BROWN GIRL IN THE RING: MAGIC FOR THE MARGINALIZED

By Ibi Zoboi

Advisor: Coe Booth

Summer/Fall 2013

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Fine Arts in Writing for Children & Young Adults Program at
Vermont College of Fine Arts

"Brown Girl in the Ring" is a Caribbean song and game where a girl dances within a circle of other girls swinging her hips and twirling around to the playful melody. The words are self-explanatory: there's a brown girl in the ring, she shows her motion, and she looks like sugar and plums—or, she *likes* sugar and rum, depending on the version. I have only recently come to know this song since I am Haitian and it originated in Jamaica and is known throughout Trinidad and Guyana as well—all the Anglophone countries in the Caribbean. Though I am from a Francophone nation, I am very familiar with ring games, something I have done in my own childhood growing up in Haiti.

I mentioned the title of this critical thesis to a classmate—an American woman born in Texas. Her five-year-old daughter sings "Brown Girl in the Ring" all the time, she told me. It is one of her favorite songs. I had not known that the Wiggles, a popular children's music band from Australia, had covered it, albeit in their own whimsical style while retaining all of the same lyrics. This classmate told me that even her Pakistani husband knew the song.

This was all very fascinating. A simple ring game that celebrates the beauty and spirit of Caribbean girls had traveled far and wide.

However, during some point in our conversation when I shared my ideas about speculative fiction featuring girls of color, she revealed to me that she has always thought that the "Brown Girl" in the song was a horse. Granted, this was an empowering game for a girl to feel safe within this protective "ring" where she is amongst her community of peers and is able to explore the movements of her changing body. But this implicit power quickly dissolved with the idea that this game was possibly once attributed to British equestrian culture.

"Brown Girl in the Ring" is a song and game, but it also involves a story. It is the story of cultural tradition and retention in the face of colonization; it is the story of searching for and

finding the profound in the mundane; and ultimately, it is the story of seeking power and validation in the midst of oppression and marginalization. Long after British high society had lost its economic grip on the Caribbean, many of its cultural traditions either remained intact or infused into the hybrid customs of the newly freed enslaved Africans, Indian indentured servants, and the British who remained on the islands. Equestrian culture in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana is a remnant of British colonial high society. If the song was indeed a part of a horse parade tune, how did it evolve into a game celebrating the physicality of Caribbean girls?

Herein is a testament to the true power of story. This power is shared between teller and listener. The tellers, over the course of history, have bent and shaped the story to fit the needs of the listeners. Cultural hybridization allows for the flexibility of story to take into consideration the history of a people, their current situation, and the need for hope and empowerment. What was once a colonized and marginalized group can stand at the helm of power and authority according to the stories they tell themselves. European folklore, in the case of the Caribbean, can merge with African folklore where werewolves and vampires become the soucouyant or loogaroo, and are no longer attributed to men, but to women who can wield their shape-shifting power in the face of all that represses them. This exemplifies the need for colonized and marginalized people globally to re-create or preserve mythologies and magical narratives to place themselves at the center of their own stories.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* colonization takes place when "a country or its citizens send a group of settlers to a place and establishes political control over them; [and] come to settle among and establish political control of the indigenous people of an area." Colonization infiltrates every aspect of the indigenous group's history, tradition, and culture in order to gain political and economic control of its people. Hence, a colonized nation's people

become marginalized, existing only within the confines of the political structures created to disempower them.

Aditya Anupkumpar, in his paper "The Concept of Marginalization" states, "The term 'marginalization' generally describes the overt actions or tendencies of human societies whereby those perceived as being without desirability or function are removed or excluded from the prevalent systems of protection and integration, so limiting their opportunities and means for survival" (3). In other words, marginalization excludes certain members of society from fully participating in activities that contribute to the social, political, and economic well-being of that society. In the case of colonization, indigenous members of that nation were stripped of their cultural traditions in order to adhere to methods that uphold the new power structure. Once independence from the colonized European nations was established, remnants of the colonial social stratification still remained in the form of colorism—fair-skinned Caribbeans having higher social standing than darker-skinned citizens, for example. Even in a first-world nation like the United States, marginalization exists within Native American, African American, and immigrant communities in the form of educational and economic disparities. However, on a much larger scale, the issue of gender inequality is the fine thread that binds all nations, regardless of its history and relationship to colonization.

Social and political movements seeking to challenge oppressive power structures have emerged over the course of history, from the French and Haitian Revolutions to the Anti-Apartheid and Civil Rights Movements, and most recently, Arab Spring. These actions were in direct response to oppressive structures that affected one segment of the population based on socio-economic status or race, regardless of age or gender. However, the feminist and suffrage movements arose out of the need to address issues facing women specifically—voting rights,

reproductive rights, sexual violence and harassment, and equal pay, to name a few.

In the same way that marginalization happens within every national, cultural, or ethnic group, social exclusion in feminism occurred when the issues of immigrant women and women of color were not readily addressed. Stemming from its western roots in nineteenth century Europe and the United States, feminism failed to acknowledge the ways in which social stratification occurred within the movement itself. Enter the academic approach to studying the struggles of women across race, class, and ethnic lines: intersectionality.

> Interest in intersectionality arose out of a critique of gender-based and race-based research for failing to account for lived experience at neglected points of intersection—ones that tended to reflect multiple subordinate locations as opposed to dominant or mixed locations. It was not possible, for example, to understand a black woman's experience from previous studies of gender combined with previous studies of race because the former focused on white women and the latter on black men. Something new was needed because of the distinct and frequently conflicting dynamics that shaped the lived experience of subjects in these social locations. To take just one example from the earliest explorations, black women seemed to achieve greater equality with men of their race relative to white women because the conditions of slavery and white supremacy forced them to work on par with black men, yet black women also were more vulnerable to sexual violence because whites did not consider them worth protecting "as women." (McCall 2005)

Intersectionality takes into account the lived experiences of women of color at every

level—gender, race, nationality, and socio-economic. Marginalization, in this case, acts as a sort of nesting doll where the existence of multiple "rings" are intersected and placed around the brown girl, for instance. For the purposes of this paper, the term "brown girl" includes all marginalized girls of color where identity markers intersect. As stated before, this ring can either act as a safe space where the brown girl is within all that empowers and affirms her, or it can act as a barrier where she is unable to break past societal norms in order to rise to her full potential. Intersectionality addresses the myriad ways in which a brown girl faces opposition within the larger society. A brown girl may experience the struggles of racial inequality based on colonial ideas of skin color if she lives in a third world country disenfranchised from the larger global economy, or if she lives in a first world country where immigrant or historically oppressed groups face disparities at every institutional level.

The 10x10 Action Campaign spearheaded *Girl Rising,* a documentary and global education movement for girls. The documentary features stories from nine girls living in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Haiti, India, Nepal, Peru, and Sierra Leone. *Girl Rising* vividly portrays the lives of these girls who face harsh circumstances that prohibit them from access to a free education. According to a compilation of statistics from 10x10:

> 1. Globally, 66 million girls are out of school. (Unesco)
>
> 2. 80% of all human trafficking victims are girls. (UNFPA)
>
> 3. There are 33 million fewer girls than boys in primary school. (Education First)
>
> 4. An estimated 150 million girls are victims of sexual violence each year. (UNIFEM)
>
> 5. The #1 cause of death for girls 15 to 19 is childbirth. (World Health Organization)

However, *Girl Rising* does not simply highlight these critical statistics to induce pity and guilt from the audience. Stories of tragedy and defeat conclude with stories of victory and triumph. Yasmin, whose name was changed in the film to protect her identity, is lured by a sexual predator along with her friend on the bustling streets of Cairo, Egypt. When she relays her story of how she ends up defeating her tormentor, she weaves a fantastical tale about transforming herself into a superhero where she wields a hidden weapon and annihilates the older man in a knife fight. Her story is rendered in animation where a vividly illustrated Yasmin is able to spin around her captor and leap into the air as she delivers the near deadly blow all while pridefully wearing her burqa. Here, again, is the power of story.

Yasmin, marginalized by the rules of her culture, finds herself in an all too likely situation for girls her age. Yet, she gains courage and strength to break past those "rings" victoriously. What is most compelling is the way in which she chooses to shape the details of how she escapes rape and captivity. She never fully conveys the exact particulars of her journey, but she embellishes her story with power and magic. Yasmin crafts a hyperbolic tall-tale for herself, and thus becomes the superhero of her own story. This also involves hybridity where she pulls from the western superhero narrative and places it within her own cultural context. Yasmin did not see herself changing out of her burqa and into a superhero bodysuit and cape. Her story was still culturally relevant while defying the cultural norms that oppress her.

Unfortunately, not all girls are able to defeat their abusers as Yasmin did. While Yasmin pulls from the oral tradition to recount her tale, this kind of story has yet to make it into books for young readers. World mythology is replete with women destroying men in war as in the cases of the Hindu goddess Kali and the West African deity Oya. However, children's literature has yet to represent these many narratives where brown girls are the heroes of larger-than-life

magical stories. It is evident that tall-tales of magic and adventure exist at the very local level where they are passed down verbally, and even on a smaller scale where they are simply "showing their motion" in games and songs such as "Brown Girl in the Ring." But considering the popularity and success of magical and heroic stories for young readers in the form of middle grade and young adult fantasy and science fiction, especially ones that feature girls as the main protagonists, there still remains a dearth of titles where girls of color are the heroes fighting evil and saving the day.

According to author Jane Yolen, in her collection of essays, *Touch Magic:Fantasy, Faerie & Folklore in the Literature of Childhood,*"Culture begins in the cradle. Literature is a continuous process from childhood onward, not a body of work sprung full-blown from the heads of adults who never read or were read to as children" (9). Much like a re-adapted song and game, and a victimized girl weaving a tall-tale, stories are the result of imaginative play. These stories are what make up literature, what Yolen considers "their birthright: the myths, the fairy tales, fantasies, and folklore that are their proper legacy" (14).

Magical literature simply continues the legacy of the oral tradition. Yolen asserts that these kinds of stories serve as a fantastical playground for the child's imagination.

> One of the basic functions of myth and folk literature is to provide a landscape of allusion. With the first story a child hears, he or she takes a step forward perceiving a new environment, one that is filled with quests and questers, fated heroes and fetid monsters, intrepid heroines and trepid helpers, even incompetent oafs who achieve competence and wholeness by going out and trying. (15)

A sense of hope and power underlies all mythological stories. Though literature may not directly

address hope for change and power to change within the story itself if the story is a cautionary tale for example, a young reader will be able to make larger connections between the characters and the events in the story to what is possible in her world and what is possible for herself.

Fantasy literature falls under the umbrella term of speculative fiction which also encompasses science fiction and supernatural horror. Essentially, speculative fiction asks the reader to ponder the question, what if? In the case of magical stories featuring girls of color, what if the very least amongst us, those who exist at the very bottom rung of social hierarchy, were to rise from the trenches of marginalization to fight evil and become a world hero; or what if a brown girl were to travel back in time to change the course of history forever?

In the same way that Caribbean culture has appropriated "Brown Girl in the Ring," possibly a horse parade tune, and made it into a song celebrating girlhood, speculative fiction can shift the magical hero's journey away from its Western-centered narrative toward stories that place marginalized girls of color as heroes in their own journeys. If speculative fiction is to be affirming, empowering, and authentic for girls of color, such readers should be able to identify with and see themselves represented by the protagonists in the story. This can act as the "ring" where the brown girl is celebrated and can test the limits of her power within the safe confines of her own culture.

Speculative fiction that is affirming takes into account that girls of color have inherited their own magical systems and mythologies. Such stories should also consider the many ways in which the brown girl character is marginalized so that the reader will begin to see herself and her place in the world within the broader context of social exclusion. Empowering speculative fiction stories featuring girls of color allow the protagonist to take full reign of her journey. That character has agency, navigates insurmountable odds, and has a hyperbolic journey that will not

only transform her but her community as well. The story should, most importantly, be authentic. The characters, cultural details, and setting should ring true to the real life circumstances of marginalized girls of color. When the brown girl reader sees herself authentically reflected in fantasy and science fiction stories at every level, the narrative becomes that much more empowering and affirming.

Included throughout this paper is a poem entitled, "Ego Tripping" by Nikki Giovanni written in 1973 and published in her first collection of children's poetry with a foreword by Virginia Hamilton. This poem and the popularity it garnered was a direct result of both the Black Power and Black Arts movements of the 1960s and 70s which witnessed a surge in African American literature, and the Second-wave Feminism movement which addressed abortion rights, salary inequities, and sexual harassment in the workplace. "Ego Tripping" encompasses the intersectionality of black womanhood at a time when black nationalism and feminism aimed to eradicate marginalization for both groups. The poem includes aspects of speculative fiction and a child-like playfulness reminiscent of girlhood games like "Brown Girl in the Ring." "Ego Tripping" is both affirming and empowering in the way that it highlights global and historical references and pairs it with hyperbolic assertions; and it is authentic in the way that it mimics the Anglo-Saxon boast poem in the tradition of *Beowulf* and includes elements of African American "signifyin'" where participants exchange a series of boasts, insults, and creative wordplay. Herein lies another example of cultural hybridity where the oral tradition of two cultures converge on the page as part of a movement to dismantle an oppressive narrative.

Lady of the Ring: Affirming Character & Character Development

> "I was born in the congo
> I walked to the fertile crescent and built
> the sphinx
> I designed a pyramid so tough that a star
> that only glows every one hundred years falls
> into the center giving divine perfect light
> I am bad"
>
> "I sat on the throne
> drinking nectar with allah
> I got hot and sent an ice age to europe
> to cool my thirst
> My oldest daughter is nefertiti
> the tears from my birth pains
> created the nile
> I am a beautiful woman" (Giovanni 3)

Given the dire statistics of the conditions of girls of color around the globe, narratives featuring such girls should affirm their experiences through characterization and character development. Physical descriptions and character growth should ring true to the reader in order for her to identify with the protagonist in the story. However, a brown girl character should not only be described by her physical features, but with all her attributes that affirm her culture and her place in the story world. *Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess,* an article published by the Journal of Negro Education (2005), argues that "children's self-image is affected by the ways in which they see themselves in texts both verbal and visual" (221). The Disney Fairy Tale Princess aesthetic upholds cultural norms whereby whiteness, gentility, and femininity are standards of beauty and grace. A reader who constantly receives these underlying messages experiences what Hurley describes in the article as "internalized White privilege," and these messages "[provide] visual images to [girls of color] that give them

cultural information about themselves [and] others" and their "relative status of group membership" (221). In other words, such physical descriptions in books excluding girls of color will demonstrate for the reader that her social exclusion is often based on external physical factors such as hair type, skin color, body type, eye shape, etc.

Despite the negative images that girls of color receive from the media at large, the brown girl still has the capacity to celebrate her changing body from ring games, songs, folktales, and myths that are culturally derived. She has the innate ability to subvert these ideas when she draws from her own cultural traditions, if she is aware of them. Thus, a story featuring a girl of color should mimic this inherited skill. Although, the brown girl character in a story does not need to have a positive image about her hair, eyes, or skin, for example, to be affirming, the story should address how such physical attributes set the brown girl character apart from the status quo. Simply "coloring" a character without taking into consideration all the cultural details that contribute to how she perceives herself and her beauty within the larger society is minimizing and ineffective. If the marginalization of brown girls stems from social exclusion because of physical characteristics, a story should include these identity markers as points of connection for the reader, while also going beyond these descriptions in order to be affirming. However, a story need not be about race or ethnicity to affirm these characteristics. As Stuart Ching points out in his paper, "Multicultural Children's Literature as an Instrument of Power," "The 'ideological underpinnings' of an apparently non-political book my indeed give the text political function. [Such books] affirm the beauty of the African American child against a history of negative representation in public media" (133).

Crafting a brown girl hero involves as much of an understanding of characterization as it does an awareness of marginalization and intersectionality. The author should consider point of

view and idiosyncrasies that are character-specific while affirming the "ring" of culture and identity that encompasses all brown girls. A brown girl character is by no means any different from a white male child facing insurmountable circumstances, or any different from an white girl who also faces gender inequalities in both the story world and real world. However, in order to be affirming, an author should consider certain types of characterizations that speak directly to the experiences of brown girls. The author should take into account word choice when describing physical characteristics. If skin color is compared with coffee, chocolate, or even wood, for example, it may carry certain negative connotations.

Affirming self-image in speculative fiction featuring girls of color through characterization can be done in a number of ways. Hurley asserts that "it is clear that children, if they are to develop a positive self-image, need to 'see' themselves or their images in texts. Books can therefore serve as a reinforcement or counter negative notions of self-image in children of color" (221). Placing the brown girl hero in a magical, dystopian, technologically advanced, or futuristic setting allows her to push past hierarchical structures that relegate her to the margins of society based on artificial physical classifications. In this instance, speculative fiction can play an important role in shaping the self-image of the brown girl reader. This is not to say that the brown girl reader will gain positive self-image by simply reading about a brown girl hero in a magical story, or that the brown girl hero who has positive self-image will in turn instill this same confidence in the reader. Highlighting all physical and cultural traits in the speculative fiction story featuring a girl of color will assert "these images and the relative value of group membership associated with the images [that] are then translated into beliefs [brown girls] hold about status in [a] particular group membership, in relation to notions of good, bad, pretty, and ugly" (222). In other words, the brown girl reader will be able to see the truth of her existence in

the larger world; she will be able to see the conditions of her own social exclusion or inclusion based on what is affirmed in the text.

Nnedi Okorafor's *Zahrah the Windseeker* features thirteen year-old Zahrah in a future Nigeria where technology, nature, and West African mythology converge. Zahra has magical dada hair (extremely coarse and knotted into locks) which marks her as an outsider and gives her the ability to fly, thus making her a Windseeker. Dada hair and Windseekers are shunned by Zahrah's community. "To many, to be dada meant you were born with strange powers. That you could walk into a room and a mysterious wind would knock things over or clocks would automatically stop; that your mere presence would cause flowers to grow underneath the soil instead of above. That you caused things to rebel or that you would grow up to be a rebellious yourself!" (Okorafor, viii). While Zahrah remains well-insulated within this "ring" of her cultural traditions and magical systems, she is still marginalized because of her hair and the power that comes with it. The novel is speculative and is set in a futuristic world, yet, Okorafor manages to address the social issue of dada hair and witchcraft in modern day Nigeria. This also affirms the experiences of all brown girls who grapple with notions of beautiful hair. Okorafor has taken what is considered to be a source of shame and exclusion and subverts it by making it a source of power and magic. She upholds a certain truth in society and places it under the microscopic lens of speculative fiction as a way to affirm the experiences of girls of color.

Zahrah the Windseeker also addresses intersectionality where not only is Zahrah a hero, but she is "a girl, and only boys and men [are] supposed to be rebellious. Girls [are] supposed to be soft, quiet, and pleasant" (viii). Okorafor does not gloss over the fact that even within a culturally familiar setting, her protagonist still faces marginalization on many sub-levels—that of gender, hair type, and magical ability. She goes beyond basic physical descriptions to not only

13

affirm the experiences of her character, but to portray her brown girl character as complex and nuanced.

While Zahrah is accepting of her dada hair mainly because of her parents' support, she must evolve into becoming a Windseeker. Okorafor does not simply characterize her as a magical brown girl; Zahrah must earn her power and this is conveyed through her character development in the story. Zahra is at first reluctant to venture into the forbidden Greeny Jungle to rescue her friend, Dari. But through supportive parents and elder guides, she finds the courage to begin her journey.

> Thankfully, when I was born, my parents were open-minded, well educated, and familiar with some of the older stories about dada people. These stories said that the dada-born were destined to be wise beings, not necessarily rebels. As a result, my parents didn't cut my hair, and they weren't scared by it either. Instead they let it grow and, as I got older, made sure I understood that being dada was not a curse. In fact, it was a blessing, because it was part of me, they said. Of course, I didn't feel this way when I was old enough to go to school and my classmates called me names. (viii)

Such cultural and familial details outside of physical characteristics can also be affirming for the brown girl reader. Not only will she be able to see herself reflected through the main character but through the supporting characters as well. Zahrah is surrounded by the supportive members of her community such as the elder wise man, Papa Grip, her best friend Dari, and a fellow Windseeker by the name of Nsibidi. While she must navigate the negative responses from her community, her heroism is a result of those who encourage her along the course of the story.

This is affirming for the reader who is grounded in her community in the same manner. She may be shunned by the larger society, but she is surrounded by the protective "ring" of her family and village.

Even when a brown girl hero is faced with less than ideal circumstances, cultural and physical details should validate her experience for the reader who may be in a similar situation. Fifteen-year-old Genna in Zetta Elliott's *A Wish After Midnight* wrestles with her changing Brooklyn community and how it affects each of her family members in different ways. Her mother is overworked, her older sister leaves home, and her older brother has been arrested. White people are moving in and she's secretly babysitting for a well-meaning woman who gives her clothes that her mother would adamantly reject. With these details, Elliott affirms some of the issues facing many girls of color in urban communities—single parenthood, drugs and crime in the neighborhood, and gentrification. While Genna lacks the support of a tightly-knit family or community, she finds solace within her immediate surroundings—a garden and a wishing well. "When I'm inside the garden, sometimes I imagine that I'm a bird. A rare, beautiful bird from somewhere far away. I imagine that I have flown hundreds and hundreds of miles just to get here, and the garden is my sanctuary. I pretend that I am only staying here for a little while, gathering strength for the long journey home" (Elliott 16).

The garden is Genna's safe space and the wishing well is eventually a portal that takes her to another time and place where she becomes the hero. Much like the "ring" in children's games, safe spaces allow girls of color to explore their imagination, find meaning in all that is happening around them and within them. For girls of color in urban settings, safe spaces can be few and far between. There are cramped apartments, overcrowded schools, and over-sexualized images in the media. When there are few safe spaces, this proverbial "ring" can be the

imagination itself, ideas that place a marginalized girl of color as hero in her own story, a story affirming all her physical attributes that do not represent the ideals of beauty.

While Genna finds her safe space in a garden, this garden ultimately acts as a portal that transports her back to a time where she loses ownership of her body and her freedom. A wishing well acts as a time machine and takes Genna to Civil War-era Brooklyn. She is then labeled a run-away slave and must find ways to fit seamlessly into this new reality or face death. She is forced to come to terms with her limited freedom and space in ways she's never had to before. Her "ring" has been broken. "But this life—like this body—just isn't mine. I want my old life back. I want the body that isn't dotted with scars that look like somebody used me to stub out their cigar. I want the back that was smooth and strong, not half numb and covered with bubbly keloid scars. I want my days filled with school…my plans of going to college and getting out of the 'hood one day. I want the Brooklyn that has subways and black and brown faces everywhere" (Elliott 130).

A Wish After Midnight uses magical elements to affirm the experiences of African American girls in both a historical context and in modern day urban life. Elliott conveys how Genna's racial identity marks her status in a changing Brooklyn neighborhood in a similar way that it marks her in nineteenth century Brooklyn. The reader will be able to make connections between her own experiences and to what may have been possible for her if she were to travel back in time.

Elliott also uses physical descriptions poignantly to validate some of the self-image issues girls like Genna face each day. Genna is concerned about her hair and her complexion and this is juxtaposed with how her hair and skin is viewed and cared for when she is enslaved. "I wish my hair was long and wavy like those caramel-colored girls in music videos. I wish I had nice

clothes to wear instead of knockoffs or bargains from the ten dollar store. I wish I wasn't so tall.

Being tall's okay if you look like a model. But I don't. I'm just plain, and dark, and too tall, and

too shy to talk to anybody. Except I'm not shy, really. I just don't fit in" (1). As the novel

progresses, Genna meets a love interest, Judah, who encourages her to accept her hair and Genna

begins to cultivate her hair into dreadlocks, but at the expense of some teasing from her

classmates. She resorts to covering her hair all the time, but Judah challenges her to accept her

hair:

> We sit without talking for a while. Then Judah says, "Why you always
>
> cover your hair, Gen?"
>
> I want to say because it is ugly, because it is short and stiff and does not
>
> swing when I walk. Because I cannot afford to get braids put in, or a
>
> weave. Because I will never look like Toshi or the girls in music videos.
>
> (53)

Genna's friendship with Judah, who wears his own dreadlocks, and her experiences back in time

as an unidentified runaway slave allow her to begin to accept her skin and hair. She develops a

deep sense of self-awareness because of this time-traveling magic where she witnesses the full

trajectory of her experience as a girl of color in both historical and modern-day Brooklyn.

Both Zahrah and Genna in Okorafor's and Elliott's novels respectively affirm how

African and African American girls struggle with their hair. However, this physical characteristic

is not the central theme in either of those books. This detail figures prominently in how the

characters develop, but ultimately, it is a symbolic representation of self-acceptance, power,

magic, and pride.

Even if a story does not use hair or skin color as a source of power and magic for the

brown girl character, such details should remain prevalent throughout the novel as constant points of connection for the reader. *Tankborn* by Karen Sandler features brown girl heroes in futuristic and dystopian settings. *Tankborn'*s protagonists, Kayla and Mishalla, are GENs, genetically modified humans, who must receive Assignments—their life's work and mission—amidst a future world where class and wealth are determined by skin color and hair texture. GENs are genetically engineered non-humans with animal DNA and possess some of their features and skills. This places the GENs at the very bottom of the social hierarchy in the story. Throughout the novel, Kayla is keenly aware of her status, her looks, and her remarkable upper body strength. Although she is well aware of the "skin color charts" in the "Doctrine," schools where GENs are socialized, she still struggles with self-acceptance and questions her place in this world:

> The non-humans were at the bottom of the pile, of course. She smoothed the long sleeves of her shirt over her wrists and regarded her own skin. Even ignoring the repulsive blots on her arms, no one would mistake her as anything but a GEN. Her skin was thankfully not as worm white as Livot's, but it was nowhere near Devak's perfect skin color…
>
> All the while she was growing up, Tala told Kayla she was pretty. But Kayla knew better and had years of torment by her Doctrine schoolmates to back her up. Older girls, thankfully long gone on their own Assignments, beautiful with near high-status skin color, had educated Kayla on her lowly place, even in GEN society.
>
> It wasn't just her skin color, or her wild frizzy hair. The older girls would gossip and speculate about what animal DNA had been used for Kayla's

strength sket and what had been mixed in to make the ugly marks on her

arms. GENs never knew for certain what had been mixed into their genetic

makeup, but that didn't stop them from guessing.

Even Earth horses, with their speed and nobility, were preferable to what

they assumed had been woven with Kayla's DNA. She's part elephant,

they'd whisper. And that hair, the skin on her arms, the way she can't

walk straight without tripping—drom, for sure. It hurt so much hearing

their mean talk. But how could she defend herself? They were probably

right. (26-27)

Sandler validates her brown girl character's experience with hair and skin concerns even if she is

a genetically modified non-human. Kayla's status also confirms intersectionality where she is not

only marginalized by being a GEN, but she is a low-born GEN who does not have the right

shade of dark brown and the straight glossy long hair of the high-status true-borns (humans).

However, *Tankborn* falls short of truly affirming characterization for the brown girl

reader. While Sandler attempts to subvert superficial social constructs based on skin color and

hair through world building, certain ideas of beauty are still upheld. Within the opening pages of

the book, the narrator does not describe Kayla in detail, rather, descriptions of a boy as "blond

and tall and good-looking with a mouthful of too-white teeth" (4) are prevalent within the first

few paragraphs. "The good-looking one" and the "good-looking trueborn" (5) are repeated

several times before the reader receives any visual depiction of Kayla. Granted, the cover

features a photograph of an African American girl. This is the only indication that Kayla is

indeed black until she is described as having "wild and kinked" hair that is "a waist-length

sandy-colored mess" (6-7). The author continues to uphold this mysterious boy's beauty while it

is revealed that Kayla with her wild hair is of a lower status, a slave perhaps, who fears this beautiful blond boy:

> By the prophets, he was beautiful. His face out-dazzled the images she'd
> seen of the mythic gods Iyenku and his brother Kas. On Earth, the twins
> had driven their fiery chariot together across the sky. Here on Loka they
> chased each other, the primary sun Iyenku rising first, then sleepy Kas
> peeping above the horizon later. In her mind, neither god could compare
> with the flesh and blood trueborn standing before her. (7)

Sandler paints her main characters as typical teenage girls who grapple with beauty and self-acceptance. However, even in a future, alternate planet, where standards of beauty are reversed to uphold dark skin as high-ranking and white or light skin as low-ranking, her brown girl characters must contend with being considered less human and less attractive—a prevailing theme in the lives of marginalized brown girl readers. While *Tankborn* fails to craft affirming protagonists for the brown girl reader through characterization, the story succeeds in validating its characters' overall development within the plot.

The themes of slavery and freedom are prevalent throughout *Tankborn* where Kayla and Mishalla are ultimately the heroes of the story. Few descriptive markers in the text confirm that Kayla and Mishalla are indeed brown girls; however, both characters develop along the course of the story where they must find courage within themselves and break past the "rings" of marginalization to save stolen children and instill justice in a society falling apart at the seams. The ways in which Kayla and Mishalla evolve from non-human slaves to agents of social change affirm for the brown girl the full trajectory of how she can observe the injustices in her society, cultivate within herself how she must evolve and begin to take action in changing her

surrounding marginalizing community. Character development is affirming in this case whereby the story's structure is set up in a way that allows the brown girl protagonist to cultivate agency and become the hero of the story, thus making it an empowering tale for the brown girl reader.

Ego Trip: Empowering the Brown Girl on the Hero's Journey

> "For a birthday present when he was three
> I gave my son hannibal an elephant
>   He gave me rome for mother's day
> My strength flows ever on
>
> My son noah built new/ark and
> I stood proudly at the helm
>   as we sailed on a soft summer day
> I turned myself into myself and was
>   jesus
>   men intone my loving name
>   All praises All praises
> I am the one who would save." (Giovanni 4-5)

Speculative fiction has the ability to give its protagonist omnipotent power. Whether this is done through the use of science and technology in science fiction, or magic and mythology in fantasy, a brown girl can face overwhelming obstacles to achieve extraordinary goals. Heroism is the bedrock of all speculative fiction. The character's heroic journey is central to the plot and forward movement of the story. In her paper, "Girls Who Save the World: The Female Hero in Young Adult Fantasy," Erin F. Danehy states:

There is a theme prevalent in almost all fantasy, of protagonists making

consequential decisions and tangibly taking action themselves which may

be attributed to the chivalrous—honest, loyal, brave—knights of legend

and their fictional legacy… Almost all fantasy worlds are those in which

the hero can make a substantial difference in their world, however big or

small, through his or her successful quest. (9)

In this instance, speculative fiction can act as the "ring" in which both a brown girl hero and a

brown girl reader is empowered. As stated previously, most speculative fiction is derivative of

culturally-specific myths, folktales, and legends. When this wealth of tradition is paired with the

literary genres of fantasy and science fiction, the potential empowerment for the reader is

amplified.

Most speculative fiction heroic narratives follow in the tradition of Joseph Campbell's

Hero Myth Cycle or the "monomyth" as coined by James Joyce in his book *Finnegans Wake*: "A

hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder:

fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from

this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (581). Yet, this

heroic journey as examined and widely documented by Joseph Campbell himself, promotes a

male-centered narrative and a Eurocentric world view. As Danehy points out:

Heroism is a concept our world has never seemed to be without. As far

back as stories stretch, we find tales of heroes performing great deeds and

saving their people. Very often, however, women have been left out of

that venerable heroic tradition. Often when women are included, they

serve functions more often than they embody individual character. They also often face an inevitable fate of marriage in the comic or romantic tale, or death in the tragedy. The few examples of women performing heroic (not *heroinic*) deeds—the myth of Psyche, the true martyrdom of Joan of Arc, for example—are dwarfed by both the number and scale of male hero stories, both mythic and those based on history. There are many other stories, plays, fairy tales, and novels with female main characters, but those women are often termed as "heroines"—female protagonists who, while demonstrating strength and complexity of character, fall into the more commonly defined roles for women. (4)

This is indeed true when looking through the lens of the written literary tradition, or certain mythologies made popular by Western culture—Greek, Roman, Celtic, and Norse, for example. However, the author of this paper overlooks a more global approach to myth and story where intersectionality would be at the forefront of the discussion of girl heroes which would address the lack of heroic YA fantasy literature featuring girls *and* children of color. Outside of the Western mythological and literary heroic narratives exists a plethora of stories where women are indeed heroes fighting evil and saving the day. A thorough survey of world mythology spanning back to before the height of Western civilization would confirm the presence of matriarchal societies whereby goddess myths of heroic women were abundant—many of which still exist today.

However, if YA fantasy is a direct offspring of Western mythology and literary tradition, then Danehy is correct in her assertion that heroic tales have historically omitted girls and women. Though stretching beyond Western history, Leonard Shlain in his book *The Alphabet*

Versus the Goddess claims that "there is overwhelming archaeological and historical evidence that during a long period of prehistory and early history both men and women worshiped goddesses, women functioned as chief priests, and property commonly passed through the mother's lineage" (VII). The oral stories from this era certainly reflected the ways in which power was maintained in the culture. Women played central roles in acquiring, cultivating, and disseminating magic onto their kin and clan. Thus, Shlain ponders the question: "What in culture changed to cause leaders in all Western religions to condemn goddess worship" (VII)? In other words, how did Western civilization eradicate the female-centered heroic narrative from its literary tradition? Shlain offers an examination of the relationship between literacy and patriarchy. He claims that "literacy has promoted the subjugation of women by men throughout all but the very recent history of the West. Misogyny and patriarchy rise and fall with the fortunes of the alphabetic written word" (3). He argues that with the advent of the written word, came the dissent of the goddess and female-centered mythology. With the founding of the clergy, monarchy, contractual land ownership and marriage in the form of writing came a "fundamental change in the way newly literate cultures understood their realities" (7).

In this instance, while literature is the natural offspring of mythology, certain elements such as the goddess narrative have been left out in order to expand on the male hero myth. Shlain asserts that the oral tradition is heavily reliant on imagery and the pictures that are conjured in the mind of both the listener and teller. However, with the written mode, the story is bound to the text and page relying on the exact verbatim depiction from the author's imaginative mind. Therefore, as Jane Yolen states in *Touch Magic,* "The story in the mouth is different from the one on the page. The tale apprehended by the ear is different from the one taken in by the eye" (38).

The heroic stories of mythological and historic women of color such as Hua Mulan of China, Phoolan Devi of India, Queen Nzinga Mbande and Yaa Asentawaa of Africa have yet to be emulated and depicted widely in the form of YA fantasy literature. While male hero narratives have historically been abundant in YA fantasy and science fiction, female-centered stories have witnessed a surge in presence and popularity. Danehy claims that YA fantasy featuring girls should also be considered heroic tales and cites literary critic Nadya Aisenberg who states:

> Though there is no dearth, and never has been, of courageous women, active women, spiritual women, women of leadership, the Hero has nonetheless been our culture's central symbol… We need a new heroine with new strengths, new virtues, and new energies to play roles because classical heroes and the heroic code they embrace have failed us badly. The paradigm of virtue that heroes like Aeneas, like Roland, and the heroic code—maiden-rescuing, dragon-slaying—represent has been destructive both to the individual and to Western culture… Examining the hero, we discover his essential narrowness which neglects concerns with community, negotiation, nature, human relations, and the enablement of individual destinies to flourish in their differences." (11-12)

New heroes have indeed emerged in such titles as *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent,* for example. The girl hero has become a mainstay in YA fantasy because of the popularity and success of such titles. However, what Shlain argues in terms of the eradication of female-centered oral narratives via the advent of written communication, and what Danehy claims in terms of the need for more girl heroes in YA, as opposed to the overabundance of boy-centered YA speculative fiction, the same can be argued for the erasure of mythology featuring women

and girls of color via colonization, cultural annihilation, and the relative absence of YA fantasy and science fiction featuring girls of color.

The Hero Myth Cycle as a structure and form, when applied to heroic stories featuring girls of color, will allow the reader to see her journey reflected in the stages of growth of the brown girl hero. In order for the brown girl reader to be empowered by the story, the hero must have agency, be self-determined, and be the sole navigator of her trails. Her magic must allow her to face the obstacles head on in order to reach her destination. She then becomes the hero who has traversed through magical thresholds, battled beasts, and earned the ultimate reward for, not only herself, but her community as well. There are indeed brown girl heroines in contemporary YA, but brown girl hero narratives that can seamlessly fit into this mythic structure are few and far between. As Campbell points out in his seminal work, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*:

> The composite hero of the monomyth is a personage of exceptional gifts. Frequently he is honored by his society, frequently unrecognized or disdained. He and/or the world in which he finds himself suffers from a symbolical deficiency… Typically, the hero of the fairy tale achieves a domestic, a microcosmic triumph, and the hero of the myth a world--historical macrocosmic triumph. Whereas the former—the youngest despised child who becomes the master of extraordinary powers—prevails over his personal oppressors, the latter brings back from his adventure the means for the regeneration of his society as a whole. (38)

In other words, the hero can exist on two levels: the personal and the communal.

Empowerment for the brown girl reader can be achieved in both instances. However, power can be exponentially amplified if the brown girl's heroism is mythic and macrocosmic. If she not only saves herself but saves the world, her relative status in society is elevated to new heights and thus she is indeed made hero, and the brown girl reader is indeed empowered.

Guadalupe Garcia McCall's *Summer of the Mariposas* and Adam Rex's *The True Meaning of Smekday* both feature girls of color embarking on heroic journeys. Each novel has its brown girl character venturing forth on an adventure she hopes will connect her with a loved one. This initial desire of finding an estranged father and an alien-abducted mother in *Summer of the Mariposas* and *The True Meaning of Smekday* respectively, leads the brown girl hero to addressing personal and communal issues such as family connectedness, displacement, and immigration. However, it is the deep yearning for that connectedness that leads the hero towards taking the first steps in her mythic journey. This yearning is what encapsulates the plot out of which the mythic journey emerges. According to Robert Olen Butler, in his book, *From Where You Dream:*

> Desire is the driving force behind plot. The character yearns, the character does something in pursuit of that yearning, and some force or other will block the attempt to fulfill that yearning. The character will respond to the force in some way, go round or through or over or under it, and continue the pursuit. This dynamic beneath the story is plot; the attempt to fulfill the yearning and the world's attempt to thwart that. (42)

This yearning is what initiates what Campbell describes as the call to adventure in the heroic journey. Yearning, in this case, does not simply act as a fine thread woven through the

27

hero's narrative; it is what Ursula Le Guin calls in her essay, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," the bottle or the vessel. If the widely presumed "proper shape of the [hero] narrative is that of the arrow or spear, starting *here* and going straight *there* and…hitting its mark (which drops dead)" (169), then yearning is what rounds out the otherwise linear story. What the brown girl hero yearns, for not only herself but her community as well, acts as a vessel for which process and growth and evolution are a continuing process. This bag or container represents her desires in which all the tools for navigating her journey are stored. While the Hero Myth Cycle as a structure guides the brown girl character along the road to heroism, it is her yearning that gives the story its shape. In this case, the vessel acts as a womb which encompasses the hero's yearning; and when she is birthed from this womb, her journey begins. This understanding of yearning both upholds and subverts the Hero Myth Cycle for the speculative fiction novel featuring a brown girl character.

In *Summer of Mariposas,* Odilia and her four sisters discover a dead man's body floating near a swimming hole along the shores of the Rio Grande. They all must agree to take the man's body across the Mexican border back to his family. If they alert the authorities, however, then the man's body will be thrown into an unmarked grave reserved for illegal border crossers and their secret swimming hole will be revealed and swarming with border patrol guards. While Odilia tries at first to thwart her sisters' plans to take their estranged father's car along for the journey, she ultimately yields to their defiance when she fails at attempts to tell their weary, overworked mother. The five sisters, ranging in ages 9 through 16 with Odilia being the oldest, ultimately agree to return the body to El Sacrificio, Mexico, where the girls' father is from and where their abuela resides. This journey is within the vessel that holds the girls' desires: to reconnect a family to their deceased father and husband, to find their estranged father, and to

ultimately bond with their grandmother.

Summer of Mariposas does not begin with the traditional hero embarking on the journey alone. The sisters discover the body together. The first heroic act comes a few chapters later when Odilia tries to save two boys from drowning in the river. After discovering that the boys were indeed the phantom sons of La Llorana, the ghost of a woman who was said to have drowned her own children in the Rio Grande, Odilia learns of her true role in leading her sisters on the journey back to Mexico. La Llorana tells her, "You were chosen for the goodness in your heart. You displayed great courage when you jumped into the water to save my sons" (50). While this moment marks Odilia as the hero of the story, she does not embark on her journey alone. She must take her sisters with her. La Llorana lets her know that her heroism will not be without the support of her sisters. "This is about all of you: your sisters, your parents, even your *abuela*... You must travel to the other side, into the land of your ancestors, to find each other again" (53). "This is not for you to do alone. You must come together, you and your *hermanitas*. You must rejoice in the strength of sisterhood and return the man to his family" (56). While she is the sole navigator of her trials, and her journey is also that of personal growth and communal responsibility, Odilia's heroism is determinant on how she guides her sisters.

In this instance, Garcia McCall subverts the lone hero narrative and makes the heroic journey a communal effort. Odilia would not have embarked on the journey without the insistence of her sisters, and she will not be able to complete the trip without them. However, it is the traditional supernatural aid motif that ultimately gives Odilia that final nudge. Garcia McCall intentionally structures the novel within the myth cycle paradigm by titling the three parts of the story "The Departure," "The Initiation," and "The Return." Here, cultural hybridity takes the form of the Mexican values of family and folklore combined with the myth cycle

29

narrative to create this brown girl's heroic journey. While there are points on the journey where Odilia leaves her sisters to converse with the magical elements, she is reconnected with her sisters time and time again as they continue on the magical road to Mexico.

The future world in Adam Rex's *The True Meaning of Smekday* is colonized by aliens called Boov. The Boov have claimed the earth for themselves and have ordered all humans to relocate to Florida. Eleven year-old Gratuity Tucci tells her story of how she comes to understand the meaning of Smekday in the form of a school assignment that is to be entered into a contest. When her mother is abducted by the Boov through a mole in the back of her neck, Gratuity, or Tip as she's affectionately called by her mother, must fend for herself. This comes as a slow realization after she is left alone to care for herself when her mother disappears. Her mother's abduction is what initially sets off Tip's self-reliance. Before this point, Tip has an amicable relationship with her fickle mother where the days are filled with "meals and sleep and arguments…as though she weren't about to be taken, as though everything weren't about to change" (45). However, Tip is deeply affected by her mother's initial communication with the Boov through her mole and she is ultimately "swallowed" by a Boov ship.

> I don't know if I can write about everything afterward. It's going to sound like I'm trying to be dramatic, but it's not like that. It isn't for anyone else. You only fall because your legs stop working. And you don't fall to your knees, you fall on your ass into a patch of crabgrass like the Idiot of the Year. You scream for your mom because you really think it will bring her back. And when it doesn't, your skin feels too tight, and your lungs are full of cotton, and you couldn't call her again if you wanted to. And you don't get up, and you don't think up any clever plans, because you're only

waiting to burst like firecracker and die. It's the only thing to do." (52)

This moment in Tip's journey signifies the reluctant hero. She does not think that she can move forward on her own. An outer change takes place which causes an internal shift in the brown girl hero. However, the outer change in this larger world is hyperbolic. There is an alien invasion and Tip is alone. She eventually comes to a moment where she must act. She cultivates agency and determines the course of her next actions alone.

> And this is when I finally started to plan, but all of my plans were stupid. I think there's a part of the brain, probably somewhere in the back, that won't give up believing in magic. It was the part that made cavemen believe that drawing elks on stone would make for a good hunt the next day. And it's still chugging along, making you think you have lucky socks, or that your kids' birthdays will win the lottery. It made me think I could stop time in the cemetery with a wave of my hand, or summon Mom to my side with her name. Currently, it was very busy, thinking over and over about how to go back in time, and what I should do when I got there. (53)

Tip teaches herself how to drive and plans to take her pet cat along with her from New Jersey to Florida until she encounters a Boov who becomes her passenger in exchange for fixing her stalled car. Tip soon discovers that her mother is not dead after all and this acts as a catalyst to bond with the Boov who is part of the oppressive alien colonizers responsible for her mother's disappearance. She is determined to reach Florida and reunite with her mother. This yearning initiates her magical adventure of discovering the complex layers surrounding the Boov's

31

occupation.

Both Odilia in *Summer of Mariposas* and Tip in *The True Meaning of Smekday* are thrust into their magical journey by a supernatural aid. This aid ushers them through a magical dimension that initially transforms them into self-reliant and determined budding heroes. While her sisters first motivate Odilia to take the dead man's body down to Mexico, it is La Llorana, the magical ghost, who reveals to her what her purpose is on this journey. While Tip finds the will within herself to travel down to Florida on her own, it is the Boov who reveals to her that her mother may be in Florida waiting for her, thus giving her newfound purpose for this trip. A ghost and an alien both serve as what Campbell describes as the blunder in the hero's journey.

> This is an example of one of the ways in which the adventure can begin. A blunder—apparently the merest change—reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood. [Blunders] are the result of suppressed desires and conflicts. They are ripples on the surface of life, produced by unsuspected springs. And these may be very deep—as deep as the soul itself. The blunder may amount to the opening of destiny. (51)

Both the supernatural aids in these two novels serve as gateways to a larger more macrocosmic complex world where only the personal microcosmic desires once existed for these brown girl heroes. Odilia longs for her father and to reunite her family, but La Llorana exposes her to her Aztec origins and the need for her to continue that legacy. Tip longs to find her mother, but a renegade Boov exposes her to the internal power struggles of the aliens and she must save the human race from being casualties in their civil battle. Therefore, the personal

32

becomes the communal. Power is ascertained on the part of the brown girl hero and power is disseminated towards the community where Aztec cultural traditions and the human race are preserved in *Summer of Mariposas* and *The True Meaning of Smekday* respectively.

For the brown girl reader, this trajectory of connecting the personal desire to the heroic journey—the microscopic to the macroscopic—can be empowering in the way that it "emphasizes interpersonal openness and a common humanity" (Ching 135). The brown girl reader can make practical personal connections with the brown girl hero's desires—a longing for a mother, father, or family is relatable. This microcosmic connection allows the brown girl reader to more readily follow the hero along in her journey. This journey broadens the reader's world. According to Holly Virginia Blackford in her book *Out of this World: Why Literature Matters to Girls,* "Girls find quest adventure thematizes the very structure of desire. For them, the specific object of a quest is not as significant as the structure of the quest, which the impersonal reader can personalize. The girls define the central quest of a text differently from one another, translating the terms of the quest to mirror their own personal desires" (53). In other words, while the personal desires of the brown girl hero are relatable for the brown girl reader, it is the specific terms of the journey that hold deeper value. The brown girl reader is able to connect to ways in which both Odilia and Tip negotiate the terms of their sacrifices along the quest to achieve the ultimate goal. Odilia was willing to risk the lives of her four sisters in order to keep the "*cinco hermanitas*" intact. Tip was willing to conceal the identity of a perceived enemy in order to gain an ally on her quest.

Here, the journey is empowering. The brown girl reader can clearly ascertain the necessary steps leading from personal desire to communal heroism. She can "explore issues of power [whereby] a community's struggle and survival evoke a mythical place in the

community's memory" (Ching 134). This acknowledgment of the brown girl hero's journey will not only empower the reader, but her community as well. It will "serve the community as much as the child by affirming the arc of the child's existence—the struggles that came before and those that [she] will fight in her lifetime. Such books commemorate the community that has persevered before and, by imparting the memory of this struggle to the [reader], affirms [her] participation in the community's future" (Ching 134). The brown girl reader can understand the issues surrounding immigration and importance of cultural retention in the face of hardship through Odilia's journey in *Summer of Mariposas.* She can make connections to slavery, Native American reservations, and the abolitionist movements through Tip's journey in *The True Meaning of Smekday.* Both the brown girl character and reader are empowered along the courses of the quests in these two novels in the way that they present the full reality of what may be possible for many brown girls—single parenthood, displacement, immigration, disconnected families, cultural isolation, and self-reliance.

The very final step in the hero's journey, the magic flight and the freedom to live, is one that not only elevates the brown girl reader's sense of herself, but restores balance to the society in which she was oppressed. For the reader, this flight and freedom can mean "passing into advocacy…[gaining] a deeper understanding of power relations that enables one to comprehend and advocate for another's cause" (Ching 131). If the brown girl in a speculative fiction novel combats the evil forces of sexual abuse, economic oppression, and educational disparity, for instance, the reader can begin to "address issues of power…[and] counter dominant, oppressive ideologies… [The story] also portrays the full cultural and political development of their characters, and they elevate underprivileged communities" (Ching 133). Much like the song "Brown Girl in the Ring" dismantles a tradition from the former colonizer and elevates it to an

empowering game for the formerly oppressed, fantasy and science fiction novels for young

readers that have historically excluded children of color, and girls of color in particular, can

evolve into a genre that includes the truly marginalized so that such readers can experience the

freedom of existing within the realms of science and magic as true heroes—this proverbial ring

where they can "show their motion."

Yet, what gives these books their distinctive empowering qualities are the ways in which

they are authentic in their world-building. These connections would not be present for the brown

girl reader if *Summer of Mariposas* did not present culturally-specific details of Mexican culture

and mythology, or if *The True Meaning of Smekday* did not present racially diverse characters

coming together to fight against an even more marginalizing and oppressive force. Thus, the

authentic world-building is the paved road on which the brown girl hero's journey is traveled.

Run the World: Cultural Authenticity in Speculative Fiction Featuring Girls of Color

"I sowed diamonds in my back yard
My bowels deliver uranium
　the filings from my fingernails are
　semi-precious jewels
On a trip north
　I caught a cold and blew
　my nose giving oil to the arab world
I am so hip even my errors are correct
I sailed west to reach east and had to round off
　　the earth as I went"
The hair from my head thinned and gold was laid
across three continents

35

I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal

I cannot be comprehended except by my permission

I mean...I...can fly

   like a bird in the sky..." (Giovanni 5)

While characterization and structure are empowering for both the brown girl hero and character, crafting a culturally authentic and accurate speculative fiction story is just as crucial. Plausible world building is necessary in any speculative fiction story; however, when featuring a brown girl character, she has already inherited a plethora of cultural details that would affirm her position and power within a fabricated magical or futuristic world. The magical system need not be created from the ground up in order to be affirming, empowering, and authentic. As Holly Black states in her lecture on magical systems, "Fantasy is escapism, but [it has] the same obligation to tell the truth." A marginalized brown girl is not stripped of the realities of her dire circumstances in a magical story, rather, questions are posed where magic does not merely solve the problems but complicates the story for both the hero and the reader.

Black gives the example of the werewolf in a story where the question would be, "What does it mean to take away blame?" Or the story that features changelings: "Why do you feel alienated?" In these instances, the magic offers ways in which "things become problematic in the story [and] create problems for the character." This magic can also be a tool or weapon, but if used as such, it does not simply liberate the brown girl hero from the trenches of her own marginalization, rather, the magic as a tool or weapon comes with a set of consequences. Such magic, when it is authentic and accurate, immerses the brown girl hero within her own culture where questions of hybridity, tradition, cultural retention, and obligation are posed. This would

36

then reveal certain truths about the society for both the brown girl hero and reader. As Yolen states in *Touch Magic*:

> The black and white glyphs on a page convey a conviction, a ring of *truth* far greater and more subtle than that which is sent into the air. Every written-down story carries as much binding power as a contract. Speech is ephemeral. It soon fades away. A book remains for the life of its paper and print and thus its imprint persist on the lives of its hundreds, even thousands, of readers. (80)

This is even more so relevant in the case of speculative fiction where the author poses the question, "What if?" in a number of different ways through science or magic. Truth is revealed through the metaphors of fantasy and science fiction. When a magical, futuristic, and even scientific world is created, truth must be woven into the fabric of the story in order to be authentic and accurate.

"To tell the truth, but to tell it slant," as Black points out quoting the famous line from poet Emily Dickinson, requires a certain familiarity with the magical system on the part of the writer. Magical rules stemming solely from the writer's imagination still have to be grounded in some reality. Black stresses the use of myth and folklore as models for magic, which would allow for accurate and authentic world building. World mythology is replete with archetypal stories out of which a magical system can be created. By placing the brown girl hero in a magical story, the possibility for complete immersion into her own authentic cultural traditions and magical systems will empower both the hero and reader. Authentic world building based on mythology can cover a huge span of cultural traditions, thus allowing the brown girl reader to better understand how cultures share a common humanity and how hybridity can emerge. Yolen

makes the point that new magical systems emerge out of old mythologies by quoting Maureen

Duffy's *The Erotic World of Faery:*

> We remake our mythology in every age out of our own needs. We may
>
> use ideas lying around loose from a previous system or systems as part of
>
> the fabric. The human situation doesn't radically alter and therefore
>
> certain myths are constantly reappearing. (16)

While myths based on European cultures such as fairies, vampires, and werewolves are

abundant in middle grade and young adult novels, stories falling outside of these venerable

traditions are few and far between. Yolen continues: "Thus, for example, in the adaptable Spider-

Man who helps the poor, the vulnerable, and the helpless we see Prometheus and Robin Hood,

though his abilities also echo the African Anansi the Spider…The great archetypal stories

provide a framework or model for an individual's belief system" (16-17). If a brown girl reader

can make the connections between the plethora of vampire stories that exist on the shelves, for

example, and the Caribbean vampire called the soucouyant or the Latin American chupacabra,

the story is that much more authentic, empowering, and affirming. This sort of authentic world

building is more embracing of universal belief systems than it is fragmenting and marginalizing.

The brown girl reader can see how she is within the "ring" of her very own culture that is also

part of a larger "ring" of many cultural traditions that share common magical systems.

The use of authentic magical systems based on the brown girl hero's own myth and

folklore helps to "create a landscape of allusion, enabling [the brown girl reader] to understand

[her] own and other cultures from the inside out, providing an adaptable tool of therapy, and

stating in symbolic or metaphoric terms abstract truths of our common human existence" (Yolen

18). Yolen also poses this question: "If you deny our children their cultural, historical heritage,

their birthright to these stories, what then?" (18). In the same manner, if marginalized brown girls are denied their own cultural traditions through middle grade and young adult speculative fiction, what will become of their rich legacies and their connection to them?

Jewell Parker Rhodes' *Ninth Ward* is not so deeply immersed in fantasy or a futuristic setting that the world building is created solely from the author's imagination. The story is set in New Orleans, Louisiana at onset of the tragic Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Twelve year-old Lanesha is the hero of the novel where she must act on the guidance from the ghost of her deceased mother and grandmother to save herself and a friend from the rising waters surrounding her neighborhood, Ninth Ward. Lanesha's magical power is that she can see ghosts.

> I do see ghosts. Have since I was an itty-bitty baby. Ghosts. Here, now. Always. They're soft, wispy. I can put my hand through them. If I blow hard enough, I can make them shiver. Ghosts don't frighten me. Most of them just look lost—like they can't understand what's happened to them. Their eyes blank, their ghost bodies wander about. (19)

In *Ninth Ward,* the magic is subtle yet profound. The ability to see ghosts is an overused motif in YA fantasy literature; however, this novel features an African American girl within a very modern setting amid a widely publicized disaster. Lanesha does not simply see "old ghosts" from the heydays of New Orleans, but she witnesses newer ghosts, former classmates, for example.

> Every morning since I started my new school, Jermaine's ghost waits for me on the school steps. He should be starting middle school with the rest of us. Instead, he sits on the steps, watching everyone pass by. Jermaine used to skip school lots. His last skip, he was in a 7-eleven buying soda. He got a belly shot. Wrong place, wrong time. He never got to graduate. I

always wave at him. Sometimes, he says, "You're cool, Lanesha." Other

times, "Stay in school." (21)

This sort of authentic cultural detail adds depth to an otherwise commonplace story about seeing ghosts. With such details, a brown girl reader is reminded of the harsh realities of impoverished yet close-knit communities like Ninth Ward. The ghosts are not simply reminders of a time long gone that has very little meaning for both the brown girl hero and reader, but they are current and relevant. "Now, ghosts in baggy pants, their underwear showing, wearing short-sleeve T-shirts and body tattoos, are from my time. They're mostly boys killed in drive-bys or fights or robberies. Sometimes I know them from school" (Rhodes 20).

This magical ability is not simply handed to her through the author's creative license; there is a reason Lanesha sees ghosts and it is based on an actual cultural belief system:

They say I was born with a caul, a skin netting covering my face like a

glove. My mother died birthing me. I would've died, too, if Mama Ya-Ya

hadn't sliced the bloody membrane from my face. I let out a wail when

she parted the caul, letting in first air, first light. (1)

Babies born with a caul or a "veil" over their face holds spiritual and mystical significance in many cultural traditions. Thus, this detail connected to Lanesha's magical ability lends credibility and authenticity to the story. Lanesha's grandmother, Mama Ya-Ya who "births babies," has a deep understanding of her gift of seeing ghosts and acts as a strong spiritual guide for her granddaughter throughout the story. Other details such as Lanesha's relationship with her grandmother, the bonds between her neighbors and classmates, and the descriptions of the neighborhood enriches the story and frames the Katrina disaster around not only a community but the individual lives impacted by the tragedy.

Rhodes crafts a diverse community where Lanesha's magical ability brings people of different backgrounds together. The magic here acts as a binding force that validates Yolen's idea of myth perpetuating our common humanity. Lanesha's math teacher Mr. Ng also understands the concept of seeing ghosts, and this confirms Lanesha's strong ties to her community and her need to ultimately act heroically towards the end of the novel.

> Mr. Ng understands ghosts. He told Mama Ya-Ya that Vietnam is filled with them. From time to time, the two of them talk about ointments and roots. Mr. Ng confides his worries about his ancestors. He hopes his cousins in Vietnam are caring for his parents' graves. Mama Ya-Ya says, "I understand." Then Mama Ya-Ya hugs him. Mr. Ng bows. Their conversation is always the same. (59)

While authentic cultural details add specificity to a story featuring a brown girl, they can also highlight ways in which cultural details are shared amongst different groups. Thus, the brown girl reader can find points of connection between herself and the ideas that exist outside of her cultural margins. Her world broadens and deepens and she is empowered.

Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* is set in a dystopian Toronto where urban decay and chaos has caused the wealthier residents to flee to the suburbs leaving the poor residents like a young woman named Ti-Jeanne to fend for themselves. Crime and drug lords have taken over the city along with a host of mythical carnival characters from the Caribbean, such as Jab-Jab and duppies, who haunt Ti-Jeanne, her newborn son, and her grandmother. Ti-Jeanne must trust the guidance of her sooth-sayer grandmother, Gros-Jeanne, in navigating the turmoils of a city overrun with both exoteric and mystical mayhem. While *Brown Girl in the Ring* features a young adult woman barely out of her teen years, and *Ninth Ward* features a pre-

teen girl, both brown girl heroes must navigate the spiritual connections between themselves, their mothers, and their grandmothers to find the source of their power. Ti-Jeanne, like Lanesha, has a power that enables her to see into the past lives and current lives of those around her:

> Ti-Jeanne could see with more than sight. Sometimes she saw how people were going to die. When she closed her eyes, the childhood songs her grandmother had sung to her replayed in her mind, and dancing to their music were images: this one's body jerking in a spray of gunfire and blood, that one writhing as cramps turned her bowels to liquid. Never the peaceful deaths. Ti-Jeanne hated the visions. (9)

While visions are commonplace for a hero with magical sensibilities, here, the specific details as to the kinds of visions Ti-Jeanne experiences are culturally grounded within her environment. Ti-Jeanne, like Lanesha, is marginalized by the crime and violence in her community, therefore her magical ability is affected by this. She is constantly subjected to the pain of those around her as they experience violence in the same way that Lanesha is able to see those who have succumbed to violence. This magic is a hindrance at first, but over the course of the story, Ti-Jeanne must learn to navigate this power in order to save the day. At each stage of her journey are rich, authentic cultural details that not only ground the story in the culture of Toronto, but in the culture of the city's Caribbean immigrant population.

Hopkinson uses Jamaican dialect for not only the characters' dialogues, but in the way that she tells the story as well. The story is interspersed with Jamaican proverbs at the beginning of each chapter along with witty sayings by Gros-Jeanne, the grandmother. While Toronto is not described as exclusively Caribbean, the story is told from Ti-Jeanne's point of view who is firmly immersed within this Caribbean community. This sort of authentic detail validates the

lived experiences of immigrant girls of color in large urban centers. Ti-Jeanne is well encapsulated in her community, but there is a much broader community that surrounds her. There are exchanges between Ti-Jeanne's world and the city at large, but the story mostly centers around the main figures in the story who use Caribbean magic to navigate the conflicts with the novel. While Ti-Jeanne has visions of ailing and dying people, it is her grandmother who heals them as an *obeah* woman or an herbalist. Ti-Jeanne is also immersed in modern-day ideas, and she must find balance between the "old time" magic her grandmother tries to teach her and the new ways of dealing with illness:

> Ti-Jeanne didn't place too much stock in Mami's bush doctor remedies. Sometimes herbs lost their potency, stored through Toronto's long, bitter winters. And they had to guess at dosages. For instance, willow bark made a good painkiller, but too much of it caused internal bleeding. Ti-Jeanne would have preferred to rely on commercial drugs. They could still get them, and Mami's nursing training had taught her how to dispense them… She had built up quite a stockpile of antibiotics and painkillers, so Ti-Jeanne didn't understand why Mami insisted on trying to teach her all that old-time nonsense. If Mami didn't know how to cure something, she could look it up in one of the growing piles of medical books lining the walls of the cottage. (37)

This detail between grandmother and granddaughter, old magic and new medicine, adds depth to how culturally-specific magic can work within a contemporary setting. Here, the magic of herbalism is complicated with the presence of modern medicine and both Ti-Jeanne and her grandmother's knowledge of it. Ti-Jeanne is not simply a magical brown girl in a city falling

apart at the seams, she has inherited this gift from a long line of magical women before her—those who have traveled from the Caribbean with their old magic in tow.

Ti-Jeanne, at the onset of a violent clash between drug lords and the evil Caribbean spirits that serve them, must come to terms with the power she has inherited. Magic must find its way through the dilapidated ruins and into this brown girl hero so that she can save herself, her infant son, her grandmother, and the ultimately the city of Toronto. Her very own cultural traditions take precedence in this story, even if it is set within confines of an outside culture. While Ti-Jeanne's grandmother practices obeah, a Caribbean African-based tradition, she is a magnetizing force for the whole community.

> After the Riots, when Mami had moved herself and Ti-Jeanne into the
> Riverdale Farm Buildings, Mami was soon leading regular rituals in the
> chapel. At nights, people dressed in white would troop past the front door
> of their house, carrying food and drums. Ti-Jeanne could hear them
> speaking. Mostly Caribbean English, but some spoke Spanish and others
> the African-rhythmed French of the French Caribbean islands. One or two
> were White, and there was Mami's friend Jenny, who was Romany. (87)

Herein lies an example of how cultural specificity and authenticity can directly correlate to what Stuart Ching identifies as "multiracial democracy" (130). By authentically highlighting a brown girl hero's own cultural traditions in a magical story, the author subverts marginalizing hierarchical structures and places the hero, the reader, and their respective cultures in a position of power. Therefore, a diverse cultural setting in a speculative fiction story is not merely inclusion into the genre; rather, it is incorporating and validating what already exists in the real world. Thus, the reader can cultivate critical awareness of how her own culture can co-exist

44

within that of the larger society. Ching's definition of multiracial democracy is that it "invites diverse groups to participate fully in the democratic construction of society [which] assumes active contest over and weighs the ethical and unethical uses of power" (130). While some level of diversity exists in these two novels, it is ultimately the magic and culture of the brown girl hero that saves the day. This authentic affirmation of culture will empower the brown girl reader and as Ching emphasizes, "[This] awareness of power is a necessary prerequisite for passing into advocacy" (131).

A brown girl reader will make connections to Lanesha, her magic, and her community and gain a deeper understanding of the inequities surrounding the Hurricane Katrina relief. Crime and disenfranchisement in urban communities will have greater significance for the reader when she reads how Ti-Jeanne must wield her culturally specific magic to save the day. She will begin to advocate for herself, her community, and the communities of others. She will cultivate not power over others, but power to act and to change and to move past social barriers—the multiple "rings" that marginalize her.

Works Cited

Anupkumar, Aditya. "The Concept of Marginalization." N.d. Unpublished essay.

      adityaanupkumar.com. Web.

Blackford, Holly Virginia. *Out of this World: Why Literature Matters to Girls.* New York:

      Teachers College Press, 2004. Print.

Butler, Robert Olen. *From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction.* New York:

      Grove Press, 2005. Print.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces.* [1949] Princeton, NJ: Princeton University

      Press, 1973. Print.

Ching, Stuart H. D. "Multicultural Children's Literature as an Instrument of Power." *Language*

      Arts, Vol. 83 No. 2, 128-136. 2005. Web.

Danehy, Erin F. *Girls Who Save the World: The Female Hero in Young Adult Fantasy.* MA

      Thesis. Carnegie Mellon University, 2007. Web.

Elliott, Zetta. *A Wish After Midnight.* Las Vegas, NV: AmazonEncore, 2009. Print.

Giovanni, Nikki. *Ego Tripping and Other Poems for Young People.* New York: Lawrence Hill

      Books, 1993. Print.

 Hopkinson, Nalo. *Brown Girl in the Ring.* New York: Warner Books, 1998. Print.

Hurley, Dorothy L . "Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess." The

      Journal of Negro Education, Vol. 74 No. 3 pp. 221-232 (2005). JSTOR. Web. 2 Sep

      2013. Web.

McCall, Guadalupe Garcia. *Summer of the Mariposas.* New York: Tu Books, Lee & Low, 2012.

      Print.

McCall, Leslie. "The Complexity of Intersectionality." The University of Chicago Press, Vol. 30
No. 3 pp. 1771-1800 (2005) JSTOR. Web. 2 Sep 2013. Web.

Okarafor, Nnedi. *Zahrah the Windseeker.* Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005. Print.

Rex, Adam. *The True Meaning of Smekday.* New York: Disney Hyperion Books, 2007. Print.

Sandler, Karen. *Tankborn.* New York: Tu Books, 2011. Print.

Shlain, Leonard. *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image.* New
York: Penguin Compass, 1998. Print.

Yolen, Jane. *Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie & Folklore in the Literature of Childhood.* Atlanta,
GA: August House, Inc., 2000. Print.