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"Conjuring the Monsters in Ourselves: Fantasy and writing back to historical discourses"

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Abstract

"Fantasy is the lie that speaks truth," writes Brian Attebery in his reflection on fantasy as a genre. This paper looks at how fantasy as a genre can do more than "speak truth" in the abstract sense, and how it can make visible often obscured historical truths. Literature has long been a medium that allows society to take a distanced look at itself, with contemporary fantasy containing within it a unique ability to reveal real-world truths through the construction of the imaginary. This paper uses *Cinderella is Dead* by Kalynn Bayron, *Legendborn* by Tracy Deonn, and *Skin of the Sea* by Natasha Bowen, to examine how fantasy can make visible human-caused atrocities in more stringent ways. As such, fantasy becomes the vehicle for writing back; where nonfiction won't accept the truth, the fantastic demands it be witnessed, unobscured and undisguised by the trappings of magic or an imaginary world.

Keywords: fantasy, monsters, retellings, adaptation, young adult

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Conjuring the Monsters in Ourselves

Fantasy and writing back to historical discourses

In his 2019 Tolkien Lecture at Pembroke College, Oxford, Marlon James reflected on the connections between the worlds that fantasy authors J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis each created and the historical trauma of the Great War that they both experienced. He noted that fantasy worlds such as Middle Earth, where Tolkien remade the world through mythologies that affirmed his sense of self, were necessary to making sense of the great evil they had faced as a generation: "It's the mythologies that allowed [Tolkien and Lewis] to understand the darkest aspects of human nature and how massive worldwide evil can still be man-made" (James 2019). The reflection on trauma in Tolkien's works and contemporary fantasy can arguably be read through the lens of engaging the metahistorical imagination, as described by Amy Elias (2001), or through Linda Hutcheon's conception of historiographic metafiction (1988). Such readings add a dimension to how we might further understand the capacity of fantasy to help make sense of the human experience.

As Brian Attebery notes, fantasy as a genre neither directly depicts nor directly challenges social norms and political systems (2024, 1), but one of its essential functions is its capacity to give readers "ways to re-see the world" and thus as a genre "says things are not as we think they are" (2024, 6). The relationship that Attebery identifies between fantasy and history through Fredric Jameson's discussion of romance is one that I will consider further through Tracy Deonn's *Legendborn* (2020), Kalynn Bayron's *Cinderella is Dead* (2020), and Natasha Bowen's *Skin of the Sea* (2021). In doing so, I consider how fantasy can intervene in the narrative of history through imaginative discourses.

This intervention is a concern of postmodernism, as the postmodern both "has taught us that both history and fiction are discourses" and "reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining" while also problematizing "the entire notion of historical knowledge" (Hutcheon 1988, 89). While writing about historical fiction and not fantasy itself, Hutcheon's observations are pertinent to works of fantasy that also "contaminat[e]", so to speak, "the historical with didactic and situational discursive elements, thereby challenging the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation" (1988, 92). Hutcheon's designation of historiographic metafiction by definition "puts into question, at the same time it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past as real" (92). As such, it is implicitly intertextual, and, as other postmodern fictions, "suggests that to rewrite or to re-present the past in fiction and in history… is to open it up to the present" (110). Fictional representation in these cases, grounded in historical contexts, is not necessarily about rewriting the past, but instead allows for questioning the records such that other ways of knowing the past can be realized.

Hutcheon's work points to what Elias later discussed as a metahistorical imagination, or "an imagination that returns to history and questions the grounds on which it has been epistemologically and politically established" (2001, xiv). Elias connects this to the idea of a "post-traumatic imaginary" (2001, 52) that links postmodernist historical fiction and postcolonial fiction as genres that "attempt to counter the forces of modernization and are a reaction-formation to the trauma of history itself" (2001, xiv). Again, though not discussed in relation to fantasy, both Elias' and Hutcheon's ideas bring an interesting perspective to what Attebery calls "fantasy's capacity of mythopoesis: the making of narratives that reshape the world" (2014, 8). Fantasy can become a space in which to question historical events and human truths, unfettered by reality while also grounded within both reality and history.

What I will focus on here are instances where works of fantasy incorporate under-discussed or deliberately obscured history and use the progressive potential of the fantastic to force readers not to linger on moments of wonder but rather to acknowledge fully the trespasses of the past and their long-reaching aftereffects. Such works become anchors for dialogue between past and present, witnesses through

the imaginary to what should have been, by all rights, unimaginable. These works perform through their imaginative constructs the metafictional self-reflexivity of historiographic metafiction, and through such performance emphasise the "ontological line between historical past and literature" (Hutcheon 1989, 10). The fantasy becomes part of how such works convey that they are not trying to relate history as truth, but rather call for a reconsideration of how history is told and what might humans be capable of. Novels such as *Legendborn*, *Cinderella is Dead*, and *Skin of the Sea* make visible how fantasy can intervene in history, alongside the invocation of the mythic, of fairy tales or the folkloresque. They illuminate how historiographic metafiction in relation to a post-traumatic imaginary can become almost hypervisible in fantasy.

The three novels are all YA fantasy that adapt or appropriate legend or fairy tales. Dana E. Lawrence and Amy L. Montz write that such works for YA audiences are of particular note as they "have the added benefit of engaging the young adult reader with both then and now, past and present – functioning as both 'monuments' to history and the 'flesh' of the reader's lived experience" (2020, 1). In this dual engagement, such works invite a reader to see "the past with new eyes" and thus "imagine the past in all its defects…engaging without predecessors and the rights – and wrongs – of their literatures" (2020, 2). For Lawrence and Montz, adaptations "empower young readers, making them more culturally, historically, and socially aware through the lens of literary diversity" (2020, 2). This level of engagement is facilitated by the teenage protagonists, who are tested in ways that allow them to "fully claim an identity" (xii) as they encounter "disruptions to systems that define their lives" (xi), a hallmark of YA literature identified by Rebekah Fitzsimmons and Casey Alane Wilson (2020). Disruptions in these novels are manifold: they are systemic, they are historical, and they even interrupt known or perceived to be known narratives. The disruptions happen from the embodied and embedded perspective of the teenage protagonists who gain new knowledge even as their eyes are opened to the horrors beneath the worlds they thought they knew.

From the transatlantic slave trade to the assumed whiteness of Arthurian legend, these novels do not draw from the magical to create conflict but from the real, from history that is constantly struggling to be told in a way that centers the trauma and humanity of its

victims. While Attebery's conceptualization of fantasy as "the lie that speaks truth" (2022, 9) might be viewed in terms mythic, structural, or metaphorical truths, these novels transpose specific historical events and details into fantasy spaces in ways that don't obscure their historical realities. Authors who engage in this particular mode of fantasy retellings make visible what Matthew Sangster identifies as "the nature of Fantasy as a form that places reappropriation and reconfiguration at its heart" (2023, 12) to more fully realize the social justice-oriented paradigms of what Attebery considers one of the "affordances of fantasy," which is "the ability to revise cultural narratives, and to enlist the reader in this enterprise" (2024, 20).

The emphasis on historically rooted, racialized, misogynist, patriarchal, and homophobic violence in these fantasy spaces can be considered in dialogue with Attebery's consideration of rationalization in the Anglo-American folk tradition. Drawing from Tristram Coffin's work, Attebery considers the process of shifting extraordinary details in ballads to ones that were "more familiar and mundane" (1980, 17). Attebery's concern is the ways that this process flattens, or homogenizes the ballads, creating an "effect that is all too often to obscure motivations, trivialize effects, and render entire groups of related ballads indistinguishable: another unfaithful love, one more murdered girl" (1980, 17). But in the novels discussed here, the rationalization of violence becomes a necessary process to ground the stakes of fantasy. The repetitive, almost mundane presence of racialized, gender-based, or anti-queer violence is so prevalent that it cannot even be escaped in a fantasy world. Such rationalization calls attention to that which might otherwise evoke numbness, despair, or despondency.

Fantasy thus becomes another tool for writing back. In an age of constant disinformation, such as the pushback against National Trust acknowledgements of historical connections to Caribbean plantation slavery (Quinn 2024), or the reactions to journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones' 1619 project (Lozada 2021; Waldstreicher 2020), sometimes truth can become lost. But in certain works of fantasy, the narrative can demand that the horrors of history be witnessed. Despite the nuances of worldbuilding, the violence is not invented but reiterated from recorded history. The settings of these three novels make this starkly apparent. Bayron's Mersailles might be invented, drawn from proto-European fairy-tale spaces, but the violence she depicts through its patriarchal, misogynistic, and homophobic society is very much

that of the real world. Bowen draws her cultural, temporal, and geographic details from a historical moment in West Africa and the cruelty depicted is not by the mythic figures she invokes but rather from human history. Deonn brings various magical legacies into the contemporary United States and makes readers understand that the violence of this hidden magical society is not divorced the greater society and the historical legacies of chattel slavery and racism. Such narratives conjure the monsters society often chooses not to acknowledge.

Cinderella is Dead

In *Cinderella is Dead* by Kalynn Bayron, Sophia Grimmins is forced to navigate a strictly patriarchal, heteronormative world that treats any who deviate from the King's declared standards of normativity with extreme prejudice and cruelty. In this world, the kingdom is ruled by the absolute monarch, King Manfred, and under his rule patriarchy is taken to its extremes where not only do women have no rights to self-determination, finances, or choice in their future roles, but also anyone who does not conform to conservative gendered norms is considered less than human. When Sophia refuses to navigate this world according to its rules, she breaks the rules and the world they uphold apart, an example of how the fusion of YA dystopia and fairytale narrative can generate new ways of being in, understanding, and even paths towards remaking the real world. As Jill Coste writes, "these retellings acknowledge the complexity of social structures and the personal struggles that can complicate a happy ending… dystopian fairytales transcend the hero's journey and stress the importance of social awareness and the ongoing efforts required to enact social change" (2020, 96). The world of Sophia's story, Mersailles, is an immersive fantasy drawn from European fairytale spaces, one that "presents the fantastic without comment as the norm both for the protagonist and for the reader" (Mendlesohn 2008, xx). Nevertheless, Bayron consciously embeds the misogynist and homophobic violence of the real world into her fantasy space, or perhaps one can say that everyday violence intrudes into the fantasy space, which lends the peril a sense of reality. If we draw from Bacchilega and Greenhill's consideration of "fairy tale or wonder tale" as forms that operate "in the fantastic as a general mode of expression that is not mimetic or

confined to realism" but that most often seeks to elicit hope (2022, 1–2), then the emphasis on realistic patriarchal violence becomes a fascinating interruption in the narrative mode. Violence is present in many fairy tales, but Bayron's depictions of everyday, gender-based violence are a part of the worldbuilding rather than a transgression against a particular protagonist or punishment of a villain. By relocating this violence to be social and cultural violence against women at large, Bayron makes the ubiquity of such patriarchal and misogynistic violence more visible in the real world. It becomes a repetitive refrain: not just what might happen to Sophia and her friends and family if they do not conform with social norms, but what did happen to Sophia's grandmother and what does happen to the seamstress who makes Sophia's dress. The backdrop of patriarchal violence helps show how it is systemic and not merely caused by a handful of bad actors.

In interviews about the process of writing *Cinderella is Dead*, Bayron refers to everyday moments of sexual harassment, noting the sinister, pervasive, implied threat that a society that tolerates such acts levies against women as "many of the rules and incidents [she] included are things that happen in the real world" (Montovani 2020). In this novel, the violence of patriarchy and misogyny and power become explicitly tied, both through the actions of King Manfred who feeds vampirically on souls to prolong his life, and the men who follow his example in the use and abuse of not only women but anyone who does not conform to social norms. It is normalized in this society for men to attempt to choose two girls at the ball, or harm the wives they already have to be able to claim another. The structural implications of normalized sexual violence are laid bare in a way that is unignorable. Bayron's work asks readers to consider the end result of not pursuing gender equity or addressing gender-based violence.

The violence depicted in the novel includes the suppression of queer people (Bayron 2020, 5; 77); the demand by Sophia's parents that she hide who she is (35–6; 72–3); the violence directed at Luke, a queer character that is suggested as a potential spouse for Sophia by her mother, for his sexuality (106–7); the control and ownership exerted by men over their wives and female relatives, as in the case of the seamstress and her husband where the reader sees financial and physical abuse levied against a woman with a trade who is violently dominated by her husband (46–7) or the guards who joke about killing their wives in order to claim younger ones (4); the psychological control

and socialization of children through the palace-approved "Cinderella" story (17–9); the social control of women by any men who can threaten physical violence or otherwise declare any woman forfeit for breaking curfew or other gender-based rules and norms (178–9); the economic control over families through the arrangement of safe marriages for daughters or female relatives (87); and the absolute control over the population by King Manford who can declare individuals forfeit to the crown for breaking his edicts, a process that sees them enslaved and sold outside the kingdom (p. 5–6; 8). Importantly, Bayron identifies and reflects this violence as both structural and individual. The everyday, normalized violence is intertwined; Manford's reign and rules empower other men to behave in increasingly cruel and controlling ways, but also individual men have to take it upon themselves to enforce such rules for this social control to be effective. The interplay of individual and system comes to a head in the novel's resolution, when Sophia and Constance defeat Manford but recognize that it is not enough to remove the instigator of violent systems. As they flee the burning palace, Sophia notes that even amid the chaos, people are too willing to act as if the king's reign continues: "I scan the crowd. Even now, as the palace burns, some of the suitors hold tight to their newly won prizes. One young woman struggles in her partner's grip as he looks around, wild-eyed. The king may be a pile of ash, but his ideas are still alive and well" (376). They are only able to challenge the power invested in both the systems and the individuals by addressing both together. By refusing to compromise, or agree to a gradual unmaking of these systems, they remove the ability for individuals to step into the vacuum left by Manfred's death. This resolution counters real-world contexts for systemic violence, where systems of patriarchy, racialized violence or homophobic structures have not been deliberately dismantled and so the social impacts persist, such as the post-Civil War period in the United States, the lack of reparations paid to the formally enslaved after the abolishment of chattel slavery by European nations in the 1800s, or the systems that allowed the abuses that came to light following the MeToo movement in the present being allowed to persist. The novel acts as a counter narrative by showing how systemic violence interacts with issues of representation and power and thus the "fantasy shows us what happens when the world is changed" but like Sophia and Constance's resistance and remaking of the society, "the work of changing must fall to its readers" (Attebery 2024, 21).

Sophia's actions are underscored by the intersecting axes of her identity. She is othered by her sexual identity and her gender, but there is a multi-layered construction where the reader also experiences a Black female heroine who gets to survive. As Ebony Elizabeth Thomas has traced across franchises including *The Hunger Games*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Vampire Diaries*, such a resolution is a rarity in western, Anglophone mass-market fantasy (2019). As such, the novel layers an awareness of the banal violence normalized and enacted against Black women in both fantastic and real-world spaces. Through Sophia's eyes, the layers of violence and oppression in Mersailles are made shocking not because they are abnormal but because she is adamant that they should be, that this control and coercion and cruelty should be remarked upon and resisted. Her outrage and indignation can recall the reader from a state of acclimation to banal violence that seems so pervasive that there is no point in challenging it.

Skin of the Sea

In *Skin of the Sea*, Bowen uses fantasy to not only pull apart assumptions about who can be represented as certain mythic figures and diversify imaginative space, but also to give voice to an often-obscured period of history, particularly in US and UK historical narratives, in this case, the 15th century when Europeans, specifically the Portuguese, began kidnapping and enslaving people from West Africa. *Skin of the Sea* follows a young girl named Simidele, called Simi, who has been transformed into a Mami Wata, a mermaid, and given the task of collecting the souls of captive people who choose the sea over their future enslavement in order to lay them to rest. But Simi struggles to let go of her human life and this leads to a cosmic struggle where, in order to save Yemoja, the deity who saved Simi from the sea when she had been captured, Simi must become involved in human affairs again. Bowen's mermaid intervention was published on the heels of multiple scandals and backlashes involving race-bending popular characters across franchises, where Black actresses took on the roles in Disney films, the *Star Wars* franchise, and the *Harry Potter* franchise in the face of much misogynoir in response (Sévère 2023, 3). Importantly, the idea of an African-Atlantic mermaid figure does not start with Bowen's work but has roots both in African folkloric, spiritual, and religious traditions, and in the spiritual traditions of

the enslaved diaspora (Connolly 2021, 79–93). In her Author's Note, Bowen writes, "Black history doesn't start with slavery. An important aspect of *Skin of the Sea* for me is the positive depiction of ancient African knowledge, culture, and history, which are often insidiously and incorrectly presented as primitive" (305), stating that the novel is "a blend of history, myth, and fiction [that] portrays an alternative version of mermaids and their origins, but also touches upon a dark time in history where resistance, courage, and ingenuity were shown" (306). While the horrors of the slave trade are a significant strand of the narrative and the worldbuilding, Bowen takes advantage of time and setting to showcase a side of West African cultures rarely discussed in the Western Anglosphere, much less in mass-market fantasy. One of the examples she touches upon in the Author's Note is "the conscious and deliberate use of fractals (repeated patterns) in hairstyles, art, cloth, and architecture across the continent" (305). The narrative and plot stems from the characters' encounters with those who would enslave them, but the richness of the world is built on more than that human-driven horror. Using language and specific indications of culture, from apparel to tiered educational and cultural systems, and describing how culture was both passed from one generation to the next and was also a thriving ecosystem of knowledge and story, Bowen writes back to primitivizing narratives of Africa in Western colonial and postcolonial imaginations.

This level of historicizing detail is not new – such effects are utilized in both fantasy texts and screen media, perhaps most notably in Disney's live-action remakes. But what is unique here is how Bowen wields familiar narrative shapes peppered with simultaneously defamiliarizing details. The deployment of particularly Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" tale is self-conscious. Simi's reclaiming of human form on Yemoja's island taps into the same longing to be human that Andersen's mermaid expresses; the language used to describe Adekola's (called Kola) pain from the chains and whiplashes is reminiscent of the pain Andersen's mermaid endures to walk – but for Kola his pain is accompanied by the real threat of sharks in blood-infested waters. Even though the narrative crosses further into the space of the fantastic as Simi and Kola journey to find the bracelets that will summon Olodumare, the mythic landscape remains rooted in Simi's memories of her human life which are solidified through the mundane and the everyday details of interactions with her

parents, of learning to cook, of visiting markets, and of training to fight.

The intrusion of historical details adds depth to the immersive fantasy. Simi's positive memories of a thriving culture and society, and the scenes with Kola's family and village, make readers aware of a different version of West African history, one that is not framed by western narratives of domination and subjugation. Bowen's work performs the function of both postmodern historical fiction and postcolonial fiction through the reconstruction of this mythic and mythopoeic West Africa. It is a counternarrative to commonly accepted hegemonic constructions of Africa and necessarily provokes an interrogation of how the past is imagined, potentially encouraging a celebration and reclamation of a past not affected by the trauma of colonization. Bowen captures a moment when a historical trauma is in the process of being inflicted. The fantasy thus becomes rooted in historical detail, but in an inverted way; Bowen shows two forgotten or obscured historical narratives and both are necessary for the fantasy to unfold.

Simi's recollections also put a face on the violent trauma of raids and kidnappings. Early in the novel, after she and Kola begin traveling together, the sight of one of the slave ships triggers a memory of when she was captured by raiders. Simi recounts gathering fruit with her friend when they are surrounded by the kidnappers, the òyìnbó, who "must be spirits, with their white skin" (Bowen 2020, 70). She remembers:

> I've heard a few tales of the òyìnbó from a traveling storyteller who had journeyed the length of the coast. He spoke of the cloth and new metal weapons the men trade with villagers in return for spices, gold…people. The storyteller said they were kidnappers, too. Attacking people collecting water or herding their animals. By the light and warmth of the fire, with a belly full of chicken stew, the stories had seemed unreal. (71)

The next recollection Simi has is from within the ship. The interior is "dark, with only weak sunlight filtering through the wooden deck above…the air is humid and almost-solid beast that squats above us, and my lungs are tight from the heat and the stench of misery" (75). She sees another kidnapped man killed in front of her for fighting the òyìnbó. She describes the feel of chains scraping her legs, people

crying in Yoruba and Twi, a "crush of bodies," and noises that cannot be blocked out: "the sound of the sea, the clank of manacles and the incessant groans of despair that float on the filthy air" (75). She remembers, "the only thing I'm more afraid of than dying in the dark, no breath or anyone to say my final prayers, is when the hold opens. A bright rectangle of white light that blinds us. A sign that some of the òyìnbó are coming" (76). Her memory of captivity is full of fear and despair, as well as disbelief that the stories that she had heard of this threat were real. She describes a dehumanization that is not hypothetical but historical and constructed intertextually through the relationship between the reader, this text, and "within the history of discourse itself" (Hutcheon 1988, 126). The narrativization of known historical events in a literary context places both the fantastic construct and its historic intertext within an "ever-expanding intertextual network" (1988, 129) where the past can be directly confronted (1988, 118).

By contextualizing this history within a first-person experience of both joy and atrocity, the historical counternarrative becomes two-fold. A positive narrative of thriving, sophisticated peoples and cultures is reasserted alongside a history that deserves no celebration, that should rather provoke shame and disgust. Bowen's speculative work allows readers to see the experiences on slave ships detailed through all the senses – the feel of whips, the smell, the illness, the desperation; readers become immersed in the violence. These accounts aren't new, but by moving them into a fantastic space, readers become more likely to be open; they have already suspended disbelief to accept the fantasy world. The actions of other immortals, even when approaching the monstrous or cruel, still pale in comparison to what Simi, Kola, and other characters share about their experience at the hands of would-be enslavers. *Skin of the Sea* shows the human impact at the beginning of what readers know will become centuries of violence and cruelty, and writes back against a historical narrative marked primarily by that tale of violence by weaving a beautiful fantasy that explores rich narrative, intellectual, and artistic cultures. It presents a different narrative of history and, in doing so, puts fantasy in dialogue with historiographic metafiction. The beauty stands against the cruelty that historically destroys it, making readers aware not only of how preconceptions about this period are skewed in the favor of those doing the enslaving, but also of how much has been lost, obfuscated, or deliberately buried. Bowen's work, especially as it is directed at an Anglophone audience,

combats Western-centric history while also challenging narratives about who might own different pieces of folklore.

Legendborn

Legendborn complicates the King Arthur legend through the narrative deployment of the history of European settlement of North America and chattel slavery. In her 2021 article "An Arthurian Empire of Magic, and Its Discontents: An Afterword", Geraldine Heng has both questioned and traced the longevity of and various successes of interventions in 900 years of retelling a legendary narrative that has a specific legacy within a specific cultural and national heritage, and has led to the perception of a certain kind of heroic legacy as being located in the heritage and descendants of the British Isles. From that historical and mythic context, Deonn forces readers to extrapolate who the descendants of the chivalrous, honorable Round Table would have become if they settled in the new world. By tying the descendants of the Round Table, the knights who have become symbolic of all that is righteous and virtuous in Western Anglophone society and are a bedrock of certain national identity formations (Heng 2021, 127) to some of the cruelest systems ever enforced by human beings against other human beings, Deonn questions a hegemonic narrative in Western culture and makes room for other histories. The worldbuilding encourages a reconsideration of how, where, and with regards to whom narratives about honor, courage, and integrity are openly wielded, by focalizing an Arthurian narrative through a young Black woman, Bree, in the space of the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill campus, with both the narrative and the bodies in it at intersecting historical and imaginary nexuses.

While Baker notes that transformation in fantasy is neither intrinsically positive nor negative, progressive or conservative (2012, 438), witnessing both a supernatural evil and the human evils that were historically enacted simultaneously becomes a radical act of imagining. While demons abound and fighting them forms the primary narrative conflict, the demons are not the evil that becomes the most striking. When Bree is on a tour of the Order of the Round Table's house with the rest of the Pages, the new recruits to the Order, there is a pair of manacles on display in the library. Bree is shocked by their presence alongside journals and other artifacts, but

those who are already accustomed to this world simply shrug off the manacles as a normal thing – of course the Merlins would be in need of something to contain and capture other aether (magic) users outside of the Order of the Round Table. For those raised within the world of this Order, who see the Order as a policing or regulatory, protective force, this is entirely reasonable. But for Bree, who is aware of a very different historical context, the manacles have a completely different connotation (Deonn 2020, 96–97): "While the others follow her to the door, I linger at the case, shaken by all that had been left unsaid: why the manacles were used initially, why they're on display now, and, most disturbing, what they mean about Merlins and their missions. Merlins don't just hunt demons. They hunt people" (97). The context of slavery, slave catching, and human enslavement is much more present to Bree, who, shortly after this, must endure a speech about how her Page class is far more "diverse" than any prior, a clear reference to the fact that she is a Black woman entering an elite, white, Southern organization (100). Deonn, through Bree, refers to bearing this kind of microaggression as a "death by a thousand cuts," counting the comments and assumptions made about her presence in this space in a short amount of time and wondering about how much more of this she will have to bear to find the answers about her mother's death (100–101). These are not something that lessen throughout the narrative; there is a dinner thrown by the equivalent of a booster club where Bree is assumed to be a servant and her inclusion as a Page is openly questioned by the women who make up this auxiliary (181–182). Racialized societal expectations matter more to the worldbuilding in *Legendborn* than the magic structure or the demonic monsters.

The structural racism that Bree encounters is seen through things so mundane that they risk undercutting the fantastic, and yet, because of how these racist moments are wielded in the narrative space, combined with Bree's first-person explication of how she feels in these moments, Deonn's display of this particular violence does anything but trivialize or homogenize them. Bree's experiences of negotiating everything from microaggressions at the hands of real-world institutions to open hostility rooted in the inherent (and later made explicit) white supremacist structure of the Order of the Round Table, and, as I will show, of the University system at large, will be recognizable to many readers.

Deonn's work and worldbuilding is even more historically and geographically specific than Bowen's. The bulk of the story is set within the social and geographic contexts of UNC-Chapel Hill, a place where history, identity, and narrative are irrevocably intertwined. While mythic space exists in the narrative, it does not have primacy in creating meaning – the entanglements of the real world, competing legacies, and promoted and obscured histories do. This is made visible through not only how Bree is tracing her mother's footsteps at the university, but also how Bree interacts with the legacies of slavery, the Antebellum period, segregation, and their collective impact on the racialized social fabric of the American South. When meeting her therapist for the first time, they meet in the Arboretum and discuss the Unsung Founders Memorial, a class gift that was meant to acknowledge the enslaved and servant labor that built the school. The low, round black granite slab is held up by bronze figures depicting Black laborers "like hundreds of Atlases holding the world" (Deonn 2020, 161). Dr. Hartwood reflects that it makes her sad, because "how can [she] be at peace when [she looks] down and [sees] that they're still working?" (161). The memorial is real; as a physical space that can be visited, that also grounds emotionally and narratively significant moments, its presence in the narrative space brings an extra gravity to how the mythic or the fantastic then intrudes into real historical space, and vice versa. In Deonn's novel it becomes a "border of History itself" (Elias 2001, 65) but linked to the uncanny through the metahistorical nature of the novel and its specific efforts to "articulate a post-traumatic imaginary" (52) through its invocations of both the historic violence of chattel and plantation slavery and the everyday racism experienced by Bree alongside the trauma of maternal loss.

It is during this first meeting with Dr. Hartwood that Bree learns her mother was a Wildcrafter, a branch of rootcraft, a different tradition of energy manipulation outside of the Order's definitions of magic use. Dr Hartwood calls the Order's use of aether, which Bree is being indoctrinated into by becoming a Page and joining the Order, "bloodcraft" or "colonizer magic." She differentiates it from rootcraft by explaining that "bloodcrafters don't *borrow* power from their ancestors, they steal it. Bind it to their bodies for generations and generations" unlike rootcrafters who allow their ancestors gifts to work through them (Deonn 2020, 232–233). Dr. Hartwood's explanation ties the Order of the Round Table's magic system directly to the colonization of

North America. She specifies that colonizer magic is "magic that *costs* and *takes*. Many practitioners face demons. Many of us face evil. But from the moment their founders arrived, from the moment they *stole* Native homelands, the Order themselves gave the demons plenty to feed on! They reap what their magic sows" (233). This ties the racism, the legacies of chattel slavery in the US South, the legacies of the enslavers, the Confederate legacies embedded in campus statuary, the legacies of segregation, and Bree's own lived experiences abutting these structural violences directly to the legacy of Arthurian legend. The practice of root, in comparison, is one that is a borrowing of power from ancestors. When Bree walks in the past with the dead, she sees it as a tradition passed down between generations of oppressed peoples at the hands of settler communities like that of the Order of the Round Table, who they stand for, and all that they stand for in Deonn's worldbuilding.

Bree's journey is as much about finding her own stories as it is about reclaiming Arthuriana. Deonn's book becomes in itself an answer to James' question in his 2019 Tolkien lecture, "what does it mean when you don't think you have a mythology?" (2019). James' lecture is an exploration on the power of fantasy to address the unspeakable, of fantasy as a process of mythmaking. James talks about Tolkien's generation of fantasists using mythology as a way to address the trauma and violence of their experiences with war, asking, "what do you do when the sheer beauty and economy of language lies to you about what ugliness really is" (2019), but also asserting that "not every story is made for a good purpose, and not every myth comes from a good place, but even the bad ones tell us something about human nature" (2019). Deonn uses one of the key myths that "define Britishness" (James 2019) to instead address a monstrousness that is often obscured in the re-deployment of chivalric romances. *Legendborn* deconstructs what Heng terms "the ability of romance to transact a magical relationship with history," of courtly romance "transformed into cultural fantasy" (2021, 126), making visible how fantasy, like romance, has often been deployed as a "narrational modality that offers safe harm from the horrors of historical events, the discussion of which becomes rewarded with pleasure, not pain" because it "supplies a space of freedom for the discussion of the difficult and the undiscussable" (Heng 2021, 126–127). Deonn's take on Arthuriana is a way of writing back to the patterns of chivalric romance that obscure the inherent

violence of these stories of conquest. Bree finds her own history and legacy that contests a dominant narrative, which represents an important paradigm shift within the fantasy space. The violence of the dominant narrative was not the original pact with demons, but rather the human abuses perpetuated historically and in Bree's own life, including the rape and vicious hunting of her ancestors that led to both her power and her mother's death.

Visualizing the darkness: the revealing power of fantasy as genre

The three novels are all old stories told in new ways, interrupting assumptions about what the normative ways to tell these stories are, or who can occupy them. As such, they address some of what Ursula K. Le Guin considers one of the purposes of myth, connecting the conscious and unconscious, by allowing the individual to "go to the window, and draw back the curtains, and look out into the dark" (1989[1979], 66). She continues, "Sometimes it takes considerable courage to do that. When you open curtains you don't know what may be out there in the night. Maybe starlight; maybe dragons; maybe the secret police. Maybe the grace of God; maybe the horror of death" (66). When *Legendborn*, *Skin of the Sea*, and *Cinderella is Dead* pull back the curtain, they reveal the darkest impulses of not what humans might do, but what they already have done, what they continue to do. From the racism in *Legendborn* and the scenes depicting the lives of enslaved people on Southern plantations, to the colonial violence of enslavers in *Skin of the Sea*, to the misogynistic and patriarchal violence exerted towards women and queer people in *Cinderella is Dead*, the worst of the evil depicted is not supernatural, but simply human – actions ripped from historical events and the violence that humans are already known to have enacted against each other. The actions of the Order of the Round Table towards other users of magic don't come from their contact with demons, but rather their war against the demons is used as a reason to police anyone who is not of their world, in terms of their socially- and historically-constructed hierarchies. Simi's worst recollections from her human life are of people kidnapping members of her community to drag into slavery. The violence of men towards women, and the structural violence demonstrated towards queer people and then

enacted by regular citizens in *Cinderella is Dead* is some of the most mundane violence in the world, from domestic violence to sexual harassment and open threats of gendered violence. Manford might set the standard and might be a type of vampire-zombie in terms of his supernaturally extended life and restored youth, but the violence he exerts against the society he rules has nothing to do with these supernatural qualities. Rather, his supernatural qualities allow him to more effectively enact patriarchal and class-based violence against the people he rules over. By narrating very human violence with historical parallels within the context of the fantasy worldbuilding, such fantasies become reflective of the impulse in late 20th-century fiction that was informed by traumatic events and can be thought of as a "reaction-formation to the trauma of history itself" (Elias 2001, xiv).

These novels are also, again, YA novels, a genre or category that Leah Phillips identifies as "passage narrative[s] participating in the adolescent's ritual transference from childhood to adulthood" (2023, 1). Simi, Sophia, and Bree each within their own context stand on the cusp of a transformation that is not necessarily age-related, but contextually and culturally defined. Their own places in society and personal histories (and implied futures) are not fixed yet. Such implicit liminality within texts that could be described as both mythopoeic YA and historiographic metafiction adds to the potential for revisioning both historical narratives and the futures that might await readers (Phillips 2020, 123–124). Further, as YA novels, these works are specifically addressed to "readers at a particularly malleable time in their identity formation" (Coats 2011, 315) and to reconstruct or interrupt known historical or social discourses to a liminally positioned audience with similarly liminal characters further opens the potential for questioning and deconstructing historical narratives.

The deployment of the historically-rooted in fantasy spaces not only adds depth and specificity but also, because of the reading process, compels readers to accept the reality of the history in order to engage with the "reality" of the fantasy space. Because we suspend disbelief to actively buy into the fantasy world, the truths that are so often obscured in the real world become hypervisible. Fantasy becomes the method through which we may conjure the monstrousness of human behavior, and maybe for the first time truly draw back the curtains and look that monster in the eyes. These monsters cannot be relegated to psychological or theoretical spaces; they are real. They

are us. Thus, this kind of fantasy novel can force us to look more clearly at the violence we are all capable of, not only on individual but systemic levels. It can force us to reconsider the ways in which we might reinforce systems of harm or how we might participate in structural or institutional violence – even if it is by insisting that change is not possible, or must be incremental, or maybe, that the past was a better place. Not only can it call us to face histories whose stories are often obscured, it can force us to reexamine our mythologized pasts, and ask, better for whom?

This type of writing back, or counter-imagining, also ties into the liberating and transformative potentials considered by Bacchilega and Greenhill, where the dialogic and intertextual relationships between the presented fictions and the historical contexts that are reflected within them become a lens for focalizing the injustices. As each narrative in its own way revisions the ways in which injustice can be faced down, addressed, or overcome, these novels are also "part of a necessary array of diverse and hopeful modes to approach a complex world" (2022, 19). While Bacchilega and Greenhill are focused on the ability of visual narratives to bring more hope to broad audiences through fairytale reanimation, these three novels also bring hope in different ways. By changing the position of who is and what actions are considered heroic, imagining systemic change, and even large and small shifts in the perspectives of individuals, these novels allow readers to consider how human-driven cruelty might also be addressed in the real world. To make such cruelty visible in a way that acknowledges its veracity in order to make it possible to reimagine it and redress it might be one of fantasy's greatest affordances. As Neal writes regarding *Legendborn*:

> Bree's removal of the sword from its stone begins the process of toppling it – whether that be into a lake or maybe far into dark recesses of the past. Bree's legend … is still being written. Giving people of color the space to do so, to imagine worlds stitched together and worn over from our own cultural connections recognized and retold through Arthurian tales, allows such stories to be told. More importantly they allow for the stories and those lives within them to be seen, as the legacies and their believers grow with every book sold, and every page flipped. We just need to keep in mind that the answers to these legacies and the questions they bring will continue to depend on who is asking. (2023, 100)

By conjuring our monsters, historical and present, essentially through the invocation of the "metahistorical postmodern consciousness" (Elias 2001, 67), fantasy media allows for a deeper inquiry into multiple historical and mythic legacies.

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