Dean Myers, for example, tells of meeting James Baldwin, an author Myers credits with reinvigorating his love of reading. Myers, who is

black, turned away from reading as a child when he felt buried under books by and about white

people. When faced with no images of himself in white literature, Myers felt excluded from the

world of books. It was reading Baldwin's story, "Sonny Blues," that changed Myers' life. When

he met Baldwin, Myers said "I blurted out to him what his story had done for me. "I know

exactly what you mean," [Baldwin] said. "I had to leave Harlem and the United States to search

for who I was. Isn't that a shame?"" (Myers)

The roots of Sasha's exclusion run deeper than this singular event with the officers. He

calls out the Chicago police for their brutality, suggesting his exclusion is systemic.

> "[The police] were harassing me and my friends,' Sasha said.
> 'They were pushing around this girl I know. And they were just . . .
> they were abusing the power they were given! Y'all don't know
> what it's like for a black man in the U.S. And y'all certainly don't
> know Chicago cops on the South Side. Here everyone's black, so
> you don't have [this type of trouble]" (60).

Being black in the US subjects Sasha to racial abuse. It is important to recognize that this abuse

stems from "power" or authority and the reason is racial prejudice. Sasha's civic experience, and

by extension the civic experience of other black citizens, remains outside the white norm and this

outsidedness stems from his blackness.

These accounts highlight the exclusion people of color are subjected to in the US. The

political scientist Elizabeth Cohen offers an overview of this issue of citizenship exclusion

enacted over racial difference; her ideas offer a frame for investigating exclusionary practices in

Akata Witch. Both voluntary and forced immigrants, according to Cohen, go through two types

of citizenship assimilation. The first is political, where the immigrant gains legal status. Civic

processes, such as naturalization or jus soli—citizenship by birth—ensure this type of

assimilation. Both Sunny and Sasha possess this legal status. The second and more tedious

assimilation, according to Cohen, is cultural, where the immigrant becomes accepted into the

American identity. Cohen argues that people of color and ethnic minorities in the US (African-Americans are included here because of forced migration) cannot access the dominant group, often resulting in exclusion from society at large. Black Americans who deserve full cultural assimilation like Sasha, and Walter Dean Myers, and James Baldwin, are left excluded, on the outside of full citizenship status. She says the "fundamental principles of American public law have contributed to an understanding of citizenship driven by concerns of difference, particularly racial difference, ascribed among native-born citizens. This internal differentiation domestically produces foreignness that renders ostensible citizens . . . foreign despite their native birth" (Cohen 32-33). In other words, people of color, like Sasha, are technically brought into the fold of official citizenship yet still remain excluded or foreign despite their official status. Thinkers as diverse as the sociologist Nathan Glazer, the historian David Hollinger, and the philosopher Will Kymlicka make similar claims, particularly in reference to the unique plight of black Americans. These scholars, among others, point out that black citizens face a unique situation as they fall outside important groups relevant to multiculturalist politics: they are neither voluntary immigrants nor indigenous. Save limited examples of individuals who can pass for white, black citizens cannot voluntarily choose to align with groups of their choice.

Okorafor intensifies her commentary on exclusion by exploring the issue through the fantastic. Sasha's situation as a young black male in Chicago's South Side discussed above is a criticism of contemporary US society. Okorafor visits this idea again when Sasha tells the other children about the US magic board in New York City, one of the regional governing bodies of the Leopard world. The book projects that racism, the overt litmus test of racialized exclusion in the US, extends into Leopard society, a society which perpetuates systemic racism within its own communities. Of the US magic boards, Sasha says:

> "I don't consider [the New York office] the head of anything. It doesn't represent black folks. We are a minority, I guess. As a matter of fact—everything's biased toward European juju. The African American headquarters is on the Gullah Islands in South Carolina. We call it Tar Nation." (60)

The US juju offices located in New York are not immune from white privilege and racial oppression that infiltrate from the Lamb world. There is a bitter irony as the Statue of Liberty, a symbol of U.S. welcome, sits in New York Harbor, the port of entry for many immigrants, yet her own black citizens are unwelcome. The African American magic board, excluded from full political participation with the white board, is housed in South Carolina. The novel reminds that white privilege is endemic. It transcends boundaries, even magical ones. With her racialization of the magic boards, Okorafor calls into question fallacious assumptions of color blindness in both reality and fantasy. While *Akata Witch* functions as a lens to examine contemporary racism, the novel can also be used as a lens to examine popular fantasy. The novel unearths uncomfortable truths regarding color-blind fantasy literature. *Harry Potter's* Ministry of Magic and the Hogwarts faculty, for example, are in fact the White Ministry of Magic and the white Hogwarts faculty.

Okorafor's insufficient solution. Okorafor's critiques of exclusion in Chicago and the Leopard world act as crucial counter-narrative to US modes of exclusionary practices. She then strengthens her critique of exclusionary constructions of US citizenship by drawing on the fantastic. She constructs a world Leopard community as an inclusive institution, a contrast to the US. In Okorafor's Leopard world, those able to practice or perform juju do so across boundaries of language, ethnicity, nationality, and religion. "A Leopard Person goes by many names around the world . . . All people of mystical true ability are Leopard People." (6) "All people" makes a

bold claim of universality. This universality is confirmed early in the book when Sunny, still learning about juju, questions Chichi and Orlu about their Leopard identity. Sunny asks:

> "So you all are—witches, or something?"
> [Chichi and Orlu] laughed. "I guess," Orlu said. "Here in Nigeria,
> we call ourselves Leopard People." (35-36)

Sunny tries to make sense of her new Leopard friends by ascribing an English term for a practitioner of juju—witch. In response, Orlu does not deny the English term. Instead, he uses the phrase "here in Nigeria," implying that in other locations, the name, but only the name, changes. Witches and Leopards are the same. "[Leopards have] always been around, all over the world. In some countries, we're called witches, sorcerers, shamans, wizards . . . So it's not just black people." (78) *Akata Witch* presents a fantasy universe where the worldview assumes exclusion is not the norm.

It would be naïve to take this universalist model at face value. While the idea of a united magic community is intriguing, the racism of the New York magic board already reveals its deficiency. The novel offers other rifts in the Leopard community, notably prejudices towards Free-Agents. In Okorafor's universe, the world is divided by Leopards, Lambs, and Free-Agents. In the Leopard world, the ability to perform juju is passed through a spiritual line of heredity. Lambs are people with no spiritual line of heredity and therefore, no juju ability. Pure Leopards receive the spiritual inheritance from both parents. Free-Agents like Sunny are those with only one Leopard parent. They are "never a Lamb" (64) but they are often on the outside looking in at Leopard society. It is possible that some of this degradation (exclusion) stems from Free-Agents' diminished juju ability and power, but there is a strong indication that the prejudice is exacerbated by the demeaning caricatures penned in those found in *Fast Facts for Free Agents* (*FFfFA*), an instruction book for Leopards like Sunny. The author of the book is a Nigerian

woman who studied in Europe and the US. *FFfFA* is a source of emotional chaffing for Sunny as it describes her, a Free-Agent, as ignorant, powerless, helpless, and unknowledgable. When Sunny shares her frustrations with Anatov, a leader in the Leopard community and a mentor to the four children, he informs her that the author developed deep-seated prejudices against indigenous and black peoples while living abroad. She harbored particular disdain for African Americans. (112) Anatov speaks of the book with repulsion, calling her ideas "vile." (113) Chichi concurs, calling the author "a bitch." (113) This reaction suggests key members of the juju community reject these racist, exclusionary practices. Yet when Sunny browses at a Leopard bookstore, a customer "sucked his teeth" (154) in disgust when he found out she was a Free Agent. Clearly, prejudice and exclusion remain in the community. What must be reiterated is the misguided inspiration for the demeaning caricatures of Free Agents is colonial and racial attitudes picked up by the author of *FFfFA* during her time in the white West. The Leopard world, where the labels of witch or Leopard differ but the magic purportedly remains the same, is infiltrated and inflamed by oppressive US structures. While Sunny is a Free-Agent, she is also a powerful Leopard. Her existence shows that the separation of Leopards and Free-Agents into distinct groups is arbitrary, stemming from white racism, not real cultural boundaries.

      Sunny as Sufficient Solution. Sunny raises questions surrounding the problem of US exclusion of black people from full citizenship. Cohen's claims about racial difference as an excluded category line up with other scholars in the field of multiculturalism and citizenship studies. Will Kymlicka, for example, argues that black Americans stand as a special case regarding cultural inclusion as they always remain on the periphery, always excluded from full cultural assimilation. He contrasts Greek-Arabs with Greek-African Americans. According to Kymlicka, a Greek-Arab can choose to identify with either aspect of their identities or neither as

they could likely pass for white. An American citizen of Greek and African descent does not

have the same agency. If she wishes to identify with her Greek heritage, society still considers

her black.

A simple solution would be to read Sunny as a dweller of two worlds, inhabiting black

and white identities through her albinism. In this simple solution, she is Nigerian, but also a

white American. However, extending Sunny's albinism to whiteness is an intriguing but

fallacious proposition. To call her "wooly blonde hair" (7) a marker of two races fails to grasp

both the concept of whiteness and the diversity within black cultures and ethnicities. Whiteness

as a social construct does not extend to albinos who are left outside of whiteness, not receiving

any racial privilege, and outside of blackness. Nigerians characters in the text, however, make

the move when they consider Sunny as white. I read the Nigerian Lambs' treatment of Sunny as

an Albino hovering on the artificial. Albinos in Nigeria suffer violence and oppression brought

about by superstition, not by an attribution of whiteness. However, both Sunny's classmates (12)

and her brothers (39) call her white. This is a label Sunny resists with anger. The label she adopts

and prefers is "American."

A more compelling solution is to read Sunny as a reclamation of exclusionary practices.

As a Free-Agent, she hovers on the periphery of the Leopard world. As an albino, she is as an

excluded member of an already excluded group. I argue that her peripheral status places her in an

open category that shifts the focus away from a hegemonic ideal. Sunny as a black American

becomes the new center of the citizen. As she is rebuffed from so many categories, she ironically

figures as a character that can be accessed by all. A comment by Anatov illustrates this point. As

an African American, one who has returned to Nigeria and who speaks with an American accent,

Anatov would seem to resonate more with Sasha, the Chicago native. Sasha and Anatov are both

African American, are both multilingual, and have histories of resisting oppressive authority. Yet in addressing Sunny about the prejudice of the author of *Fast Fact for Free Agents*, Anatov says, "you can imagine what this African woman thought of us African Americans." (emphasis added 113) Here, Anatov wraps Sunny in the fold of African Americans, using the pronoun "us." Though their backgrounds differ (Anatov is a decendent of slaves, Sunny a child of immigrants; Anatov is of pure Leopard lineage, Sunny is a Free Agent) Anatov relates to Sunny over shared struggles. He finds a connection and makes the move to draw her to him.

Sunny's representation(s) of black citizenship (she is black and Nigerian while identifying as American; she exists on the periphery yet represents the center) pushes the boundaries of key positions in citizenship studies. For example, David Hollinger argues that community identity "is best seen as a spectrum." (244) A spectrum implies presence of a point along multiple points of possibility. *Akata Witch* shows the spectrum metaphor is deficient for those with hyphenated identities. The black citizen offers a plurality of possibilities—she can embody multiple points along a spectrum rather than one. There is no contradiction in Sasha as an American maintaining pride over his connection with the African-American magic board on Gullah Island, while showing irritation regarding the New York magic board's exclusion of black Leopards. A black American can hold both positions. In addition, Sunny can develop as a Leopard in Nigeria, strengthening the Nigerian aspects of her identity while primarily identifying as American. Anatov can speak with a US accent, include himself with the pronoun "us" when talking about African-Americans, while also referring to himself with the pronoun "we" when talking about what Nigerians value.

Okorafor also touches on this concept in her novel *The Book of Phoenix*, the prequel to her award-winning dystopia *Who Fears Death*. The black protagonist Phoenix, born in the US

but genetically engineered with African genes, listens to her juju-practicing friend Mmuo tell about his youth working in Nigerian politics. In the course of his story, Mmuo tells Phoenix that his knowledge of juju complemented his political savvy. As Phoenix struggles with his story of a magic wielding politician, Mmuo says, "You are an American, Phoenix. So though you know Africa well, you will believe in the power of science over all that we know. But you are an African, too, so you know it in your flesh, that the spirit world rules the physical world." (116) Mmuo's comment reinforces the theme in Okorafor's work, that belonging to two groups and oscillating between them, being wholly part of both yet completely separate, is a complementary position, not a contradictory one.

The possibilities of the fantastic

I want to finish by placing this discussion back within the context of conversations of the fantastic. As complicated and intertwined as these real issues surrounding racial exclusion are, *Akata Witch* as a fantasy grapples with their full complexity. Grappling with a topic alone, however, does not necessarily move an idea forward in a meaningful way. While Okorafor's novel proposes a compelling solution (Sunny reclaims the status of exclusion), the solution does not fully convince in either the contemporary she critiques or the fantastical she proposes.

Regarding the solution, Okorafor's model of a citizen embodying a plurality of possibilities seems to address a problem raised by the writer Kenan Malik. He argues that multiculturalism as a political policy of cultural recognition fails because it pursues unity but inadvertently produces division. When Germany tried to integrate Turkish immigrants, Malik says that Turks and other minority groups were "'allowed' to keep their own culture, language and lifestyle. The consequence was the creation of parallel communities . . . The policy did not so much represent respect for diversity as a means of avoiding the issue of how to create a

common, inclusive culture." As a model of citizenship, Sunny addresses this problem of "parallel communities" by showing that a citizen can be a member of many parallel communities simultaneously. In other words, a parallel community is not an isolated community. However, when placing this model back into the context of the contemporary world, the model becomes untenable. Okorafor addresses the issue of the citizen but doesn't solve the issue of the system. While Sunny can inhabit many communities, she does not change the communities themselves. Returning this conversation to Malik, his problem of the integration of German Turks does not arise solely from their isolation into their own "parallel communities." Cultural assimilation requires two parties to cooperate: the immigrant must be willing to assimilate and the dominant group must be willing to accept new citizens. The German Turks' inability to integrate also stems from mainstream German culture enacting their own form of racial exclusion. Malik lays blame with German Turks but does not ask anything of native Germans.

The idea behind Sunny's recentered citizenship faces similar problems within the novel. While her outsidedness extends notions of US citizenship, her outsidedness as a Free Agent extends notions of Leopard standing. Sunny recenters Free Agents as full participants in the Leopard community. However, she does not change the Leopard community itself. It is not convincing that Sunny's Free Agency would now shift the balance of entrenched prejudices created by *Fast Facts for Free Agents*.

Despite these limitations, I want to reiterate the power black fantasy holds in reimagining new cultural and racial paradigms. With the US culture underwritten by deep-seated yet often implicit racism, fantasy provides the space for proposing news models and solutions. In her book *Afrofuturism: The world of black sci-fi and fantasy culture*, Ytasha L. Womack presents a solid overview of the threads connecting black speculative art with empowerment in the black

community. She speaks to fantasy's potential for empowerment when she says black science fiction and fantasy "unchains the mind" (15) and that images of the black geek "shatters limited notions of black identity." (13) All of this adds up to a genre whose roots are in social change. (17) These ideas speak directly to those of black feminists like bell hooks who has claimed the black imagination has been "colonized." (55) Therefore, the "mind is the site of resistance" (54). Only "when the imagination is free to wander, explore, question, transgress" (55) via engagement with literature will the mind be set free. hooks calls critical fictions literature which "challenges . . . hegemonic narratives" (p. 57). It is important to recognize that hooks feels critical fictions must resist fantasy and pursue that which "returns us to the real more fully." (55) Okorafor's text shows fantasy can also function as critical fictions. What *Akata Witch* offers here is an empowering image for black readers and thinkers. While *Akata Witch* does not shift the system, it provides a conceptual model for teasing out weaknesses in the system. This points to the education philosopher Maxine Greene's idea of "social imagination" (5), or the ability to see a "deficient society" differently, as that which makes societal improvement possible. We cannot work towards what we cannot see. In other words, the first step in creating a better society is imagining a better one to replace the current one. While *Akata Witch* does not shift the center of the citizen nor dismantle the system which the citizen inhabits, it carries the potential for shifting both when it allows the space for reimagining what inclusive citizenship looks like. With such a dearth of books about children of color, with most characters of color appearing as side-kicks or minor players in the plot, and with fantasy literature standing as a stark example of this white hegemonic hold on literature, there must be the recognition that the appearance of a black protagonist, written by an author who can accurately and insightfully represent a black experience is itself a critical act of resistance (hooks, 1991).

Conclusion

While authentic representations of characters of color resist hegemonic narratives at the systemic level, they also speak to needs of the disenfranchised at an individual level. The editor of *Black Comix*, John Jennings, says "if you're not white and you're in [the U.S.], you're starving for images of yourself" (Womack, p. 142). This starvation does more than deprive disenfranchised youth of a character to relate to. It solidifies in their mind a hegemonic view of white literature. The writer Ytasha Womack (2013) tells an anecdote about the black fantasy writer N. K. Jemisin. When Jemisin was younger, she says she wrote her stories with white characters, because she thought that was what stories were. In Jemisin's words, "the [sci-fi] genre itself sends a very clear message that you are not welcome here" (Womack, p. 110). It was not until after Jemisin read the iconic black science fiction and fantasy author Octavia Butler that she realized black characters could exist in a book. Only then, was she able to write black characters into her stories. If Jemisin, an author who creates worlds as lush and developed as J.R.R. Tolkien or George R.R. Martin, needed Butler to know she was "welcome" or at least that she could walk through the door, bidden or unbidden, then there are potentially scores, hundreds, even thousands of young authors of color who do not know they can be an author, or do not know that their stories can contain themselves and their own experiences. Fantasy, particularly fantasy by African American authors, can and I would argue is necessary to inspire new writers and thinkers.

In *Akata Witch*, Sunny visits Chichi's house for the first time and is struck by the "hut['s]" (p. 24) interior decorating.

> "The only source of light were three kerosene lamps, one hanging from the low ceiling and two others on stacks of books. The place was *full* of books—on a small table in the middle of the room, packed under the bed, stacked against the wall all the way up to the ceiling. . . Chichi's mother was perched on top of a stack of books, readings." (pp. 24-25)

The book-filled house reminds Sunny of her own book collection at home where the piles of books "[weren't] as bad as Chichi's hut, but it was getting there. Sunny had run out of shelf space, so she had started keeping books under the bed. Most were cheap baperbacks her mother had found at the market, but she had been able to bring a few over from the United States, including her two favorites—Virginia Hamilton's *Her Stories* and *The Witches* by Roald Dahl." (p. 25)

While working at a local community center in a under-served, predominantly black community in Michigan, a white former teacher volunteer told me, "poor families don't even think of reading to their children." By poor, she meant black. Her believe, while egregious and not supported by research, is not uncommon among white workers in poor, black communities. Some teachers and even education scholars believe and perpetuate the stereotype that black people do not read. Often, these assumptions are buried under white supremacist coded language. Rather than saying "black people don't read," teachers will say a child's "home environment is not supportive" or that "poor families don't read." This coded language however, does not often show up in poor white communities and school.

In contrast to these white myths is the prominence of black readers and black lovers of books in black speculative fiction. *Akata Witch* is replete with these images. Besides Chichi's hut and Sunny's room, *Fast Facts for Free Agents* functions as a book within a book, with pages from the instruction manual taking up entire pages in *Akata Witch*. Books even sit at the heart of the entire Nigerian Leopard government as the headquarters are housed in a library.

I would short sell the prominence of these images if I said many other works of black speculative fiction contain similar accounts. Books and writing are not just included, but central to many of these texts.

- In Okorafor's children's novel *Zahrah the Windseeker*, the protagonist successfully navigates the dangers of the Forbidden Greeny Jungle only with the help of information from the book *The Forbidden Greeny Jungle Field Guide, Volume 439* (p. 114).

- One of the central conflicts in Samuel Delany's *Neveryona* is the character pryn's journey of discovering letters. She begins the book as "pryn—because she knew something of writing but not of capital letters," (p. 12) then eventually becomes Pryn on her journey as she learns of capital letters and her own history.

- Lauren from *Parable of the Sower* records her verses for her own religious text, *Earthseed*, in a notebook. These verses appear at the beginning of every chapter.

My previous two articles have examined issues of "subversion" (Jackson, 1984) in texts of black speculative fiction. Subversive, critical commentaries in these texts cover a wide range of issues including police violence, microaggressions, slavery, transphobia, and many others. The potential for these texts to work in the anti-racist classroom rests, in part, in their ability to name the pain (hooks, 1984). They also hold potential to recast stereotypical images and assumptions.

In the next two articles, I transition. Up to this point, I looked at images in the text. Now, I place these texts in the hands of readers (specifically, white pre-service teachers) to determine how they engage with representations of grand concepts such as slavery or colonialism and more everyday instances such as black people surrounding themselves with books.

White pre-service teacher engagement with black speculative fiction: Insight into talk about race and teacher dispositions

Harry Potter, *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and other series show that science fiction and fantasy (sff) literature is a popular genre, able to reach levels of fandom that few other genres can. While many students read sff, the genres are often sparse in the classroom as teachers prefer realistic narratives in contemporary or historical settings. Scholarship in children's literature and multicultural literature reinforce this divide. Many scholars assume meaningful engagement occurs around realistic texts (Escamilla and Nathenson-Mejia, 2010; Laframboise and Griffith, 1997) while other studies indicate texts connected to sff, like comic books, constitute the majority of many students' out-of-school reading (Hughes-Hassell & Rodge, 2007). In other words, there is a disconnect between what students read and what teachers and scholars value in classroom texts.

Because our students read these books, we must teach them *how* to read them. This need is critical considering the problematic nature of racial representation in the genre. Much has been said and written about the lack of racial diversity in novels like *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* series but little has changed in more contemporary stories. For example, a tumbler titled "Every Single Word" clocks the total dialogue by people of color in popular films. The Harry Potter films contain less than six minutes of dialogue in over 1,200 total minutes of film. The popularity of the genre and its offshoots in popular culture like video games and comic books require teachers to develop critical reading strategies to engage with these books.

Black speculative fiction (bsf), stories of science fiction and fantasy written by black authors that front black and brown issues and voices, plays an important role in addressing this need because it disrupts the assumed whiteness found within the genre. Besides offering

fascinating and compelling stories, authors such as Nalo Hopkinson, Nnedi Okorafor, N.K. Jemisin, and others expand the genre beyond Eurocentric and Americentric characters and settings. Black speculative fiction as a movement (the term subgenre fails to capture bsf's power) is disrupting the assumed whiteness found in sff. In doing so, it is also increasing its fan base and garnering respect among critics and award committees.

In this paper, I explore the potential of black speculative fiction for anti-racist education by examining white pre-service teacher discourse on race and racism when reading *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler.

Butler's *Parable of the Sower*

One of the most influential authors of black speculative fiction is Octavia Butler. She has reached levels of popularity and scholarly recognition known by few authors of any genre. She has won almost every science fiction and fantasy literary award and was the first science fiction author to receive a MacArthur Fellowship. Her novels such as *Kindred* are taught in American high schools and universities, her *Parable of the Sower* has been adapted to the musical stage, and her novel *Dawn* is currently in development for a television series.

Many speculative fiction writers of color cite Butler as a key literary figure in their development as a writer. Butler herself even tells of meeting a young black author "who told [her] she had thought about writing [science fiction] but didn't because she had never heard of any black [speculative fiction] writers" (McCaffery, p. 61). A scholar, teacher, or reader exploring multicultural fantasy must engage with Butler as a foundational and pivotal figure.

This study is based on my teaching Butler's text *Parable of the Sower* in an undergraduate young adult literature course. The protagonist of the story is Lauren, a young black woman who has hyperempathy, a condition that allows her to feel the emotional and

physical pain of those around her. She struggles to find meaning when restricted by the psychological walls of her father's strict religious guidelines and by the physical walls surrounding her small community of Robledo. Inside the walls are a few families, meager farms, and no jobs. Outside the walls is a dystopic California where water is expensive or poisonous, violence is pervasive, and starvation is a merciful death.

The only hope for many in *Parable of the Sower* is employment at one of the corporate towns where "old company trick[s]" (121) such as charging exorbitant prices for room and board keep so-called employees indentured to the corporation, a tactic Lauren's father equates with slavery. Eventually, Lauren must flee her community with two friends and travel north to Canada where jobs and water are still reliable. As she journey's north she picks up new group members, sometimes for protection and sometimes out of pity. While traveling, Lauren begins to write verses for *Earthseed*, a new religion she founds.

Parable of the Sower is rich in literary merit and ripe for discussion in the English classroom. Lauren's position as a young black woman attaining leadership status raises issues of gender, race, and power; her journey north metaphors the Underground Railroad; the novel's exploration of contemporary rather than historical slavery stands out to me as particularly pertinent as it is a topic easy to overlook in discussions of racism when slavery is relegated to history.

Talking about race with white students

Talking about race and racism is an uncomfortable topic in the US. Scholarship surrounding anti-racist education shows classroom discussions about race are fraught with anger, discomfort, avoidance, hedging, and many other dispositions and strategies that promote comfortable discussion over change. (Escamilla and Nathenson-Mejia, 2010; Katsarou, 2009;

Laframboise and Griffith, 1997) Some of this discomfort stems from overt discriminatory practices (Cabrera, 2014) but much is subtle.

One well-documented manifestation in the research revolves around silence. When anti-racist and social justice educators ask white students to talk about race, they say little or they code their language to avoid the subject. Haviland (2008) offers one of the clearest examinations of behaviors white students' employ when talking about race. He found fifteen different strategies white students enacted to avoid talking about race: avoiding words, false starts, safe self-critique, asserting ignorance, letting others off the hook, citing authority, maintaining silence, changing the topic, affirming sameness, joking, agreeing and supporting, praising and encouraging, caring, sharing personal information, and focusing on barriers. These "white educational discourses" (44) helped students avoid the topic and reestablish the social status quo concerning white hegemony and supremacy.

If many white pre-service teachers avoid, hedge, or downplay talking about race, more research needs to examine how to get students to talk about race and use authentic, non-coded language. In a society that values so-called color blindness, I understand why many white students feel uncomfortable talking about race. Yet considering the damage associated with whitewashing and silencing of underrepresented voices and experiences, it is important to get students to break the silence.

I find literature from the black speculative fiction movement to be an exciting tool for critical pedagogues and anti-racist teachers. The genre is an under-utilized tool that holds the potential for opening up difficult conversations and allowing white students to sustain meaningful discussions. Science fiction and fantasy has a long history of critiquing and reimagining society at large. Samuel R. Delany, Joanna Russ, Octavia Butler, Margret Atwood,

Ursula K. Le Guin, Nalo Hopkinson, Madeline L'Engle and many others have all asked their readers to consider difficult questions concerning society. The contemporary movement of bsf asks similar questions regarding class, gender, and sexuality. The genre also brings in a much needed focus on authentic representations of race and authentic reflections on racism, something often missing in mainstream science fiction and fantasy literature.

What makes bsf interesting in my view is that these critiques come in speculative stories and fantastical settings that theoretically place some distance between the reader and the subject being examined. Saler (2012), a scholar who has examined fantasy and reality in literature, calls this "critical distance" (p. 169). A science fiction text can explore the tragedies associated with colonialism, for example, but it distances the reader from the tragedy by exploring it on a distant planet, in the future, or with alien species.

I wanted to find out how a reader engages with this distance when race or racism is the subject being critiqued. As an anti-racist pedagogue, I tried to see if this layer of critical distance gives instructors a tool to open up difficult conversations or if it allowed students to sidestep or delay some of the resistance that commonly occurs. As I offered *Parable of the Sower* to my students, I wanted to find out the following:

1. How do my students engage with issues of racism in the novel?

2. What role do the speculative elements in the novel play in my students' discussions about race?

I approached these questions through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT is a system for analyzing issues of race and privilege in society. The theory began in the field of law with the work of Derrick Bell and has since been applied extensively in the field of education by scholars such as Lisa Delpit, Zeus Leonardo, Ebony Thomas, and others. As a system, CRT

consists of a series of tenets that help frame analysis of issues in education. These tenets include, among others:

- race is a social construct (Dunbar, 2008), not discreet markers of difference

- racism is structural, systemic, and pervasive—racism is not relegated to the past but continues today as a system that maintains the status quo, (Carter Andrews and Tuitt, 2013) and

- people of color bring unique insight to conversations on race (Ladson-Billings, 2009)

In plain language, use of this lens means I value open, honest conversations about explicit and implicit racism. As I analyze my data, I view color-blind language as problematic and not conducive to transformative education. I also value the writing of Butler, a woman of color, because her consideration of race and slavery carries insight generally absent from writing by white authors.

Methodology and Data

Study context. This study took place in an undergraduate young adult literature course housed in a teacher education program at a large midwestern state university. The discussion-based course focused on issues pertaining to the writing, reading, and teaching of diverse literature and the social situations that encompass, influence, and cause these issues. It is an advanced course where most of the students are education majors. While the course is an education course, students do not make lesson plans nor learn how to "teach" diverse literature. Instead, they learn to engage with diverse books as readers and think about larger issues in the field such as who can authentically tell someone else's story, what is essentialism, and what role does a reader's background play in their understanding of a story?

Students from across the disciplines routinely enroll in the course. The course is well attended, filling multiple sections each semester. Most students are female and come from white, middle class, broadly Christian backgrounds which is representative of national trends among educators (Strizek, et. al., 2006). This particular section of the course from which I draw this data contained twenty-four students, two of whom were male. Three of the female students were black, while the rest were white.

Students read many novels over the course of the 15 week semester (one novel per week) but *Parable of the Sower* was the only work of fantasy. I chose *Parable of the Sower* for my class because it tackles difficult but subtle issues of racial oppression. The text is unwavering in its critique of white supremacy but also unearths less-talked-about manifestations of oppression such as the role of corporations and governments in reinforcing and perpetuating systemic racism. I should also note that since the course was an advanced course, an elective, and one which explicitly focused on "issues of diversity," there is the possibility students would be more willing to talk about race. As I worked with the students over the semester, I also noticed that some students already took classes on diversity or multicultural education. However, I did not ask students to provide this background information for the study.

Data Sources. The data consists of three types of engagement with the novel: small group discussions, large group or class discussions, and two student writing assignments. During class, students first spent 30-40 minutes (of a three hour period) discussing the *Parable of the Sower* in small groups, followed by a whole-class discussion. For these discussions, students shared their thoughts on what they saw as issues of diversity, broadly defined, in the novel. I gave students no special prompts as I wanted to see how they naturally dealt with issues of race they encountered in the text. I wanted to allow them the freedom of discussing or ignoring any

issue they found relevant. This freedom was consistent with previous small group book discussions.

Using Haviland's (2008) study as a touchstone, I knew there would be the potential for students to avoid all conversations about race. Since I still wanted to explicitly look at their strategies for talking about race, I followed their discussions with the first writing assignment: a free-writing activity where I asked students to focus on corporatization and slavery. To help frame the free-writing, I directed students towards several vignettes from the novel where corporations, slavery, and race were explicitly tied together. I then asked students to write about the patterns they found.

One such example was toward the end of the novel. Lauren and her group approach the Canadian border where they meet Emery, an individual who has escaped from the slave "factories" (p. 324) that line the border. Emery tells them that the slave "drivers" (p. 323) are white, implying that the slaves are people of color. In this excerpt, slavery and racism are explicitly tied together. While I did not tell students to write about race, I told them to look for the patterns. The pattern of slavery tied to race is explicit enough that to not write about the pattern would be a clear example of White Educational Discourse.

The second writing activity was a regular class writing assignment (they were assigned 5 such assignments over the course of the semester) where students explored an issue of diversity in the text. This activity was completed outside of class, after the class discussions. Students could write about race or racism in this longer written assignment, but it was not required. This openness also matched the structure of previous out-of-class writing assignments. Rather than focus students on issues of racism in the longer assignment and compromise the integrity of the activity as it was originally intended (as students could select any issue of diversity), I wanted to

see if they were willing to engage with the issues independently, after the class discussions and the free-writing. I want to note that this assignment was the fourth of five papers which means the students were already versed in discussing and writing for the course.

      Data Analysis. Each of these in-class and out of class assignments became data for this study. I listened to small group and large group discussions, looking for relevant excerpts and transcribing where appropriate. I then enacted a cycle of constant comparative analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and reflexive journaling (Janesick, 2004) to find and refine themes and establish patterns in the data. As I was analyzing the discussions and writing, I sometimes came across discrepancies or elements I found perplexing. When a discrepancy related to my research questions, I looked broadly at the students other data responses for clarity.

      For example, when a student did not write about racism in the text, I could not determine if the student missed the topic because they wanted to avoid talking about race, because of the critical distance, or because they were uncomfortable with speculative literature. I triangulated by comparing the data to students' other writings and discussions to attain a fuller picture of their position and disposition regarding race.

Findings

      In many studies like mine, an excerpt of data is first presented, followed by an analysis. Or, the codes are spelled out, sometimes presented in a table, and then discussed. However, in this paper I want to approach my findings from a different angle. Because of the nature of their writing (particularly the free writing) and because of the nature of the participants (students whom I have worked closely with), I instead present the findings through a series of conversation vignettes from four students' writing assignments. Rather than craft a series of themes, I offer a snapshot of the students as students, human beings struggling with complicated issues. Rather

than present a list of empirical findings, I place my students writing in conversation with the theory of critical distance and use that conversation to speak back to Haviland (2008).

Brooke. Brooke's writing illustrates the subtle way silence works when white students and teachers talk about race (Haviland, 2008). Her second writing assignment (not the free-writing activity) explored the metaphor of walls in the novel, focusing on how walls both keep people out but also lock people in. In the middle of her paper, she says, "The novel was easy to relate to circumstances and stereotypes walls found in our own society today place on certain populations of people." A critical question is, what does she mean by "certain populations of people?"Most of her paper remains a close read of the novel, but in one paragraph she moves away from the novel, applying the metaphor to a nearby metropolitan area.

She uses this paragraph as a reflection on what she sees in that city and leaves with rich insights. Brooke mentions aspects of the poorest areas of the city, including "graffiti covered walls, trash and litter swirling in the wind." She then turns to societal assumptions and stereotypes about the area. "We are trained and programmed by society to immediately judge and make assumptions about [the city] as a whole. That each of its residents are not working but spend their days scouring the streets for drugs, that when a homeless man or woman is sleeping under a bridge they are high, and did not spend their day looking for a job."

The city in question contains a majority black population. While her language appears color-blind, she references homelessness and drugs as veiled references to black individuals in urban environments. However, her omission of race indicates an enactment of a white resistance strategy.

As I have pointed out, Brooke makes encouraging observations. Using the metaphor of the wall, she develops insight on social stereotypes. "We assume each person within the walls of

[the city] are in the same circumstance, when truly if we are not behind those walls, we do not

know." She understands that the very poor have different reasons for being in their

circumstances and she understands society's way of generalizing poor people's circumstances to

fit a disparaging narrative. Brooke's openness and understanding seem positive, but that

positiveness must be tempered by her diffracted references. Through the lens of CRT, her

dancing around the subject of race clouds her ability to move toward racial understanding.

Recognizing that race is a social construct (Dunbar, 2008) or that racism is pervasive and

structural (Carter Andrews and Tuitt, 2013) becomes difficult if race or racism is not named.

      Danielle. Danielle's responses do not fit neatly into Haviland's White Educational

Discourse (WED). She indicates initial discomfort with discussing race, a mark of WED, but

also explicitly grapples with racism in the novel. Danielle begins her assigned paper by trying to

understand race as a factor outside the walls of Robledo. She notices that as Lauren travels north,

"she only picks up people of color," leading her to ask, "why does she only pick up people of

color if that is known to draw attention? Is it because she trusts them more, because they are like

her?" Her second question shows she is struggling to understand but finding reasonable

possibilities. These questions also show Danielle using specific language which Haviland's study

suggests she would avoid. At this point, Danielle stands as a marked contrast to Brooke, who fit

easily in Haviland's framework.

      However, Danielle then asks, "in a world of such turmoil where anyone is being killed or

raped, why is race still a deciding factor, or why does race alone make them natural allies?" Her

question, based off assumptions of color-blindness, hints at disbelief. Race, in her view, should

not be an issue when survival is at stake. Danielle looks at a sensitive issue related to race but

applies a white privileged lens. She notices Lauren call people of color "natural allies" (Butler, p.

208) but fails to understand that so-called color-blind dispositions favor the majority white population, not people of color (Leonardo and Porter, 2010).

If she stopped here, Danielle would leave her exploration at a problematic point of color-blindness. But she continues, suggesting she is trying to figure out these issues rather than brush them aside and reinforce the status quo. "So, do they not pick up any white travelers, because they are afraid of them or is it because there are none?" Here, Danielle grapples with what angers her. This suggests that whiteness can embody contradictory (in Haviland's framework) positions. She reacts with discomfort because the group in the novel does not fit with her white outlook, but is also willing to dig deeper and ask questions. Rather than leave her exploration at what angers her, she moves forward to question the context of what angers her. I want to be clear that I am not condoning or minimizing her anger, but I am suggesting her anger does not prevent her from further exploration. She does not leave her initial set of questions in a way that white-washes black and brown narratives. She could have discredited Lauren's practices because they feel uncomfortable to her as a white woman. Instead, she digs and seeks understanding. Her follow-up questions provide reasonable theories that approach understanding rather than condemnation. I would not claim that Danielle appreciated silenced voices, but she grapples with her own views.

As Danielle moves on, she asks a further question regarding the race of people Lauren meets traveling north. "Is this [racial disparity] to emphasize the idea of white privilege?" Through a series of questions, she struggles with uncomfortable and unfamiliar events. But she then turns her questions from the novel to the contemporary. She asks, "is Butler trying to shed light onto real life matters here?" Danielle provides rationale for this turn to reality, saying "this question of white privilege comes from" her studying urban education at the university. She says "constantly reading articles about education in urban areas" directs the way she understands

Robledo as "very similar to that of urban education school districts." This is a key point. Simply giving a book of speculative fiction to a student does not guarantee rich discussions. However, black speculative fiction is a tool that, when used in a multicultural literature course or in conjunction with other training in "culturally responsive" (Delpit, 1995) or "culturally sustaining" (Paris, 2012) pedagogy does allow space for rich discussions about controversial issues.

Danielle's ultimate point is that she "took [Butler's divisions in class and race] as a realistic interpretation of looking at white privilege. . . . Real life issues are often transcended into fictional stories." Danielle provides insight into her understanding of how fiction and genre work. Not only does the fantasy or speculative text critique racial relations, she talked about those relations in ways that run counter to Haviland's White Educational Discourse.

Ashley. Ashley's free-writing omitted race and racism completely, much like many of her classmates. She placed the intersection of slavery and business in the context of totalitarian regimes, specifically the "communist-like society of Olivar." This, to me, was a strange angle to take as Butler's dystopian California shares little in common with communist systems. It suggests she prefers to think outside of race when faced with the historical issue of slavery and white involvement in slavery. Communism holds little psychological leverage with a rural, middle-class, mid-westerner. She then went on to write about types of slavery, attaching slavery to religion, sex traffickers, and drugs. Each type of slavery was a viable and interesting concept to consider, but all blunted the topic of race as she talked around the direct ties between slavery and race in the US. *Parable of the Sower* overtly ties slavery to race, yet Ashley's free-writing side-stepped the conversation.

As I initially worked through her free-writing, I categorized Ashley's responses as fitting in Haviland's White Educational Discourse. She ignored, omitted, or hedged when asked to talk

about race. This felt strange to me because during the course of the semester Ashley was a student who resonated with social justice-oriented conversations. She unapologetically pointed out oppression she saw in the world and advocated for inclusive literature, culturally responsive teaching, and understanding of students from disenfranchised backgrounds. Why did she seem to revert here?

Her follow-up writing assignment brought clarity and complexity to my findings. The out-of-class paper Ashley turned in the next week was a cogent exploration of whiteness in Butler's novel, clarified through ruminations on her own privilege. This assignment was markedly different from her free-writing. She wrote that whiteness can be a "luxury of not having your race pointed out to you or having the lack of applicable resources or representations of your race and culture available." She then turned this realization to the novel, claiming that the mostly white citizens of Olivar, maintain both a level of "choice" and "privilege." They can choose to go to Olivar (a choice denied Lauren and her family because they are people of color) and they have the privilege to escape "the hell pit that is [Butler's] California." It is possible her hedging was less a resistance strategy than it was the result of free-writing about a heavy topic on short notice.

Nicole. Nicole also avoided race in her initial discussion of slavery in the novel. Instead, she made a divide between *literal* and *figurative* slavery, a move that downplays the violence done to black individuals and families. When talking about literal slavery, she wrote that "corporations . . . benefit from slavery," so they allow it to continue out of financial self-interest. By figurative, she meant slavery could refer to a generic understanding of a character "being trapped in [their] world." As I did with Ashley, I initially read Nicole's coded language as an application of White Educational Discourse. Nicole avoided race, preferring to think about types

of slavery rather than who specifically is affected. In other words, from a Critical Race perspective, it is more comfortable for a white individual to talk metaphorically about slavery as an addiction or oppression by a corporation than to talk about slavery as racially motivated and oppressors as white people. This metaphorical shift is important. In order to sidestep or avoid difficult conversations, my students spoke in comfortable metaphors. This implementation of metaphors also sits outside of Haviland's WED.

Nicole's written assignment, however, was much like Ashley's: rich, engaging with the very ideas I felt she avoided in her free-write. Nicole's paper is particularly compelling as it illustrates the role black speculative fiction plays in fostering difficult conversations when she dives into a full discussion of race in Lauren's community of Robledo (discussed in the next section). She moves from a simple conversation of physical difference to an examination of structural issues. She first recognizes that Robledo "consists of predominately minority families with very few white people." She then targets the community's racial makeup as "a source of tension" and explicitly names race in her writing.

She goes on to explore "complications regarding race mixing and interracial relationships" when the characters Lauren, who is black, and Harry, who is white, discuss the difficulties of the two of them traveling together on the road. Nicole first quotes the characters' discussion where they point out that "mixed couples catch hell," and then examines the group dynamics when Zahra, a black woman from Robledo, joins the group. She references their point that Harry could look like their "cousin" if he could "get a reasonable tan," then uses this simple point about skin tone to turn to a complex reflection on "a hierarchy of status among races."

Discussion: Critical distance and meaning-making

The use of fantasy and dystopia to discuss current issues is a not uncommon strategy in the critical pedagogy classroom (Simmons, 2012; Petrone, Saringianides, and Lewis, 2014). This study extends the use of the genre to examine how it holds merit for anti-racist pedagogy. In particular, this study indicates that the genre of black speculative fiction allows some students, even ones who harbor discomfort exploring racism and white privilege, to produce sophisticated though sometimes laborious explorations. Even as students began to exhibit aspects of white educational discourse, they could also move beyond that resistance to ask questions and feel out possible solutions.

The genre provides students space to overtly discuss race and can also draw students into spaces where they inevitably, though perhaps inadvertently, talk about race. What I find most interesting about Nicole's paper, for example, is that she initially frames the novel as one that does not directly deal with race. She then writes a potent piece on race and racism without avoiding the messy work of vocalizing white privilege and oppression. She does this by connecting what she read in the novel to "racial separation that is *not too unfamiliar from our modern day*" (emphasis added). She pulled the concept from the dystopia into the contemporary, a shift that indicates she navigated the critical distance between her and the topic with success. The shift also shows she could talk about race, a finding that adds nuance to Haviland's White Educational Discourse.

Nicole used the fantastic as a lens to understand her world. Ashley flipped this scenario, using her world as a lens to traverse the critical distance and make sense of the novel. She began her paper talking about her own "experiences with race." She then tells of her own difficulties learning to identify as white and seeing her own privilege when she was taught growing up to

avoid overt talk of race. She also mentions personal growth through reading scholarship on race and privilege, specifically mentioning earlier class readings by Mingshui Cai and Gina Crosley-Corcoran. Ashley then uses this background knowledge as a lens to understand the racial dynamics of the two cities in the novel: Olivar and Robledo.

Discussion

The complex work of anti-racism. As I first looked at the data, I found many of my students continued to avoid overt references to race in all data sources: discussions, free-writing, and take-home writing. While I did not ask my students to talk about race in any of the assignments, the novel is rich in racial conflict. I also pointed them to explicit accounts of racism in the novel for the free-writing assignment. When I ask students to write about a novel like *Parable of the Sower* and they avoid race, it would seem to support Haviland's claims about White Educational Discourse. When I tell students to look at the novel's excerpt on white slave drivers in the slave factories and they still avoid talking about race, there are strong indications that Haviland provides reliable insight.

White student talk about race and privilege is complex and thorny. Some students, like Brooke, were subtle in their avoidance. She used coded language to talk about issues pertaining to race instead of directly addressing the subject. Other students, like Ashley and Nicole, offered complex reactions that provide insight into how WPTs talk about race and the role genre plays in their engagement. Becoming aware of privilege, coming to terms with it, then learning to work against it, is a messy process. Awareness of privilege and a desire to dismantle the systems that perpetuate it cannot prevent it from resurfacing. My students were young people still coming to terms with the heavy weight of US slavery and its contemporary residue. Many, for much of their lives, grew up isolated from difference and experienced years of white-washed curriculum.

The question for me then becomes, how do anti-racist educators find out students' proclivities towards understandings of race, and how do we work with students who show understandings in some areas but weaknesses in others? How do we celebrate Rachel's desire to dismantle white privilege while also not allowing her to sweep aspects of her privilege under the rug? How do we validate Nicole's investigation of racial privilege, yet point out her avoidance when she resorts to metaphorical discussions?

White pre-service teacher dispositions. My initial goal was to inquire into the nature of white pre-service teacher talk about race. This study does provide insight regarding the use of genre and its role in encouraging or deflecting silence about the topic. But as I waded into the data, I also found Ashley and Nicole raise interesting questions regarding the dispositions of white pre-service teachers and their (un)willingness to voice race. Their writing suggests white conversations about and awareness of race and racism is complex and nuanced. They are at times willing to engage and do so with a level of complexity. At the same time, they can enact well-documented strategies of avoidance and silence.

Rachel does draw upon her background for inspiration to teach. She says she wants to "use [her] awareness [of her privilege] against the White sense of entitlement and privilege" (p. 46). An anti-racist teacher educator who hears her student recognizing her privilege and then desiring to push back against white entitlement and privilege would celebrate. Where Rachel holds uncomfortable views in some areas, she also holds dispositions that can and should be nurtured and molded. Laughter's student Rachel and my students Ashley and Nicole show how WED, while clearly entrenched in classroom discourse, requires a fuller picture of white talk and white strategies. This study leaves a number of unanswered questions. How much of the messiness of my students' talk around race stemmed from their inexperience reading speculative

89

literature, how much from WED, and how much came from previous work in multicultural coursework and previous social justice dispositions?

       Navigating Critical Distance. One underutilized tool to foster student talk is the genre of black speculative fiction, a genre that dismantles privilege and oppression within rich, speculative worlds. The texts can provide anti-racist educators a tool for opening up and maintaining rich conversations. However, more questions once again arise. Both Ashley and Brooke made direct connections between the speculative, future-oriented text of *Parable of the Sower* and their present reality. For Ashley, that reality was general—"real life issues." For Brooke, that reality was more specific—a nearby urban center. It is important to note these connections. However, it is also important to note that *Parable of the Sower* utilizes less critical distance than many other speculative texts. Brooke's connection between *Parable's* California circa 2050 and her own city is not a big jump. Her navigation of tropes is less strenuous than if she were reading a speculative text like Ursula Le Guin's *Wizard of Earthsea*, which entails interactions of characters from different racial and ethnic backgrounds but is set in an alternative world in an alternative universe. When incorporating multicultural literature in the classroom, how much critical distance is ideal? Do students need elements from racial reality to connect to, or can they have rich discussions on the Na'vi from James Cameron's film *Avatar* or the Klendathu from Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*? More importantly, how does too much critical distance minimize the experiences of people of color? Arguably, conversations about race in the context of Heinlein's Klendathu dehumanizes people or color.

Conclusion

       The work of anti-racist educators is far from over. There are, however, encouraging signs. Most white pre-service teachers still grow up in socialized systems of privilege but teacher

preparations programs can and do make a difference. More research is needed to best find how to counteract privilege and to foster white student willingness to talk about what they know and do not know about race. This study also shows white students can have rich conversations about race with a literature genre that is neither contemporary in setting nor grounded in reality.

Nalo Hopkinson sets her short story "Report from Planet Midnight." at the 2009 International Conference of the Fantastic in the Arts. Hopkinson says in the prologue that the story is her actual lecture at the 2009 International Conference of the Fantastic in the Arts. In the story, she stands before an audience of science fiction writers, scholars, and fans begins to speak.

"The first thing I'd like to say is . . . " (p. 33).

While speaking, Hopkinson is inhabited (or possessed) by an alien. What exactly happens—shakes, noise, lights—are left unsaid. We are given a voice in brackets that says "BE LIGHT-HEADED. THEN BECOME THE HORSE." In a footnote, Hopkinson tells the reader that the horse is a creature that, in Afro-Caribbean culture can be possessed. The possessor can control the horse's actions and words "sometimes in defiance of their own physical capabilities when not in trance state." Hopkinson is now the horse. Her next words are those of an alien who speaks through her.

"Uh—oh my. It worked. I'm here. [LOOK AT HANDS, THEN AT AUDIENCE] Dear people, please don't be alarmed. I mean no harm. I really don't. I'm riding on the head of this horse only for a short time, I promise you. Please don't hurt me. This was an extreme measure. There seemed to be no other way to communicate directly with you."

This story/talk followed soon after "RaceFail '09," a key moment in science fiction and fantasy fandom. In Hopkinson's telling, the well-respected science fiction writer Elizabeth Bear wrote a blog post calling on other writers for more racial inclusion in their stories. Many of the responses put forward by members from many facets of the geek community were harsh. "RaceFail," in Hopkinson's words, "signify the more vehemently recalcitrant white voices in the debate." (p. 32)

"RaceFail '09" was a moment of frustration for Hopkinson in part because she felt that many budding speculative writers of color were either turned off to writing in the genre or were cut off from publishing avenues. One way she responded was through "Report from Planet Midnight." Hopkinson injected her talk with the fantastic, using alien possession to craft a "somewhat performative" (p. 32) speech. The alien in her performance wears a t-shirt that says "SPEAKER TO WHITE FOLKS." She then offers a series of common statements given by white people that perpetuate white supremacy. Statements include "I'm not racist" (p. 36) and "I don't see race" (p. 39) among others. The alien then translates these white phrases into acerbic clap back to show the paucity of white intent. For example, "I'm not racist" is translated as "I can wade through feces without getting any of it on me."

Hopkinson invades white spaces in this lecture. She conjures an alien as an ally to bite the white audience, some of whom were academics that, Hopkinson was told, felt "RaceFail" issues were "beneath them." (p. 28) Hopkinson's audience was not in an official safe space, but they were in a purported color-blind space which means it was a white space. White people are more likely to know the implicit rules of those white spaces, making white spaces safe spaces for white people.

This next article attempts to complicate notions of safe space in education studies. I examine the role critical distance plays in creating literary space and I look at how critical distance may create the environment for a reader to enter into the world of a story.

Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch* and Black speculative fiction in anti-racist pedagogy: The space within a space

Over a quarter of a century of research into white pre-service teachers' (WPTs) conceptions, discourses, and dispositions concerning black lives and experiences reveal encouraging signs and frustrating setbacks. Recent research suggests some white pre-service teachers recognize the adverse effects of privilege and maintain dispositions set on dismantling systems of inequality (Garrett and Segall, 2013; Laughter, 2011). However, much recent research still reads little differently than scholarship from two decades ago. Many white pre-service teachers avoid talking about race, espouse color-blind ideologies, and enact white supremacist dispositions (Hikido and Murray, 2016; Cabrera, 2014; DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2014; Sleeter, 2008; Haviland, 2008). Despite more than two decades of research and advocacy, more work is needed to determine what is needed to dispel racist misconceptions in white teachers and instill dispositions of empathy and understanding.

One tool used to raise awareness of racial inequality and develop social-justice mindsets is multicultural children's literature. White students reading stories by and about underrepresented voices have been found to inform about other cultures, challenge misconceptions, and enable conversation around difficult topics (Escamilla and Nathenson-Mejia, 2010; Katsarou, 2009; Laframboise and Griffith, 1997). These promising findings, however, do not often translate to teacher practice nor do they inform publishers and curriculum designers. While multicultural literature is making inroads into schools and classrooms, reading materials still remain largely Americentric and canonical. This tendency is pertinent to literature by and about black voices because school

selections adhere to works sanctioned by state authorities and cultural sensibilities (Nel, 2015). In other words, classrooms are more likely to teach a text about Martin Luther King Jr. than one about Stokley Carmichael or Sun Ra.

Genre selection also bows to market sanctions and school conventions. Works of multicultural literature in k-20 programs focus almost exclusively on so-called realistic stories in historical and contemporary settings. Schools are more likely to offer a white savior narrative about slavery (like *To Kill a Mockingbird*) rather than a black feminist dystopia (like Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*). Black speculative genres (such as fantasy, science fiction, and magical realism) are almost non-existent in contemporary schooling. While realistic stories carry power and can act as counter stories (Hughes-Hassell, 2013; Glenn, 2012), they also compose, when used in isolation, a myopic picture of black lives and experiences. While the limits placed on genre can stem from the market and publishing industry (Nel, 2015) much of the limits are school and teacher imposed. Teachers and schools tend to assume that multicultural literature should be realistic (Laframboise and Griffith, 1997). Almost all the studies examining multicultural literature read for this paper considered realistic or historical fiction. Only one study mentioned two works that could qualify as fantasy literature but those novels (*Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Invisible Man* by Richard Wright) hold canonical status (Katsarou, 2009).

In the midst of this genre climate, black speculative fiction—a subgenre of fantasy literature where the texts are written by black authors and imagine new social and racial paradigms, is gaining in readership and critical recognition. Science fiction and fantasy written by black authors is not a recent phenomenon. One of the best-known

black authors of science fiction, Octavia Butler, started producing novels in the mid-70s. Before her, the prolific science fiction writer Samuel Delany began in the 1960s. But black speculative roots grow deeper as W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, and George S. Schuyler all produced works of speculation in the 20s and 30s. Charles W. Chesnutt and Pauline Hopkins wrote tales of mysticism and the supernatural even earlier, around the turn of the century.

The modern movement of black speculative fiction, forwarded by authors such as Nalo Hopkinson and N.K. Jemisin, is building a firm foothold in the science fiction and fantasy world. Black writers of speculative fiction have won some of the most prestigious literary awards and are beginning to change the shape of scholarship and fandom in fantasy and geek culture. One of the key figures in this modern movement is Nnedi Okorafor. She is the first black author to win the prestigious World Fantasy Award in the novel category for her book *Who Fears Death*. She is prolific, her work consistently earns critical praise, and she writes across a range of speculative subgenres including space opera, fantasy, afrosurrealism, and myth. In addition to her adult works, she has written award winning children's books, including the novels *Zahrah the Windseeker* and *Akata Witch* and the picturebook *Chicken in the Kitchen*.

In this paper, I explore the role black-authored children's speculative literature plays in anti-racist education. Specifically, I examine the relationship between safe space and literary space created by speculative literatures' alternative realities. I argue that discussions of black speculative literature in small groups presents, not safe spaces, but literary spaces of inquiry where pre-service teachers may grapple with issues of racism and privilege. First, I consider the literature on safe spaces in education research and how

multicultural literature speaks to this research. Second, I present a brief overview of the genre of black speculative literature and its potential as a tool for anti-racist pedagogy. Finally, I present findings drawn from a classroom study where pre-service teachers discuss *Akata Witch*, by Nnedi Okorafor. I examine their talk around issues of systemic racism and present implications for anti-racist education.

Multicultural literature and safe space

The term *safe space* or *safe place* has been applied in a variety of fields and contexts including social work (Redmond, 2010; Holly and Steiner, 2005), business management (Kanyal, 2014), and (after) school programs (Burgoyne, 2007; Nyamekye, 2013; Harris and Kiyama, 2015). By the mid-90's, the term was not uncommon in education research though it was little studied as a concept. Rom (1998) points out that by 1998, the two phrases garnered less than twenty total items on the ERIC database. Today, those numbers are 109 (*safe space*) and 161 (*safe place*). While these numbers show a marked increase from twenty years ago, that growth is modest.

Some of the earliest uses of safe space refer to a physical space (Hawkins ,1987), which has evolved and carries on today, most notably in school and university "safe zones" for LGTBQ youth (Poynter and Tubbs, 2008). In classroom research, the attribution of safe physical space becomes intertwined with psychological safety. "A safe classroom space is one in which students are able to openly express their individuality, even if it differers dramatically from the norms set by the instructor, the profession, or other students" (Holly and Steiner, 2005, p. 50). Explicit and implicit power held by an instructor (they control grades and recommendations for example) necessitates a space where students can challenge ideas. But Holly and Steiner are quick to point out that

97

"being safe is not the same as being comfortable." Safe space should not mean the absence of challenge or debate. For them, safety hinges on personal disclosure, when students in class can share personal struggles, setbacks, or experiences knowing they can safely share these experiences without fear of ridicule or exposure. In other words, students should feel safe sharing their experiences dealing with depression, not safe sharing or reinforcing racist ideologies.

Some scholars claim that literature itself creates safe space. Brooks and Hampton (2005), in examining black and Latino/Latina discussions around a work of historical fiction, found engaging with racism in literature is "safer than encountering racism first-hand in the field of an adolescents' daily life" (p. 98). Guse et. al. (2013), also show that telling stories can create safe spaces as well. They organized digital storytelling with black youth in Chicago to facilitate sexual and reproductive health education. In digital storytelling, participants share their individual experiences, then craft them into a collective story. According to Guse et. al., the reflective and communal nature of digital storytelling created a safe space where students could "find safe relationships and spaces to share intimate and painful feelings without ridicule" (p. 226). It is difficult to challenge a sexist remark if the remark is protected under a policy of safe space.

In these studies, the idea of safe space was assumed and under-theorized. They do not clarify what constitutes a safe space, how they are created, and how a person enters one. There have been recent moves to complicate understandings of safe space, moves which propose problems with some of the simplistic notions attached to those spaces. For example, Stengel (2010) says many studies "take for granted the need to protect students" (p. 523). This need to protect can conflict with the natural discomfort associated with

dialogic and liberal education. Latting (1990) provides an example of what Stengel

critiques when she advocates for classrooms that exhibit a "demeanor of nonjudgemental

acceptance of students" (p. 43). Latting then extends this demeanor to include

"reprehensible" claims and statements. A blanket statement of nonjudgement disallows

an environment where ideas can be challenged and refined. It also sets up an environment

where racist, sexist, and homophobic statements are given the same protection as anti-

racist sentiments. As Stengel (2010) points out, safe space "makes it difficult for an

educator to respond to actual cases of harassment in a constructive and fitting way" (p.

524). It is difficult to challenge a sexist remark if the remark is protected under a policy

of safe space.

To illustrate Stengel's critique of safe space, consider, Pollak (1995). She presents

a problematic position when she speaks proudly of her class as a safe space. "Even if

students leave my class without a clear understanding of *Romeo and Juliet* or *Hamlet*, I

will celebrate the fact that they remember my class as a place they liked to be" (p. 186). I

could not fault Pollak for her desire for students to feel comfortable in class or even to

like class. The value of enjoyment over "clear understanding" does, however, present a

host of problems. These problems are, according to Rom (1998) inherent in the label

itself. "Educators who talk about creating 'safe spaces' would vehemently deny that they

would ever countenance bland acceptance of all opinions and behavior. [A claim

contradicted by Latting and Pollak] But the problem is that precise outcome is built into

the metaphor of 'safe space'" (p. 407). In order to address this contradiction, both Stengel

(2010) and Redmond (2010) call up Boler's (1999) proposed "pedagogies of discomfort"

(p. 19) as a solution. In Bowler's framework, "a pedagogy of discomfort begins by

inviting educators and students to engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs, and to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others" (pp. 176-177). In other words, there are two main aspects of a pedagogy of discomfort: critically examining self-held assumptions and taking on the perspective of others. Under this framework, racist comments do not hold a protected status as it is itself an uninterrogated assumption which falls apart when considered in light of the Other.

Thoughtful implementation of multicultural literature in the classroom, I argue, relies on practices like Boler's pedagogy of discomfort. Shallow use of multicultural literature relies on superficial inclusion of so-called diverse texts. Robust pedagogy, however, must pursue a goal of transformation of both students and teachers through "challenging students' preconceived notions about another culture (Dong, 2005, p. 369). Glazier and Seo (2005) approach this necessity of discomfort when they offer a foundational formula for utilizing multicultural literature in the classroom: multicultural literature + dialogic instruction + safe space = transformative potential (p. 686). While their formula, built on Bishop's (1990) metaphor of literature as windows and mirrors, is useful, it is also simplistic. Research has called for nuanced conceptualization of multicultural literature (not all literature deemed multicultural is equal) (Cai, 1998); classroom dialogue around issues of race is fraught with resistance (Cabrera, 2014; Haviland, 2008); and the concept of safe space has been critiqued for favoring white students over students of color (Nyamekye, 2013). Further adding to the simplicity of the formula, scholars have pointed out that transformation requires a holistic approach; it requires interaction or dialogue with underrepresented voices and work in the community

(Sleeter, 2008). Glazier and Seo's formula only covers a few isolated elements of the full range of strategies and tools needed for transformative pedagogy.

In line with calls for nuanced conceptualizations of safe space, I propose exploration of literary space and its interactions with so-called safe space. As part of this proposal, I draw on Bowler's pedagogy of discomfort to explore how students engage in classroom spaces and how genre speaks to her framework. In order to take the first step where values and cherished beliefs are considered, the value or belief must be named (hooks, 1994). Initiating conversations is itself an act of anti-racist pedagogy as "silence and omission are by no means neutral" (Bowler, p. 184). The key question is, how can these conversations be initiated and maintained? How does literary space contribute to students talk about risky topics? In what ways might literature with greater critical distance like speculative fiction influence students' engagement with systemic racism? How might literary distance or critical distance complicate these notions of safe space?

Black speculative fiction as social critique

Speculative literature has a precedent of exploring uncomfortable issues and refracting social norms. Readers familiar with classic works of fantasy literature, such as Madeline L'Engle's A *Wrinkle in Time* and Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, recognize the genre's ability to upend reality in order to see reality more clearly. Authors and scholars such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Farah Mendlesohn, and Barry Malzberg have all written about the critical stance speculative fiction takes against hegemony and oppression. Mary Jackson (1981) argues fantasy texts reveal social disquiet and take a critical stance towards those issues. Malzberg (1982) makes a similar claim about science fiction. He argues that science fiction disturbs middle class notions of certainty.

Black speculative fiction embodies this critical tendency by utilizing black experiences to *reimagine* possible societies and *rewrite* possible futures. Rather than explore an issue, bsf rewrites the issue. For example, Samuel R. Delany recasts racial, sexual, and economic paradigms in his Neveryon series to craft a society free, not from hegemony, but from the white straight male patriarchy. In *Lagoon*, Nnedi Okorafor reframes the alien invasion narrative by setting the landing in Nigeria in a way the separates the trope from its history of latent racism. N. K. Jemisin offers new modes of resistance in *The Fifth Season*, a novel set in a broken fantasy world that she says was inspired by the Black Lives Matters movement (Adams, 2015).

I do not want to give the impression that social critique is limited to speculative fiction. Any genre has the potential for and the track record of producing counter stories. What makes speculative fiction different is the role the fantastical setting and tropes play in distancing the reader from the subversive aspects of the text. Saler (2011) calls this placement "critical distance" (p. 169). Subversive or uncomfortable topics such as racism and sexism are dealt with in a way that critiques the issue while wrapping it in layers of literary distance. An illustration, albeit a problematic one, from mainstream fantasy can clarify this idea of critical distance. The situation of the House-elves in *Harry Potter* is, at best, uncomfortable. Their emancipation plays a key role in the series and Hermione's pursuit of their rights and freedoms is crafted to tug at the reader's sympathies. Rowling constructs their situation as one clearly unjust and readers resonate with it. As evidence, *The Independent* recently reported that visitors to Warner Bros. Studios in London are leaving socks at a Dobby installment (Karlin, 2015). The House-elves' position and the position other wizards hold in relation to them raise compelling questions. While

Hermione works to free them, most wizards ignore their situation and enjoy their free labor. Weighty conversations are possible concerning slavery, indentured servitude, and emancipation. Equally weighty conversations are possible concerning Rowling's portrayal of House-elves as a species. Why are the House-elves, depicted as slaves, child-like in their attitudes and intelligence? Why are they happy in their subservient role?

The example of the House-elves illustrates the complex role critical distance plays in speculative genres. Discussing US complicity in slavery is, unfortunately, an endeavor fraught with difficulty. There is a role that a genre like fantasy can play in allowing discussions around questions such as, what type of person does Hermione represent? Ron Weasley (who sees no problem with the House-elves' position)? How do these characters show and resist tropes of the white savior and the complicit person of privilege? How does Hermione complicate the narrative if she is interpreted as a black character rather than a white one (a theory with a sizable group of adherents, particularly in the world of fan fiction)? How might using the House-elves as a metaphor for US slavery devalue black experiences and history?

The concept of critical distance also offers rich nodes for exploration of safe space. When white pre-service teachers are enveloped in critical distance, how do they talk about risky topics related to race? In what ways does their engagement differ from engagement with realistic genres? How does literary space complicate notions of safe space? How do representations of race in speculative literature through House-elves or alien races simplify or dehumanize black experiences?

The study context

      This study, part of a larger study on pre-service teacher engagement with black speculative literature, took place in two children's literature classes housed in an education department at a large, midwestern state university. The courses were spread over two semesters, with 25 students in each class. The majority of students were white females and came from middle class backgrounds. The courses were an introductory children's literature course required of elementary education students, though it is open to all majors. The course focused on historical, cultural, and textual concepts and strategies for reading and interpretation that would help teachers engage with the literature in a way meaningful to them as readers (as opposed to analyzing texts to design lesson plans).

      Analysis for this study focused on responses to the text *Akata Witch* by Nnedi Okorafor. This children's novel is set in Nigeria and follows an albino, Nigerian-American protagonist as she learns to use juju (cast in the book as a West-African form of magic) to fight a US-funded serial killer. This text was chosen for its critical consideration of US racism, colonialism, and cultural conflict/cooperation. In addition to *Akata Witch*, students read a selection of other books during the course. These books came from a range of genres, both realistic and fantastic, and from a range of author backgrounds.

      Before the class period, students read *Akata Witch* and developed a set of three to five discussion questions to share with classmates. These discussion questions could be about any aspect of the book. In class, students discussed the novel in small groups, using their discussion questions as a guide. After thirty to forty minutes of small group discussions, the class moved to a whole class discussion which I facilitated. When

discussing the text as a class, I tried to hold back from immediately raising or interrogating issues of race and racism until after I first gave students an opportunity to raise those issues on their own. During other book discussions over the course of the semester, when a student raised an issue of racism or purported a racist view, I would open that point up to the class for consideration. As an anti-racist educator, I wanted to bring these difficult issues to the forefront so students would face them. With *Akata Witch* however, I first waited to see if other students would pick up the conversation before I addressed the issues. This was a pedagogical choice in order to see the influence speculative literature's critical distance might have on the discussions.

Data Analysis

Data sources included written assignments, transcribed audio recordings of class conversations (small and large group discussions), field notes taken during small group discussions, and instructor reflections after class discussions. The courses included significant writing assignments which also became data. These written assignments included 300-400 word journal entries of initial reactions to the text; the discussion questions submitted before class; and a 400-500 word post-discussion reflection based on small and group discussions.

For both written and oral data I used critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989) framed by Critical Race Theory (Harman and Espino, 2009). I first read through the papers quickly for insight into students' avoidances or engagement with issues of racism. During the first read, I took basic mental notes of large trends regarding the topics students wrote on. I then listened to small group and class discussions to look for relevant dialogue and noted initial trends. Data was then tabulated (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison,

2007) to aid in coding. Once my preliminary examination was complete, I began a cycle of transcribing relevant sections from audio recordings and returning once again to the written comments, refining categories and looking for connections between themes. Because the nature of coding is cyclic, I employed constant comparative analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), moving back and forth between types of data and continually refined themes rather than moving step by step from open to axial coding (Gasson, 2003) for each type of data. Throughout the process, I engaged in reflexive (Glesne, 2011 p. 159) journaling to layout my analyses and processes and look for possible biases creeping into my interpretations.

Findings

I include here a series of rich excerpts from small group conversations followed by a brief section from students' writing. To illustrate the interaction of critical distance and anti-racist pedagogy, I put this data in conversation with Bowler's writing on pedagogy of discomfort.

A genre just like any other. In both written and oral discourse in this study, race was overwhelmingly ignored in favor of a focus on the less uncomfortable topics of gender, class, and economics. To be clear, discussions were still rich and fruitful. Students grappled with complex issues of gender oppression when, for example, they worked through Sunny's role on the all-boys soccer team and her difficulties living with an abusive father. They also teased out the text's stance on capitalism and knowledge based economies when they grappled with Leopard *chittim*, currency earned through growing and learning as a juju scholar. These conversations and others offered valuable pedagogical moments that indicate Okorafor's work is useful for the classroom.

When race was brought up in discussions, students often ignored the subject or shifted the topic. The first excerpt illustrates a typical encounter in discussions. Though this excerpt is from a small group, the practice was similar in the larger class discussions. Here, the group is having a conversation about Chichi, one of the main characters in *Akata Witch*. Throughout the book, Chichi refuses to tell anybody her age and the group members are offering suggestions for why.

> Alex: Maybe that has to do with the whole race thing.
> Sydney: Yeah, like looks aren't important?
> Alex: Yeah and like age shouldn't be a measure of your intelligence.
> > [13 second pause; students look for a new topic]
> Julia: I don't know.
> Alex: I pulled up your [discussion] questions if you want to look at them.
> > [11 second pause]
> (sigh)
> > [13 second pause]
> Julia: What was the point of that [Zuma Rock] fight?

After the group has been talking about Chichi for some time, Alex offers the possibility that the reason stems from "the whole race thing." Alex here invited the group into a space to talk about race, making possible the first stage of Bolwer's pedagogy of discomfort when she opens up the floor to interrogate race. The group could not find out what Alex meant by "the whole race thing," however, because Sydney changes the subject. She used a question to shift the focus from race to general looks. While it appears as if Sydney seeks clarification, she also changes the topic. Sydney subtly, probably unintentionally, reestablished the status quo (Haviland, 2008). When Alex replies, she accepts Sydney's shift. The conversation now looks at things that can't determine intelligence, like looks or age. Race is left behind. It is also important to notice the long pauses as the students try to find another topic to discuss. Rather than go back to race, a concept that permeates the novel, they proceed to other topics. Alex helps them find a

different topic by opening up an electronic copy of their pre-class discussion questions. They then take time to search through the questions, before settling on an unrelated scene from the book.

The lack of conversations around race suggests, to little surprise, that incorporation of speculative genres by itself does not help WPT engage with the subject. As a critical pedagogue, my students' conversations about sexism, gender, and class were heartening and suggest that black speculative fiction can fulfill the same role that realistic multicultural narratives fill in the classroom. However, as an anti-racist educator, these discussions suggest my students preferred to leave their assumptions about race and racism uninterrogated. Bowler's pedagogy of discomfort was naturally viable with speculative literature when my students talked about sexism, for example; but to help students encounter paradigm-shifting transformation regarding deeply held, implicit beliefs about race and racism, genre alone is insufficient. Something more is needed to help students enter into a space to critically engage with racism.

White washing, color blindness, and flipping the script. Another excerpt shows how WPTs talking about race can flip the script, countering the text's representation of race by attributing a hegemonic, color-blind interpretation. Rather than wrestle with their assumptions surrounding color-blindness, they forced readings onto the text that closes down space for a pedagogy of discomfort. To provide some context, I normally ask students to begin book discussions with a few minutes of lighter conversation where they share aspects of the book that stood out to them. In this excerpt, students began the conversation by focusing on things they didn't like.

Brooke: Um, I'm trying to think of parts I didn't like.

Sierra: I mean, to go along with the race that we've been talking about—I didn't, I felt like the, throughout the entire novel they made a point to remind us that she was albino and like,

Paige: And I don't know why either.

Sierra: You know, like I didn't get it. I was like, what's the point? Like, why do you keep reminding us?

Paige: There's no significance to the fact that she is [albino].

Brooke: I think that the significance behind all of, like, the constant reminders of her being different race but at the same, like, different was whenever they would make their spirit faces come out and they weren't any race, that's when they were most powerful. And I think that's what's, like, kinda a segue into a discussion for us the readers as, like, 'oh, so when race isn't thought about that's when they are the most powerful.

In this excerpt, students' inexperience in discussing race is revealed when they expand race to include albinism. The students' tying albinism to race, while inaccurate, is understandable as the text connects the two when Sunny's classmates call her white rather than albino and insult her by comparing her to a white teacher (p. 12). The texts' portrayal of albinism is central to the text and Okorafor's coupling of race and albinism is intriguing. The history of albinism on the African continent and the oppression and violence albinos experience in Nigeria provided my students with a wealth of issues to discuss and debate. However, my students avoided or ignored those rich sections of the text or any of those deep issues. Instead, they reacted with distaste that albinism was mentioned "throughout the entire novel." What the transcript does not reveal is the agitation the group exhibited when faced with the mere mention of albinism. Sierra in particular was reactive. She repeated her point and her voice rose in volume and intensity when she asked "what the point?" and "Why do you keep reminding us?" Sierra revealed the anger white students can exhibit when notions of color-blindness are disrupted. When color-blindness is interrupted, even in seemingly harmless ways, white students must face race. "Pedagogies that tackle racial power will be most uncomfortable for those who

benefit from that power" (Leonardo and Porter, 2010, pp. 139-140). This group is

reacting to that discomfort. Leonardo and Porter go on to say that "noticing whiteness is

itself regarded as a form of transgression" (p. 149). I can extend their idea from whiteness

to race in general. Because the novel overtly deals with albinism, my students could not

circumnavigate the issue. Because they could not escape, an implicit rule was broken. For

them, a transgression occurred. This transgression makes engaging in a pedagogy of

discomfort difficult for white students. Rather than enter into a space to discuss their own

discomfort when race was brought up "throughout the novel," they avoided the

discomfort.

   Spaces of inquiry. Brooke employed what Leonardo and Porter call

"employments of power for the sake of maintaining" (p. 146) color-blindness and

whiteness. Brooke twisted Okorafor's text through hermeneutic jujitsu to reestablish

comfort into the conversation. In the novel, when Leopards use juju their "spirit face"

appears. Okorafor describes these spirit faces as resembling West African masks. This

decision speaks to rich points around black identity as Sasha and Sunny both have spirit

faces that look like Nigerian "ceremonial masks" (p. 66) even though they have different

cultural backgrounds (Sasha is African American ["born of slaves"] and Sunny was born

in the US to Nigerian immigrant parents). But the students in this group instead read the

spirit face as an eraser of color. They also misinterpreted this eraser as positive. When

color disappears according to the students here, a person is at their strongest and most

genuine. The text does not support this interpretation. Rather, my white students forced

this interpretation onto the text in order to remove their discomfort when faced with race.

The final group I will examine engaged in an extended conversation that cannot be explored in its entirety in this paper. Instead, I will offer three moments that illustrate the complexity of their conversations. In this group, a key shift occurred in how the participants talked about race. I call this a key shift because it goes against the trends found in the many of the other discussion groups in this study and against the trend of many studies about white students discussing race (Haviland, 2008; Hikido and Murray, 2015) because it provides insight into how a pedagogy of discomfort might work in a multicultural literature discussion. Similar to the other groups in this study, my student Summer raised a point that is connected to race. She invites her group members, like Alex did in the first group, into a space to wrestle with issues of race. However, Summer makes a move that solidifies the space for transformative discomfort.

> Summer: Um, something I really liked in the book is that there were a lot of kinda dynamics of um, various kinda like prejudice and systems of oppression and stuff like that. And they actually talked about it. And I think in most children's books that I've read, and I would include Harry Potter in this, is that they don't, it's very like, extremely allusions to things. But then all the characters are so privileged in our society.
> Karen: Right.
> Summer: Does that make sense?
> Hanna: Like they talk about the abuse at home? The corporal punishment?
> Summer: I don't really mean abuse. No. 'Cause I mean
> Karen: You mean like racial things?
> Summer: Yeah, like racial things.

Summer shares that she likes the book because it deals with "prejudice and systems of oppression" and that the book deals with those issues explicitly. She also contrasts the issues of the book with the "privilege" of characters in fantasy, like Harry Potter. In this move, she conjures critical distance when she establishes the genre as a point of reference. The genre of speculative literature bounds their conversation. Through

111

these moves, she invites the group into a space where they can explore oppression. Similar to Sydney in the first group, Hanna attempts a topic shift (or a refusal to enter Summer's space) by asking if Summer is referring to the accounts of "corporal punishment "in the novel. At this point, it isn't clear what types of oppression Summer is thinking about. She doesn't use the word race or racism. However, the key words "oppression" and "privilege" are clear indicators of power. These words are often associated with issues at the systemic level, which Summer is clear to point out is her focus. The novel explores racism, sexism, abelism, and colonialism. Many of these topics would fall under "systems of oppression." It is important to note that corporal punishment sits outside the normal scope of oppression. This makes me interpret Hanna's question about corporal punishment as an intentional attempt to turn the conversation away from "privilege." When Hanna asks if she refers to "corporal punishment," the group could have shifted topics as did Alex's group. Summer, however, does not let the conversation drift. She pushes aside Hanna's topic shift and refocuses on racism. This refocus establishes her choice of topic and solidifies their space for inquiry and exploration. With their space established, the conversation opens up for a pedagogy of discomfort focused on race/racism.

Playing in critical distance: "How diverse do you have to make it?" With students enfolded in this space of inquiry, a pedagogy of discomfort around race could now unfold. Karen then took the conversation away from the book to ask a compelling question about the role literature plays in portraying diversity. It is important to note that throughout the conversation, Karen seemed to be the most resistant. This resistance rarely became contentious or argumentative, but she does push back by downgrading the need

for alternative voices and proposing race-neutral stances as preferable. She does not try to

change the topic but she does challenge Summer and Hanna. Here, she asks "how diverse

do you have to make" a book?

> Karen: You know, I don't understand though when you write a book, how diverse do you have to make it?
>
> Hanna: I think there's such a, like, who knows? 'Cause just because, personally, I'm never going to write a book nor do I think I could but I don't' think, feel that it would be my place to be a person that is not my race is going through.
>
> Karen: But if you're depicting a certain situation and it's only got white people in it, is that gonna make you come across bad as an author for not including other groups? Like, what if certain stories are true to situations? It's kinda like with . . . Huck Finn. That's like, yeah, they use the n-word but that was true to the times and context. You know what I mean? I don't understand where that line is drawn with books when it's, like, well this isn't being diverse enough. What if that's just how the situation was? Like it was all white people and that's just how it was? . . . It's hard to draw that line where what is being diverse and what isn't being diverse.
>
> Summer: I think the problem isn't an individual book necessarily. And also, like, if it's childhood [inaudible] white people it's going to be defended by the majority. Always. I mean, that's just kind of like the way it is. um I think that the problem is that it's not one book that you're talking about. It's a system, like, all the books that are taught in school are almost entirely white. And like, if they aren't then the race isn't acknowledged which implies white in our current society. So I feel the problem is not on an individual book but it's the fact that overall, all the books that are being taught, all the books that are being published, all the books that are getting famous are all about very specific, you know, white male, cis-gender, straight, able-bodied, you know, typical, everything you can think of, people. . . .

Karen's question is part inquisitive but also part resistant. Notice her word choice

of "have to make" rather than "should be?" As she raises the example of Huck Finn, the

resistance peeks out in ways that suggest she sees no need in providing more access to

silenced and disenfranchised voices, at least when white voices, as so often believed in

the classroom, can make do.

Her question, "What if that's just how the situation was?" speaks to her discomfort with so-called political correctness and multiculturalism. As they are in this space where a pedagogy of discomfort can function, what I call a space of inqury, Summer and Hanna are able to push back against the challenge. They flip the question on its head and widen the scope of the conversation to consider, not individual books, but "a system." Without using the language of critical race theory, Summer is injecting into the conversation a critical tenet of CRT—racism is systemic (Carter Andrews and Tuitt, 2013). This moves the conversation beyond problematic checklists (evaluating a book by counting the number of diverse characters) and the propensity for tokenism in literature and instead connects it to the scope of the publishing industry and classroom literature selection. Summer also raises awareness of the problems associated with color blind thinking when she points out later in the discussion that when "the race isn't acknowledged [it] implies white in our current society." Summer engages in her own anti-racist pedagogy, using *Akata Witch*, a book she reminds her group is of "stories of people [whose stories] you don't get to see," to tactfully point out the flaws in Karen's logic and suggest ways she might also look at "what's being *not* said." Summer's offers an anecdotal translation of Bowler's language—"silence and omission are by no means neutral" (p. 184).

Playing in critical distance: "I'm not gonna lie." Summer's initial move to establish the topic of "racial things" created a space of inquiry were her group could discuss a range of uncomfortable topics. In this next excerpt, they continued their conversation by moving to the necessity of multicultural literature in the classroom.

Hanna: There needs to be variety [of texts] in a classroom.

114

Summer: Yeah. I agree.

Karen: Why?

Hanna: Does there needs to be variety?

Karen: yeah.

Hanna: Like, not just one certain type of book?

Karen: Yeah.

Hanna: umm,

Summer: Because, like different people are gonna like different books. Different people are gonna relate to different books.

Hanna: Like not every, if you're assigned to read whatever books you brought into your class you don't always like them because they're like one perspective.

Karen: Right. Yeah. But at the same time, like, I'm not gonna lie, if I lived in like, a super conservative city with like, a private school of all white kids, I wouldn't chose this book to teach because I don't think they'd be able to relate to it.

Hanna: But that's the thing, like they need to still know about this stuff. If you're just always learning about white, about a white.

Lily: I think that's why I would teach it. It's because I don't want them to be like, 'oh, this is so comfortable and I'm so used to reading this.' I would rather give them this book and have them be like, 'wow, I had no idea that this was out here.' And change so many different, like, sets of rules they already have in their mind about how life works for them.

Hanna: 'Cause [an upper middle class, white, private school background is] not a reality for most of America.

Karen: But that's their reality at the moment. Like I, maybe I'm being too harsh in presuming that all my students would way too ignorant to actually be able to understand the material and its diversity

Summer: I feel like you need to teach them not to be ignorant to some extent and I think that doing it in a way, I feel that fantasy is more accessible for learning about [inaudible] from ignorance because you can distance it from yourself more and you can relate to the emotions and you can relate to the what if I found out I had magic powers. Like anyone can relate to thinking about that, you know? All kids have thought about that kind of shit so like, I think that if you can relate to the fantasy part of it and like, then I feel like this is an easier way to ease into to relating to people who are different than other things. And I think that you need to relate to people who are different or else, like, it's not gonna, nothing's gonna change.

In this excerpt, Hanna now makes the anti-racist move. When she reiterates that there needs to be a variety of perspectives in stories, Karen follows up with the simple question "why?" Her question is disconcerting as it suggests she does not see the need for diverse literature. She assumes that white children do not need texts by and about under-

represented voices. A white student, in Karen's view, needs a book about a white character because they can "relate to it." On the surface, this sounds like a reasonable caveat. Since students need to find connections in a story, it seems feasible that white students will connect with white stories. However, Karen's question, while less confrontational than Sierra's agitation, carries the same notions of Leonardo and Porter's (2010) "noticing whiteness . . . as a form of transgression" (p. 149). Whiteness must not be disturbed and inclusion of diverse texts would cause, for Karen, such a disturbance or transgression. This discrediting of black and brown stories as *unrelatable* creates the same "violence" (Leonardo and Porter, 2010, p. 140) as Brooke's hermeneutic jujitsu. Karen's suggestion would allow white students to maintain comfort in their unexposed assumptions.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that Karen's question allows a rich discussion to ensue. Anti-racist pedagogy cannot work if students remain silent. Transformative education requires honest dialogue, not superficial acquiescence. When Karen prefaces her position that she would not give this book to white students with the phrase, "I'm not gonna lie," it suggests she knows her position would not be popular. Her rationale is that white suburban kids cannot relate to the issues in *Akata Witch*. Because of Karen's question, Hanna's and Lily are both able to push back by arguing that so-called unrelatability does not trump the discomfort associated with expanding worldviews. Summer reiterates the point that a failure to intervene in white comfort only perpetuates the problem.

In this small group, all participants are able to raise their concerns after Summer refocused the conversation on racism and brought the group into a space of inquiry.

Throughout the conversation, the social-justice minded group members felt empowered to offer counter arguments and advocate for anti-racist initiatives.

The deficiency of individual space. Students' post-discussion writing also carries interest regarding literary space, safe space, and WPTs' thoughts on race. The isolation created by the individual take-home writing assignment provided students certitude to write about race even when they did not talk about it in discussions. However, their writing revealed the problematic nature of grappling with race and racism in isolation from anti-racist peers. In one class, five students (out of 25) wrote papers that explored issues of race and racism in the novel. All five students who wrote about race did not talk about the topic in the small and large group discussions. It is possible these students did not feel safe talking about race with their peers but felt comfortable in the safety of an individual paper. It is also possible students were not thinking about racism before the discussions but decided to write about it after hearing the topic addressed in class. Regardless of which possibility is the case for each student, it is important to note that students did feel like they could talk about race in the novel. Students who avoided talking about race and racism were now willing to do so. Silence for these students was put aside.

On the surface, this willingness seems positive. Silent students now put their thoughts in writing. Most of these students, however, adhered to color blind ideology and white-washing in their paper. They wrote about race but their writing perpetuated hegemony instead of dismantling it. My student Kara illustrates the divide between group interaction and individual writing. In her small group discussion, she changed the topic when race was raised. However, her paper focused on how Okorafor "metaphorically

critique[d] society" regarding race and ethnicity. She says, "race and ethnicity are two very obvious themes within *Akata Witch*. Americans are cast as rule breakers from the first few chapters of this book. . . . I think that this is critiquing the idea that teenagers in the United States are thought to be trouble makers and that they need to be sent elsewhere to be dealt with." Where Kara derailed the small group discussion on race, her paper is overt in its references of race. However, as her paper progressed, her ideas shifted almost entirely away from race and focused instead on citizenship ("the United States"). She referenced race once, when she included a quote from the novel where Sasha is called a "trouble making black *American*." But the rest of her thinking deleted race and instead focused on teenage hooliganism broadly, absent of race. Without a peer like Summer, Kara was unhindered when driting away from the vital topic that began her paper.

Emma makes similar moves. She writes,

> "I think this book resists the idea that reality is a perfect
> utopia where everyone accepts each other for who they are.
> A lot of people want to think that the world is getting better
> and that racism or discrimination has improved greatly
> enough that it is almost gone, but it has not. In reality,
> racism is everywhere and even if it is a slight better [sic]
> compared to the past it is not much of a difference."

As an anti-racist educator, I would celebrate if Emma stopped here. I would interpret her remarks as a sign that she recognizes the pervasiveness of oppression and how society casts race neutral policies as a substitute for real change. In contrast to Haviland's (2008) findings, she overtly discussed racism. She embodies a pedagogy of discomfort by naming the root of racism and recognizing the discomforting truth that she does not live in a color blind, post-racial society. However, her next line is: "I think this book resists sugar coating the idea of racism and discrimination and wants to show people that anyone

118

of any race, age, background, ect. is capable of contributing to this type of behavior." Her statement is a more sophisticated rendition of the charge "black people can be racists too," sometimes used to silence critical discussions of white racism. Okorafor does, indeed, present nuanced explorations of oppression, showing prejudice in its many forms. In the novel, Nigerians hold prejudices against US citizens and vice versa. Leopards hold prejudices against Lambs and Lambs against Leopard; members of the Igbo tribe hold prejudices against the Efik tribe and vice versa. However, the text does not make the case that all people are complicit in prejudice and that all prejudices are equal. Emma's comments extend Okorafor's stance to color-blind notions that white prejudice against blacks and black prejudice against whites are equal. Another student, Danielle, writes in a similar vein when she equates ""self-righteous African" and "troublemaking black American."" Again, this is not a position the text advocates.

Discussion

Critical Distance. From both my student's discussions and writing, it was clear that fantasy was in the forefront of their minds. Every small group referenced Harry Potter as a touchstone text. Most groups also referenced the terms "fantasy" or "science fiction." While many students lacked robust notions of these terms (one group determined that Tolkien's fantasy series *The Lord of the Rings* was science fiction), they were clear that these texts were based in alternatives modes of reality. There are also indications that students recognized that fantasy interrogates reality. My student Mary framed her post-discussion paper with this connection. "[*Akata Witch*] works to resist the materialist society that most of us live in today, and the power corruption that exists within it. Okorafor does this by creating a fictional world, Leopard Knox, which has a

completely different value system than the "lamb" world that we live in today." In just a few sentences, Mary illustrates how fantasy uses critical distance in its critique of society. She recognizes that Okorafor crafts "a fictional world" to "resist the materialist society that most of us live in today." She also recognizes that this world and its modus operandi is "completely different" from the contemporary world. Mary's writing illustrates how many students knew they were engaged with a text set (at times) in an alternative reality. Students also engaged in heavy conversations about contemporary issues in our own reality (discussed below). Anti-racist educators may find use in the spaces of inquiry created by engagement with fantasy literature and black speculative fiction. Even though the stories of magic or space travel may not be feasible in our reality, the issues the texts critque, like slavery, police violence, violence towards women, and others are commonalities in our reality. While realistic fiction can be powerful narratives of under-represented people and experiences, speculative literature can also contain equally powerful narratives.

I approached this study with literary space in mind. Scholars and fans of speculative literatures speak of *entering* or *inhabiting* the genre(s)' alternative worlds. Scholars place this literary space in the hands both of writers and readers. Tolkien for example, creator of one of the most beloved alternative worlds in Middle-earth, speaks of writers creating subworlds as God created the world. The children's fantasy scholar O'Keefe focuses on readers who "enter shifting worlds" (p. 83) of fantasy and then "build them" (p. 96). O'Keefe also recognizes the role of the text in this narrative habitation. She references the children's fantasy writer Virginia Hamilton to illustrate the texts' role, saying, "the eerie texture of Hamilton's writing *draws you into these worlds*"

(p. 183 emphasis added). In this study, I imagined my readers would enter into Okorafor's world of Leopard Knocks, dwell within it, and discuss racism and privilege within a literary space or critical distance. However, my students talked little about race in the text. It is worth noting that in each of the excerpts from the final group, little of the conversation rested on the content of the book. Instead, the book was a springboard into world issues: inclusive literature, white privilege, anti-racist education, race-neutral positions and relatability, the need for reading outside of cultural comfort zones. When they talked about race, they talked about issues within the real world. Fantasy provided the opportunity to discuss racism, but my students took the opportunity out of the text and into reality.

However, it is important to note that critical distance alone does not create a special desire to talk about race in the text. Though speculative texts hold potential for students to enter spaces of inquiry, they do not by themselves lead students to talk abour race. Students were able to encounter, conduct, and sustain robust discussions about racism in ways that studies like Cabrera (2014) and Hikido and Murry (2015) found untenable. Yet dismantling whiteness needs more than a single strategy. This study illustrates what literary space and critical distance provide—potential for social justice-minded students to engage in anti-racist work.

What is not as clear is how students engaged with literary space. In other words, if fantasy implements critical distance, how do students enter and inhabit that critical distance? Robert Scholes (1975) writes: "All fiction—every book even, fiction or not—takes us out of the world we normally inhabit. To enter a book is to live in another place" (p. 205). It seems many claims about entering literary worlds, claims about using fantasy

121

as escape apply here as well, are built on anecdote and assumption rather than solid theoretical conceptualization. Further research from the fields of education, literature, philosophy, and psychology is needed to tease out how this happens. If, as Scholes suggests, "every book" can create critical distance, how does genre influence this distance? Textually, speculative genres have greater distance. How do readers react to it?

At this point, I must recognize that I have argued myself into a contradiction. On one hand, I advocate for Bowler's pedagogy of discomfort, where students wrestle with their own implicit beliefs about racism and privilege. This pedagogy is built on challenge and resistance. On the other hand, I advocate for using speculative literature specifically because the genre implements critical distance. The distance between the reader and the racism the text critiques implicitly suggests that such conversations will place white pre-service teachers into a space where they are more willing to engage with uncomfortable topics. This contradiction is perplexing but not inhibiting. I would argue that it brings me closer to a pedagogy of discomfort as Bowler argues for the importance of ambiguity in transformative education. Good pedagogy cannot reduce to simple positions. Modern debate rules, for example, cast argument as adherence to a singular position. The position is irrelevant as a debate candidate may be assigned either a *for* or an *against* position. However, good pedagogy is not bound by such simplicity. The positions are multitude, complex, and both intersecting and intra-secting. As Bowler says, "to inhabit an ambiguous self requires courage" (p. 200).

Ambiguity also surfaces when anti-racist education meets a pedagogy of discomfort. Because anti-racist education requires disentangling both deep-seated assumptions about personal dispositions and the function society plays in entrenching

those dispositions, a pedagogy of discomfort sounds like a potential complement. Bowler would agree as she uses the subjects of racism and sexuality as contextualizers for her framework. In this study, however, the combination of these two forces, anti-racist pedagogy and a pedagogy of discomfort, leaves muddled results. This conflict or muddling appears when responding to Karen's resistant discourse. None of her conversation moves match Haviland's (2008) strategies. All of his strategies are subtle. For Haviland, a student reinforces the status quo when they use humor to defuse a conversation or when they call up their own experiences of hardship to suggest their experiences are similar to people of color. Karen, however, is more direct. If I call up Bowler here, I would argue that Karen's moves are encouraging because she is engaging with the conversation. She does not remove herself but embodies some of the moves associated with a pedagogy of discomfort. However, Critical Race Theory suggests this is a dangerous move. Karen's resistance is reminiscent of participants in Cabrera's (2014) study who deliberately attempted to establish white modes of understanding in the classroom. I can not reconcile this discrepancy except to say more work is needed to tease out how to recognize uncomfortable positions while not allowing white supremacist discourses equal weight.

The role of the anti-racist peer. My students' engagement with racism speaks to the importance of facilitating small group work into discussions on race. In whole class discussions, my students, even social just-minded students like Summer, shied away from discussing race. In individual assignments, the separation from the group gave my students space to grapple with ideas, but that isolation created space that allowed problematic ideas to go unchallenged.

While some of my students did think and write about race, they also needed a group of anti-racist peers who could challenge their ideas. My students' writing speaks to a key component of Bowler's pedagogy of discomfort—this type of education must be collective, not individualistic. Bowler spends a significant portion of her argument discussing the myopic potential of self-reflection. While self-reflection is a critical component of good pedagogy, it also "runs the risk of reducing historical complexities to an overly tidy package" (p. 177). Bowler's point is that a pedagogy of discomfort places students in the realm of social, political, and cultural systems. Students need to look beyond themselves to the wider structures that implicitly and explicitly create their set of beliefs and assumptions. Bowler does not, however, spell out how this occurs. It is tempting to inscribe Hanna's tentativeness in her writing to inexperience. She could be just learning to wrestle with these issues. However, her small group conversation dispels this temptation. She mentioned in her small group more than once that she was an urban education major and had taken courses on race and ethnicity in education. The issue is not that she has not been exposed to these ideas but that she needs her peers to push back when her ideas revert to erasing race.

Conclusion

My students' conversations reinforce the complicated and unique nature of classroom discussions on race and racism. As I have pointed out, many of my students avoided discussions of race while still engaging in uncomfortable discussions of class, gender, and ability. Because of the weighty history in the US regarding the treatment of black individuals, a classroom safe space alone will not result in discussions of race and racism. Something more than an assumed safe space is needed to open up these

conversations. As I have also pointed out, genre alone, even a genre with the potential for creating spaces of inquiry, will not create these conversations. Robust, transformative classroom conversations on US racism requires a multi-faceted approach that includes small and larger group discussions, a variety of genres, and anti-racist/social justice-minded teacher and student involvement.

However, this study also points to the importance of including multicultural speculative literature in classroom literature discussions. Black lives and black experiences are vibrant, diverse, and full of stories. These stories should not be contained in the narrow narrative box US schools sanction (often implicitly) for classroom use. Black artists and writers tell stories of slavery and police violence. They tell stories of growing up in Harlem and Chicago and Atlanta and Greenville. They also tell stories of space travel and aliens. They tell stories of robots and magicians and conjurers and space pirates. Anti-racism involves speaking out against oppression but it also involves dismantling color-blindness and expanding notions of black experiences. Black speculative fiction and its potential for creating spaces of inquiry should be a tool teachers draw upon in the classroom.

The ideas explored in this paper also speak to the power and potential of black speculative stories to critically engage with present and historical social issues. Discussions surrounding under-representation of people of color and disenfranchised groups have proliferated among scholars, teachers, activists, and students. Scholars and activists calling for more inclusive literature and the contemporary "We Need Diverse Books" campaign carry out important work. Yet an important element in developing representative children's literature is promoting a full picture of the lives of people from

under-represented groups. Unfortunately, many works of literature are constrained by limited representations sanctioned by publishers, decisions makers, and implicit social rules regarding race. The children's literature scholars Ebony Thomas and Philip Nel, in different ways, both speak of narrowed considerations of genre in African-American children's literature. Ebony Thomas, a scholar of fantasy and fandom, shares her experiences growing up as a black girl attracted to fantasy literature. As a child, she says she longed to "dream" (1) and that she "needed magic" (2) but she "[had] been told through [her] lifetime that stories like the ones [she] preferred were "for White people." She goes on to say, "when people of color seek passageways into the fantastic, we often discover that the doors are barred" (Thomas, forthcoming). Philip Nel (2015) complements Thomas' sentiments when he suggests publishers implicitly reinforce systemic racism by "using the language of business" (4) to discourage black authors from writing fantasy because the market for such literature purportedly does not exist.

Samuel (Chip) Delany, the groundbreaking science fiction author, provides an anecdote to support Nel's claim. In an interview with the literary scholar Larry McCafferty, Delany shares an early career experience of having a book rejected by a publisher. According to Delany, the publisher told him, "Chip, you tell a good story. But right now, there's a housewife somewhere in Nebraska, and we can't publish a first novel here unless there's something in it that she can relate to. The fact is, there is nothing in your book that she wants to know anything about. And that's probably why we won't publish it" (McCafferty, 1990 p. 90). Delany goes on in the interview to say that the novel was never published. On the one hand, the publisher's views were condescending to Nebraskan housewives, a sentiment I believe "housewives" from Mary Shelley to J.K.

Rowling would attest to. On the other, I have to wonder how many young children of color hunger for magic yet, like the young Thomas, find their doors barred because a publisher favors rural white women, or rural white school children, over urban (or suburban or rural) black children? Helping WPTs read black speculative fiction, appreciate it, and incorporate it into their classrooms is one step towards dismantling this slice of hegemony.

Bridge: Layers of difference

Nalo Hopkinson delves into the world of sexual abuse and the mire of recovery in her novel *Midnight Robber*. The protagonist Tan-Tan kills her father, Antonio, in self-defense; yet the inescapable guilt of his killing and the guilt of the incest follow her, infiltrating her thoughts and her dreams, leading to a bi-state of consciousness. She tries to be "good Tan-Tan" but the "bad Tan-Tan" rises up and reminds her of her past. In order to deal with this guilt, Tan-Tan takes on the persona of the Robber Queen, the carnival masquerade. In order to find her own redemption, she uses her version of the Midnight Robber to play the trickster with the inhabitants of the planet Toussaint.

One of those inhabitants is Janisette, her step-mother who blames Antonio's death and crime of incest on Tan-Tan. When they meet for the last time, Tan-Tan inhabits the character of the Midnight Robber and pronounces her innocence.

> "Tan-Tan the Robber Queen, the good and the bad,
> regarded Janisette with a regal gaze and spoke:
>
> *That plan for love never come to transaction.*
> *When Antonio find out, he rape she, beat she, nearly kill she.*
> *Lying under he pounding body she see the knife.*
> *And for she life she grab it and perform an execution.*
> *She kill she daddy dead. The guilt come down 'pon she head,*
> *The Robber Queen get born that day, out of excruciation."*

From – *Midnight Robber* by Nalo Hopkinson

Hopkinson captures this emotional brutality in a way that wears the reader down. Just when you feel like Tan-Tan has reached a moment of triumph, grief and guilt pull her back. The text tosses you into a blender, the brutality of the crime dredged up again and again.

Throughout this dissertation, I've argued that speculative literature, like *Midnight Robber,* uses elements of the fantastic to create distance between the reader and the issues in the text. The implication is the distance makes topics like race easier to address. There is, however, much wiggle room in that argument. It is difficult to claim that critical distance puts space between the tragedy of incest, for example, and the reader. Hopkinson shows the deficiency of critical distance in so far as no amount of critical distance can minimize the pain of sexual assault. With the deep history of racism and white supremacy in the US, how much critical distance is really necessary to get white students and teachers to address the issue? Even more critical, is critical distance even necessary? Does this just become another way to coddle white students and readers rather than make them face their privilege?

In another of Hopkinson's works, the short story "Report from Planet Midnight," she points out another deficiency in critical distance. Critical distance can be "employed" (Leonard and Porter, 2010) as a method of avoidance.

> "It is common for science fiction and fantasy writers, most of whom are white, to say that they don't write about people of colour because they don't know anything about us; or don't know what it's like to live as a racialized person; or, perhaps more honestly, because they don't want to piss us off. It is common for science fiction and fantasy writers to say that they set their stories in imaginary worlds among imaginary beings because the allows them to deal with fraught issues such as power and marginalization divorced from the real-world effects of such issues." (p. 29)

Hopkinson implies that critical distance can function as an escape route for white writers. Writing about race and writing authentic stories about racialized subjects is difficult work. White writers must engage in sophisticated research which includes listening to marginalized voices and dropping projects if necessary. There are risks

involved when white writers incorporate black and brown characters into their narratives. However, white writers can avoid hard work by using aliens to stand in for characters of color, distant planets to replace colonized lands. Critical distance holds potential for the anti-racist classroom. Critical distance can also be colonized to entrench whiteness and white supremacy.

I finish this dissertation by doing a number of things. First, I fill out the ideas from my classroom research articles by considering ideas from data that could not appear there because of word limit or relevance. I do this to contextualize my findings. I end by struggling over the complications of me as a white researcher conducting future research with black and brown communities. In between, I explore critical distance and the role it plays in reading engagement. Much work is needed beyond this dissertation to prevent a naïve incorporation of fantasy into classrooms. Speculative literature holds great potential for the anti-racist classroom. As Nalo Hopkinson's writing suggests, speculative literature is also subject to whiteness. As with any anti-racist tool, it must fit within a system of anti-racist dispositions, goals, and strategies.

Conclusion

As I draw this dissertation to a close, I'm faced with tying together disparate threads and seemingly disjointed patterns. Because of the nature of this document, one which followed each article to its own destination, the structure may feel choppy and unrelated. That is a risk that comes with scholarship. I could force the threads together or let the pattern take the lead. My goal in this final chapter is to highlight threads running through all the articles as different carpets are woven from a single bale of cotton. However, I want to do more than connect the articles. I want to use this final chapter to fill in some gaps, clarify what is unclear, push my ideas forward, and build upon the foundation these articles set. Some of the main points I hope to address in this final chapter concerns students' thoughts on fantasy, their knowledge or lack of knowledge of the genre, and how that knowledge influences their literature engagement. I also hope to connect these issues with larger discussions in English education, teacher education, studies on race, and literacy.

In this final chapter, I first flesh out my classroom studies by examining my students' perceptions and experiences on fantasy literature. This section draws on student open-ended questions and course assignments, important data that could not fit in the two classroom research articles. My data collection extended across three semesters of courses and much of my findings could not and should not have appeared in the two data-driven articles. My first section of this conclusion draws on this data to present implications for teacher education and English Language Arts.

Second, I want to ruminate on the concept of critical distance. In this final chapter, I want to mine this concept as I believe it is under-theorized and under-examined,

particularly regarding the field of speculative literatures. In this section, I draw primarily on the scholarship of Farah Mendlesohn, one of the foremost children's fantasy and science fiction scholars. I also put her work in conversation with Darko Suvin's canonical text *The Poetics of Science Fiction* to show how Mendlesohn's ideas about reader engagement with the fantastic echo the ideas of Suvin's. With this conversation established, I add a third voice: Rudine Sims Bishop. Bishop (1990) offered the now well-established metaphor in literacy studies: literature as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. One reason why I find the idea of critical distance so compelling is how it demands nuance from a dominant but simplified metaphor. Here, I inject speculative literatures into education's individualistic, reader-centered conversations on reader engagement and show how the text owns agency in the transaction of reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). The ideas in this section are heavy and require a thorough examination which is not possible in the space this conclusion affords. My intent is to set up a discussion that I will explore in the future.

In my third and final section, I look at implications for literacy teacher education. I take the ideas from section two on critical distance and turn them back upon my students' inexperiences and frustrations with texts like *Parable of the Sower*, *Dawn*, and *Throne of the Crescent Moon*. By using an examination of critical distance to contextualize my student reading engagement, I hope to offer thoughts on and suggestions for the wider field of literature teacher education.

Student perceptions of fantasy

For each of the three courses from which I gathered data, I gave students a four-item open-ended questionnaire on their thoughts and experiences working with speculative literature. While the sample size from the three courses is too small to make generalizable claims, the insight carries interest about WPTs' beliefs about science fiction and fantasy. The questions were:

- What do you consider fantasy literature? How would you define it?

- What was the last fantasy book you remember reading? How often do you read fantasy?

- What fantasy literature do you remember reading in school?

- Do you want your own future children or students to read fantasy literature? Why or why not?

The free-writing questionnaires showed an interesting contradiction which I anticipated would be the case before my study began. Few of my pre-service teachers had experience or confidence with speculative literature (I used the term fantasy rather than speculative literature with my students because if is a term they were more familiar with. In class, I decided simplicity outweighed ivory tower definitions.). Of the 55 questionnaires collected, only nine said they read fantasy regularly. The majority (42) said they "do not read fantasy" or "rarely" read it. Many couldn't even name any works of speculative literature. If they could name fantasy texts, they almost always consisted of mainstream bestselling series like *The Hunger Games*, *Twilight*, or *Divergent*. Many texts they mentioned were from their grade school years. My student Mary sums this up when she said she could remember reading "maybe the first two chapters in *Twilight* 5 years

ago and before that was probably the first couple chapters in Harry Potty when I was in middle school." Students who enjoy school are more likely to become teachers and try to emulate what they saw their teachers do (Lortie, 1975). As many of my students did not engage with fantasy in school, it is likely many would not have gone on to incorporate fantasy in their future classrooms.

Since they do not read much fantasy, many understandably expressed confusion about what qualifies as the genre and they could not differentiate between the many subgenres of speculative literature. When asked to define fantasy, their definitions lacked sophistication and nuance. They offered qualifiers such as: fantasy is about stories that are "not real" or "make-believe." Another descriptor offered was "imagination." These vague descriptors offered my students little certainty in determining which texts belonged to the genre. In discussions, one group could not determine if *Lord of the Flies* or Dante's *Inferno* were fantasy. One group claimed the iconic fantasy epic *The Lord of the Rings* was science fiction. One student shared that she read Phillip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* in school. However, despite reading these classic science fiction texts, she could not determine whether or not those texts were science fiction or fantasy.

Students' inexperience with speculative literature likely influenced more than their knowledge of the genre. A key question for me moving forward is whether their inexperience influenced their talk about race within the genre. Many students avoided the topic of race completely. I can not say for certain when their silence grew out of white educational discourse, (Haviland, 2008), whether it stemmed from my students' unfamiliarity with the genre, or both. What is clear is that when students were unfamiliar

with speculative literature, they struggled in their conversations. One student's comment in a section of my children's literature course that took place before this study occurred helps illustrate the effects of their inexperience. In that course, my students read another work of multicultural fantasy: *Throne of the Crescent Moon* by Saladin Ahmed, a Middle Eastern-influenced high fantasy. One student shared in discussion that the names in the book, like "Adoulla Makhslood," "Raseed bas Raseed," and "Dhamsawaat," confused her and she "just started skipping the names" when she came across them in the book. The speculative genre floats in world-building which can involve unearthly places and names. An experienced fantasy reader familiar with names like Minas Tirith, Arrakis, Imaro, and Oankali has developed strategies to deal with the uncertainty of a fantastical name or place. Some of my students unfamiliar with this trope stumbled or shut down rather than struggle for understanding.

In one small group from my Octavia Butler study, Breanna and Sarah voiced their displeasure with *Parable of the Sower*. Discussing their displeaure, Breanna shared her earlier experience reading another of Butler's books, *Dawn*, in another class.

> Sarah: [*Parable of the Sower]* is my least favorite book that I read in my YA courses.
> Breanna: [Butler's] writing is interesting to me. I had to read another one of her books for a [general studies] class and there was the same kind of confusion.
> Sarah: Oh, really?
> Breanna: That one was a lot um, like, I understood it . . .
> Sarah: What was it about?
> Breanna: I couldn't even tell you. (Multiple students laugh) It was about uh, it was definitely, like, fantasy. Like, they were in, like, the future once again and it was, like, people could walk through walls and, like, the way that the human, quote-unquote human, was structured was completely different. Like, you can touch people and knock

135

them out and stuff. Like, it was pretty weird. It was very
weird. But it made a lot more sense than this book but I still
didn't [understand] that book either.

Breanna stumbled over her words trying to explain the basic premise of *Dawn*.

Her explanation included copious fillers such as "uh" and "like." She also offered a

belabored description of Bulter's aliens, the Oankali. In the novel, these aliens appear

moderately human, though with tentacles. The Oankali visit different doomed planets,

borrow inhabitants' DNA, share some of their own, and leave both themselves and the

hosts genetically modified, evolutionary beings. Breanna reduced this complexity of the

Oankali to "quote-unquote human." She is an interesting case. While my research

explicitly focuses on white pre-service teachers, Breanna is a young black woman. She is

also a student who holds a progressive outlook. She frequently talked about race and

oppression in class. While it is possible that some of my white students used their

confusion with speculative tropes as an avoidance stragedy, Breanna shows that inability

to understand a speculative text prevents a social justice-minded student from engaging in

transformative work. She struggled with the book in a way that a reader familiar with

alien encounter literature might not. What I still do not know with certainty is how a

reader familiar with speculative literature who is not social justice-minded would engage

with the text.

In order to make sense of my students' experiences and frustrations with

speculative literature, I turn to a deeper consideration of critical distance. In the next

section, I examine the ideas on critical distance by two key speculative literature scholars,

Farah Mendlesohn and Darko Suvin.

Critical distance and spaces of wonder

My thoughts on critical distance are influenced by the work of Farah Mendlesohn. In her book *The Rhetorics of Fantasy*, she uses the term critical distance but only in passing. While she does not give the concept the consideration of Saler, her book presents an in-depth consideration of the positions a text holds towards readers. She says, "I believe that the fantastic is an area of literature that is heavily dependent on the dialectic between the author and reader for the construction of a *sense of wonder*" (p. xiii emphasis added). All reading is a dialectic though I argue that fantasy is different because of the dialectic's resulting sense of wonder. The term *wonder*, which Mendlesohn defines as "a fiction of consensual construction of belief," (p. xiii) is important in studies of fantasy. Many scholars of fantasy claim wonder is what separates fantasy from other speculative genres like science fiction. One question I was not able to determine in this dissertation, but a key question moving forward, is how critical distance might create spaces of wonder and how readers engage with those spaces.

To answer this question requires grappling with the actions of the text towards the reader. I choose this order intentionally as I consider how texts position themselves in relation to the reader rather than how a reader positions herself in relation to a text. Mendlesohn employs this angle when she lays out four systems of the fantastic: the portal-question fantasy, the immersive fantasy, the intrusive fantasy, and the liminal fantasy. These systems rest in the construction of the text and how the text places the fantastic in relation to the reader/protagonist, including ways that position the fantastic in more elusive ways. Mendlesohn's framework convincingly suggests that some speculative stories are more approachable than others. For example, the portal-quest

fantasy guides the reader through the world of the fantasy. These fantasies "almost always proceed in a linear fashion" (p. xix) and use "intensely descriptive and exploratory [language] rather than assumptive [language]" (p. xix). The immersive fantasy, however, relies on a set of shared assumptions. In the world of black speculative literature, this is the difference between *Zahrah the Windseeker* and Delany's *Neveryon* series. In *Zahrah*, the protagonist enters into the Forbidden Jungle, the place of talking animals, internet-connected plants, and Lovecraftian monsters. The elements of the Forbidden Jungle are described in "intensely descriptive" detail. In addition, Zahrah has an encyclopedia that gives further background and history about what she encounters in the jungle (a convenient way around fantasy literature's infamous information dump). In contrast, the protagonist of Delany's *Neveryona*, the second book in his *Neveryon* series, first appears already flying on the back of a dragon. "She was fifteen and she flew. Her name was pryn – because she knew something of writing but not of capital letters" (p. 11). The book opens by declaring "she flew." The book does not describe how she flies, through apparatus or magic. It is also silent on the point of her "writing" except that she does not capitalize her name. These questions are answered slowly over the course of the book. Some answers are addressed immediately. In the novel's second paragraph, the narrator tells that she rides a dragon. The narrator, however, is silent on the purpose for riding the dragon. That question is never answered. But she does fly. The reader rides along with pryn, by dragon back or two-legged journey, as she becomes Pryn and meets the Liberator, the series protagonist. The reader reads and puzzles out the world.

This is not a perfect comparison as *Zahrah* is a children's novel and *Neveryon* is an adult novel. However, the point about approachability remains sound. *Zahrah* is more

kind to a reader. That novel's system of the fantastic fills in gaps that could rebuff inexperienced readers. *Neveryon*, however, is less forgiving. The novel exposes the reader to the gaps in the narrative. As the reader explores the city of Neveryon, she must find her own way. The fantastic jostles her among the crowded streets. More questions arise around the case of speculative literature and critical distance. It seems intuitive that certain texts are easier to access. However, this scenario does not fully hold up across genres. For example, a historical fiction narrative about the Holocaust is not intuitively easier to access than a historical fiction narrative about the Crusades. Access depends on the reader's background knowledge of the historical time period. Access does not depend on so-called tropes of historical fiction. This is not a similar comparison to accessing a fantasy narrative set in Middle Earth versus accessing a fantasy narrative set in Hogwarts.

Mendlesohn's argument focuses explicitly on fantasy but her ideas of critical distance and approachability also resonate in science fiction, the other main speculative genre. Mendlesohn's ideas parallel those of Darko Suvin, one of the world's premier science fiction critics. Before presenting this parallel, I need to point out that Suvin draws a sharp line between the literatures of fantasy and science fiction. In his classic work *The Poetics of Science Fiction*, he claims science fiction assumes a scientifically rational, or what he calls *cognitive*, frame of functionality. Fantasy on the other hand, Suvin says, is "anti-cognitive" and "inimical to the empirical world and its laws" (p. 8). I respect Suvin's division but disagree with his rigid stance. In my first chapter (and again in my fourth article), I discussed my position on the error of calcified distinctions between speculative genres. I will not belabor the point here but I must point out the difference

between my view and Suvin's. He would cringe to see me use his concept of *cognitive estrangement* (discussed below) to complement textual analysis of fantasy literature.

Despite Suvin's discomfort, I find his concept of cognitive estrangement fits well with my application of critical distance to literacy education. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, science fiction is cognitive in Suvin's framework, meaning the literature holds up to plausible laws of scientific rigor. The laws don't have to be scientific, but scientifically plausible. Outside of deep theory, time travel and faster-than-light travel are currently impossible. This impossibility does not prevent the time travel of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* from seeming plausible. Nor does the impossibility of faster-than-light travel hinder the believability or plausibility of light speed in the *Star Wars* films. The second part of Suvin's conceptualization rests in the genre's function of *estrangement*. "Basically, SF is a developed oxymoron, a realistic irreality, with humanized nonhumans, this-worldly Other Worlds, and so forth. Which means that it is—potentially—the space of a potent *estrangement*, validated by the pathos and prestige of the basic cognitive norms of our times" (p. viii). In other words, a reader who encounters the disintegrating reality of Philip K. Dick's *Ubik* or the tri-genetic engineered new-humans of Octavia Butler's *Dawn* are given pause. They face a contradiction that requires cognitive gymnastics as they reshuffle their paradigms of possibility.

To dive into science fiction, and I would argue into speculative literatures, is to dive into a choppy storm of realities. Faced with contradictions of "this-worldly Other Worlds" or "humanized nonhumans," or "quote-unquote humans" as my student Breanne words it, the reader slips in certainty and conceptual rootedness. This choppy storm of realities created through tropes of time travel, futures, or alien encounters, is how science

fiction creates critical distance. Suvin's estrangement is a function of navigating critical distance. It results from reconciling the Other World with this-world, from reconciling the nonhuman with the human. For many readers, this strangeness may be irreconcilable.

Critical distance in speculative literatures, the way the text can guide or repel, leads me to question the pervasive metaphor(s) in literacy education of literature as windows, mirrors, sliding glass doors. In 1990, Rudine Sims Bishop proposed this three-part metaphor to describe how literature affects a reader's approach to a text. The foundation of her metaphor(s) is the window, which allows a reader to see another world. The other aspects, the mirror and sliding glass door, rest on the window. In other words, she does not propose three different metaphors but three manifestations of a single metaphor (hence my use of (s) to denote this multilayered-ness). The mirror, which allows a reader to see iterations of the self, is, in Bishop's proposal, the same window when "lighting conditions are just right." The sliding glass door is also the window slid open. In her piece, Bishop applies her metaphor(s) to children of color who lack authentic images of themselves in children's books. In regards to the under-representation of disenfranchised voices in children's literature, little has after changed twenty-five years as discussions on the need for more diverse books are as pertinent as ever. As I bring critical distance to bear on Bishop's metaphor, I want to be clear that I do not wish to criticize her work. It has been helpful for, by now, generations of readers. I do, however, want to complicate the metaphor and question its simplistic application to the classroom. Also to be clear, I want to point out that I do not believe Bishop is the root of this simplicity. I do not believe she offers a simplistic metaphor. The application of this metaphor, however, tends towards simplicity. When many teachers and teacher educators

call on Bishop's metaphor, they claim the mirror reflects the self and the window

provides a lens to "learn about other cultures" (field notes). In other words, a reader can

see herself and she can see (or learn about) someone else. This application narrows

Bishop's proposal in three ways. First, the mirror, which has been co-opted by white

readers and assimilated into Reader Response Theory, becomes a self-centered exercise

for students to see themselves. The assumption is a book is not good unless it is

"relatable." Bishop, however, does not propose the mirror as a nihilistic exercise. Instead,

she says "literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that

reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human

experience." Bishop's use of the mirror couches our own experience within the larger

world, not as an end in itself. The mirror contextualizes experiences. It doesn't pedestal

them. Second, her image of the window does not offer a picture of how to *learn* about

another culture, but to see another world. This is a critical distinction. In Bishop's

metaphor, the world through the window can be "imagined" or it can be "familiar."

Where classrooms call up the window as a way to learn about people and ethnicities

(meaning the Other), Bishop implies the window also lets us see Narnia or Un-Lun-Dun

or the Ooni Kingdom. Bishop makes room for fantasy and fantasy fits easily into her

metaphor. However, many treat Bishop's window as the glass on a train car from which

we glimpse people and lands in passing. Rather, her window is a portal that opens up on

the infinite. The third way teachers and students simplify Bishop's metaphor is by

omitting the picture of the sliding glass door altogether. One example, though there are

many to choose from, is Sciurba's (2014) application of Bishop to textual relevance and

black male readers. Her piece is important as it draws a distinction between young

readers finding a text relatable and finding a text relevant, an important nuance. She builds her argument around Bishop arguing that readers can find relevance when literature functions as a mirror or when it functions as a window. She omits the picture of the sliding glass door even though finding relevance by stepping into a story is a fascinating idea to consider. My goal is not to criticize Sciurba (I respect both her work and her argument) but to point out her exclusion of sliding glass doors altogether, a typical move in literacy education scholarship.

My critique of Bishop's metaphor(s) rests in the rigidity of the objects. A window and a mirror are set: one hangs on a wall; the other is embedded within a wall. Possible movement, the sliding of a glass door or the opening/closing of a window, is restricted to a track. Critical distance, however, reveals the simplicity of the metaphor. Windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors reduce a book to a simple frame, one which leaves literature with little agency. A person can approach a window, look through it, or ignore it but the window cannot act on itself. Absent an outside agent who can move the door, a sliding glass door is only a large, moveable window. Literature as a sliding glass door, the least considered aspect of Bishop's metaphor(s), is most applicable to my work on the fantastic. A reader can slide open the door to a new world and "only [have] to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author" (Bishop). Yet Mendlesohn's work convincingly suggests that doors into other worlds are more complicated than sliding aside a porch door. The recognition of critical distance suggests the metaphor(s) about literature should be something fluid and adaptable to each reader. Texts are not static. They invite, they repulse, they repel, they trap. Texts build up walls to keep some out and provide keys to let others in.

The question then is what to do with this complicated metaphor. The full answer to this question belongs in another paper. Important to this dissertation, however, is the recognition that real engagement with and growth through critical distance is a rich area for future research. The questions are fascinating. How do readers encounter critical distance and negotiate the boundaries? How does navigating critical distance influence reader development? As critical distance shows the vibrancy and agency of literature, it also shows the vibrancy of readers. They can do more than gaze out a window or slide open a door and walk through. Critical distance casts the text as entity with dynamic agency. Readers accept invitations, they retract, they flee, they fall prey. They scale walls and turn keys. They also learn from their previous experiences. Learning to navigate Wonderland makes navigating Un-Lun-Dun more manageable. Knowing how to engage with the dynamic structures of fantasy can theoretically build more robust reading strategies and reading selves. Brian Attebery, (2006) a scholar of fantasy, says, "Characters can be categorized variously as being immersed in, or wandering through, or fighting off invasions of the fantastic; readers, however, can take any or all of these positions at once, since they are constantly mediating between the fantasy world and their own experience" (qtd. in Mendlesohn, p. xviii). While critical distance can be confounding (as Suvin suggests) it can also lead to tremendous empowerment by an informed, trained reader of fantasy. Attebery points out that the successful reader of fantasy can do more than navigate critical distance. She can inhabit multiple positions simultaneously. A reader is not just a navigator but a mediator. A reader of fantasy is a full reader.

Critical Distance and the Literacy Teacher

With this exploration of critical distance in speculative literature scholarship, I return to my students' struggles with reading texts like *Parable of the* Sower and offer a simple solution. Read more speculative fiction. The solution may be self-evident but experts concur. Samuel R. Delany addressed the familiarity with speculative literature or the lack thereof in an address at the 1979 Minicon (science fiction festival) in Minneapolis.

> "With readers who have difficulty negotiating the specific rhetoric of the SF text, I've found that their problems center on the numberless rhetorical figures SF writers use to suggest, imply, or sometimes vividly draw the differences between the stories' world and ours. Unless the nature of the world of the story is completely spelled out for them in solid, expository paragraphs, they simply can't take the hints, the suggestions, the little throwaways with which inventive SF writers get this dialogue going in the minds of those readers comfortable with the discourse. They can't form these hints and throwaways into any vision of a different world. But then, where would they have had the opportunity to learn? Certainly not in contemporary mundane fiction. And yes, with practice most of them got a *lot* better at it." (emphasis in original)

If WPTs can get better at reading fantasy, their questionnaires indicate school is not providing them with the experience and exposure. While some students said they read no speculative texts in school, many could name a few texts they remember. Students mentioned *The Giver* and *The Magic Schoolbus* series regularly. However, the inclusion of token texts did not equip them to engage with the speculative literature in sophisticated ways. My student Ethan said of his school experience, "in school, most fantasy literature wasn't explained. This was considered [for] home, more personal enjoyment reading." Others back this up. Connor said, "It seems as though fantasy is reserved for pleasure

reading and used in a non-educational setting." Ethan and Connor's sentiments stand as pertinent in part because my questionnaire did not ask for this information. I only asked what texts they read in school, not why. When in a mindset to talk about fantasy, this perception of out-of-school or non-academic reading was on their mind. Claire, among others, pointed out that school actually got in the way of reading fantasy. She recalls reading "the third Harry Potter book. [She] was unable to finish it because school started again." As I've argued throughout this dissertation, education scholars and teachers, as these students' experiences attest, hold views on speculative genres that hover between tolerance and loathing.

To relegate one of students' most widely read genres, though one teachers and future teachers tend to avoid, to the pedagogical file drawer does a disservice to literacy instruction. It is, I argue, educational malpractice in the field of critical literacy education. My students' inexperience speaks to issues of English Language Arts and English education teacher knowledge. When scholars and professional development specialists determine what literacy teachers need to know, knowledge of speculative genres (titles, issues, tropes, subgenres, strategies for comprehension) must be included on the list.

A likely counter-argument would be that teachers already live with over-loaded schedules and excessive responsibility. This is a critique I sympathize with. Policy makers and stakeholders propose solving problems in US society by shifting blame to teachers. This blame game and the encompassing addition of responsibilities piled on teachers occur with an embarrassing frequency in the US. Teachers are expected to compensate for poverty, hunger, safety, broken families, and the list goes on. Expecting teachers to add more to their load is, I believe, irresponsible. In the situation with

knowledge of speculative genres, however, I am not advocating for additional responsibilities. I am advocating for existing responsibilities to be addressed well. Teachers must already know elements of genre. Speculative genres, however, slip through (or are shoved through) the cracks. Speculative literature is also not a minor genre. It is the most widely read in the US. Leaving speculative fiction out of the curriculum is akin to leaving nonfiction out of the curriculum.

One encouraging sign from the questionnaire data is the indication that pre-service teachers see the importance of the genre and are ready and willing to engage with it. Of the 55 questionnaires, all 55 said they wanted their own children and their future students to read fantasy. Almost every response was enthusiastic. Only two spoke with a tone of tolerance rather than excitement. This enthusiasm can and should be tapped. Even when students did not read speculative fiction, they felt it was valuable for their future students. Pre-service teacher preparation is a critical moment for training future teachers more widely in the genre(s) and to encourage them to include the genre in their classrooms. The willingness is there. Teacher educators can flip the switch so they know the inclusion is important and possible. As my pre-service teachers look to the future, they also reflected on their past. My student Claire ties her inexperience with fantasy with the role of the school when she says,

> "Most of the time when I was in school learning to read, I would shy away from fantasy novels because I thought they would be harder for me to understand. I always remember walking directly past the section in the library, and I feel as if I never really gave fantasy books a chance. In my adult life, like when I was in school, consists of generally avoiding fantasy because of my childhood fears of failing to comprehend them. *I wish someone would have broke* [sic] *this habit for me, because I didn't know enough, at the time, to break it myself*." (emphasis added)

There is a role school plays in preparing students to engage with any genre. As they are prepared to meaningfully read contemporary and historical fiction, they must also be prepared to read speculative literatures. From my students' responses, it seems many are willing to engage, or wish a teacher would guide them through their uncertainty. When the texts were placed in their hands, the unprepared readers found the genre off-putting.

Conclusion

As I have said repeatedly throughout this dissertation, I have crafted my scholarship to rest at the intersections of children's literature studies, studies of the fantastic, and English education. As a final parting note to this dissertation, I want to break two rules of good writing. I will finish with an extended quote and directly address the reader.

I recently stumbled upon a 1980 book review of Darko Suvin's *The Poetics of Science Fiction*, written by the children's literature scholar Perry Nodelman. The intersecting ideas of these two giants in the field capture the intersections of the fields of study. Nodelman concludes his book review with a response to an excerpt of Suvin's book.

> "Good children's literature - - maybe even all good literature - - should be what Suvin suggests science fiction should be: "the strange novelty is its raison d'entre. As a minimum, we must demand from SF that it be wiser than the world it speaks to." By wise, Suvin [as a Marxist theorist] means less conservative; I prefer to assume that to be wiser is, in fact, to be conscious of all other possibilities, to be open to the mere fact of expanded possibility. The ability to offer such wisdom is the greatest gift of both good science fiction and good children's literature." (p. 27)

As you the reader have engaged throughout this dissertation with good science fiction, good fantasy, and good children's literature, I hope it has left you as it has left me—a little wiser.

In saying goodbye, I sign off with the words of Ytasha L. Womack from her introduction to *Afrofuturism*:

Stay Spacetastic.

APPENDIX

Appendix: Children's and Fantasy Literature Referenced

Ahmed, Saladin. *Thone of the crescent moon.* (2012)

Barrie, J. M. *Peter Pan.* (1911)

Baum, L. Frank. *The wizard of oz.* (1900)

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Butler, Octavia. *Kindred.* (2004)

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice in wonderland.* (1865)

Collins, Suzanne. *The hunger games.* (2010)

Delany, Samuel. R. *Triton.* (1976)

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Herbert, Frank. *Dune.* (1965)

Hopkinson, Nalo. *Sistermine.* (2013)

Kingsley, Charles. *The water babies. (1862)*

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L'engle, Madeleine. *A wrinkle in time.* (1962)

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Pullman, Philip. *His dark materials* series (1995)

Richardson, Justin, and Parnell, Peter. *And Tango makes three.* (2005)

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter* series. (1997)

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