

Towards a Manumissive Black Fantastic in Fandom, Fantasy, and Literature for Young People; or: A Case for the Black Hermione

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a method for studying and engaging in a Black melancholic practice of YA SFF (science fiction and fantasy) fandom. In 2015, a minor fan discourse on ‘the Black Hermione’ rose to public prominence when the Black actress Noma Dumezweni was cast to play Hermione Granger in J.K. Rowling’s new *Harry Potter* stage play. I argue that the ensuing discourse evidences a fannish desire for authorial sanction that is underrecognized in the field of fandom scholarship. Race and melancholy both inflect experiences of fandom, but fandom studies historically lacks frameworks for considering either. Rowling’s public espousal of a trans-exclusive gender politic since 2019 has made it particularly urgent to address the disappointments and unrealized desires that inform fans’ relations with cultural creators. Though obscured in Rowling’s partial embrace of the Black Hermione, I argue that

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this 2015 episode stands as an important first boundary case between the scope of Rowling's imagination and fans' desires to fit within it. Adapting Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' framework to name a 'manumissive black fantastic', I explore a method for observing modes of fan engagement steeped in racial grief and, coextensively, a method for engaging in racial grief through fandom. By way of demonstration, this article concludes with a short work of original fan fiction.

INTRODUCTION

Why am I so sad when I imagine a Black Hermione? The discourse on race in children's and young adult literature recognizes a relationship between sadness and racial representation, but largely with respect to representational absence. As YA author and activist Christopher Myers indicates in his 2014 *New York Times* editorial, we know that an "apartheid of literature" separates Black children from "the much-written-about sense of self-love that comes from recognizing oneself in a text" (n.p.) More recently, education and literacy scholar Ebony Elizabeth Thomas has theorized this as an "imagination gap" (1) and for both the problem prescribes a direct solution: a new generation of Black protagonists, closing the gap through what Thomas calls "an emancipatory Black fantastic" (12). Thomas concludes her study with a coda on the Black Hermione, identifying the fan proliferation of alternate representations and 'counterstories' as an affirmative and intermediary step – ascribing a reparative utopianism to fan activity consistent with the disciplinary ethos of fandom scholarship writ large.

Before being swept up in this progressive march toward a better future, however, my sadness gives me pause: what makes the Black Hermione's emergence in fan cultures a solution, any more than she is a symptom? Why should she be understood as heralding a better future, instead of meditating on a melancholy present and past? To offer a measured parallel to the work of cultural repair, in this article I attend to the affective commitments that have made the underlying cultural hurt inevitable and inescapable. As much as it is an endless proliferation of new representations, the cultural production of fandom is still anchored to its frustratingly finite source material, tethered there by the emotional commitments that keep its fans coming back. Consequently, I observe how the modes of fan practice that produced the Black Hermione constitute an impasse for cultural repair because of the historical bridge they represent: carrying our hurt present forward toward the retreating horizon of a repaired future.

By 'the Black Hermione', I am referring to the vein of fan discourse that positions Hermione Granger, a central character from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, as Black, and which Thomas addresses in the coda to *The Dark Fantastic*. Thomas' innovative entry into fandom studies scholarship on cultural repair addresses the racist conventions of science

fiction and fantasy, using the genre analysis pioneered by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* to argue that such conventions produce an imagination gap by alienating a prospective Black readership. With data gathered from a survey of Black women SFF readers, S.R. Toliver has confirmed this thesis, noting that most respondents described reading science fiction in their youth only to shift genres in search of more personally identifiable characters (327-8). I build on Thomas' framework by observing its necessarily omitted category, suggesting that the stress placed upon the would-be Black fan limits consideration of those Black readers who, after encountering the generic racism of science fiction and fantasy, became fans anyway. If the would-be fan is stalled in their engagement by a prohibitive melancholia, should we not suppose that such a sadness characterizes the experience of those who became fans regardless? As Melanie Ramdarshan Bold observes in *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction*, this question gains special urgency with young readers, whose identification with fiction has a disproportionate impact on their emerging sense of selfhood (93-6). I therefore attend to the racial melancholy discernible in the Black Hermione discourse, in order to advance a conversation about how depression more broadly ought to be regarded as a constitutive element of fandom – particularly when fandom stages center-facing cultural engagement from marginal subject positions. Carrying with the historical logic of Thomas' metaphor, I suggest that an emancipatory frame for serving future fans applies to past/present fans more as a process of 'manumission'. Unlike emancipation, which denotes a freedom linked to the transformative historical rupture of slavery's abolition, manumission describes a process that reconciles liberation to the endurance of a larger, structural system of bondage. With the manumissive Black fantastic I therefore work to describe a slower and more contingent path to the imaginative freedom of genre, in which every step is bound in an intimate, ongoing conversation with constraint.

A manumissive reading encourages us to disregard the hope and promise of a Black Hermione as a concern for the future, and instead reckon with the desire for a Black Hermione that, in the present, cannot serve us. As elaborated in the following section, the ethnographically observable terrain of fan community – the preferred object of study for most fandom scholars – does not serve such a project so well as the archive of our own introspection. The manumissive Black fantastic is therefore a turn on the practice of 'aca-fandom', the scholarly practice of disclosing one's own embeddedness in their fan community of study. With our desires and ourselves as our primary object of consideration, the fan's disreputable and emotionally-tinted lens becomes the chief resource for generating knowledge about itself. Such an approach allows us to modify the terms of the emancipatory Black fantastic framework, adapting it to attend to its own omitted category of the past and present (rather than future) Black fan. In keeping with the metaphor of Thomas' imagination gap, my introspective method proposes to turn the imagination gap inside out.

When understood in the context of Claude Steele's performance gap – to which Thomas' term alludes – we can observe that the deficit metaphor of a "gap" does more reflexive work

than Steele or Thomas may realize. For Steele's social psychological study of Black underperformance on standardized tests, as for Thomas' theorization of obstructed Black SFF readership, nothing is supposed to be inside of the gap. Rather, it is meant to be crossed or closed, designating a repaired and idealized future made imaginable by effacement of the transitional present. In this sense, the gap is not closed so much as it is filled, by placing the unrepaired present out of sight, and so, necessarily, placing us there in the gap with it. To consider our placement here, and bring this inside-ness out, my purpose is less to offer a correction than to note that there is so much *room* within this gap, as well as a great deal of *stuff*: not merely the void of Black minds' unrealized potential, but exactly what that potential is and does when it is violently conditioned to turn back in upon itself.

We can think, perhaps, that this is the thesis on children's literature nested within *The Bluest Eye*, an analysis internal to the gap, which stands to deepen Thomas' application of a Morrisonian framework for literary study. With that novel, Morrison does not close a representative gap with a direct counterstory of *Dick and Jane* – for instance by substituting the story of a happy white little girl for a happy Black one. Instead she narrativizes the life of a young Black girl trapped within an imaginative regime custom made for a white one, and in so doing enters the gap and makes art of it. Likewise, and for better or worse, what we find in the gap are the constitutive imaginative objects of Black fandom, the dialectical product of what we receive from a predominantly white culture industry and how we as Black fans are equipped to receive it. A manumissive Black fantastic reading practice, I propose, extends introspective self-consciousness to that 'how', allowing the too-invested, allegedly fanatical, and (now) avowedly depressed meaning-making of fandom to inform upon itself. Directing some of that fannish over-investment into the writing of this article, I would analogize this reading practice to the world of *Harry Potter*.

The counterstoried imagination, the repaired gap, resembles the total wish-fulfilment of the Room of Requirement: a feature of Hogwarts school that emerges from nowhere, bearing no history, to fulfill your stated desires then disappear. When it functions properly, the reparative promise of the Room of Requirement is that it will take what you already know about yourself, and deliver you to who you want to be. But on the rare occasion that you enter in a guilty state of mind, looking to hide a secret shame, the room instead reveals a thousand such shameful things: leading you into the Room of Hidden Things, a chaotic space filled with bloody axes and forbidden objects, stowed away by generations of people as guilty as you. Crimes you never committed, gruesome desires you never confessed to having, spill out before you, projected here to somehow fulfill your needs. Against your will, the room has shown you the horrible hidden spaces within your mind, filled and blocked off by people you've never met. Emancipation presents the Black Hermione as a product of the imagination gap's closure, an artifact of Black fandom arrived on the other side. But what if she, like us, comes from inside the gap – what if she is that axe? What if she is its bloody stain?

Presenting an account of racially melancholic fandom and a manumissive means of reading through it, this article works to extend the scope of what can be described and speculated about in fandom. By consequence, my observations are by no means generalizable – rather, they lay out terms for an introspective and self-disclosing scholarly project that invites collaboration. Such collaboration requires common points of reference to ground these disclosures, and I turn to the discourse on the Black Hermione as one such place to gather. After articulating my theoretical and methodological approach, I proceed with analysis of the discourse that earned the Black Hermione her notoriety in 2015. I treat this spectacle as a case study in the operations of a melancholic cultural economy, rooting the private experiences of racially melancholic fandom in its *a priori* social context. I posit that the ostensibly pleasurable elements of fandom observable in the spectacle are to an extent prohibitive to fans’ development of a method for processing racial and cultural grief. So finally, I advance an imagination of the Black Hermione as a companion and critical focalizer for the manumitted fan’s aggrieved reencounter with the *Harry Potter* text. Instead of fulfilling our desires of her, the Black Hermione can instead demarcate the boundary between a dominant cultural imagination and our own. She may not make us happy but she can explain why we are not.

THE SADNESS OF LOVING SOMETHING

In *Fans: The Mirrors of Consumption*, Cornel Sandvoss defines the practice of fandom as “the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text” (8) – a definition consistent with the psychoanalytic unit of melancholia first theorized by Sigmund Freud and then applied to race and cultural consumption by Ann Anlin Cheng. Cheng describes the consumptive habit of racial melancholia as “pathological; it is interminable in nature and refuses substitution”, fixated and repetitive in the same manner as Sandvoss describes, but with “deep-seated, intangible, psychical complications for people living within a ruling episteme that privileges that which they can never be” (8, 7). Such melancholia is difficult to describe in fandom, because scholars like Sandvoss (and fans themselves) tend to avoid negative or pathologizing characterizations of the cultural activities being studied. We are confronted with the problem that, as a phenomenon, the sadness of loving something resists observation. In offering racial melancholy as a frame for understanding Black fans’ routinized and emotionally invested return to a text like *Harry Potter*, I am nonetheless asserting that the study of affective negativity in fan experience is necessary for a proper study of race in the *Harry Potter* franchise. To do as much, the reading practice I describe as ‘the manumissive Black fantastic’ requires stepping away from the social scientific methods most frequently applied in fandom studies, in order to apply a combination of introspection and close reading to render such negatively-tinged fan experience for our consideration.

Melancholic habits of cultural consumption risk going unobserved when studying the dynamics of oppression and social hierarchy in a given work of narrative, because text-based literary analyses often remove the reader from those dynamics and status differentials. Work by Giselle Liza Anatol, Brycchan Carey, Jackie C. Horne, Farah Mendlesohn, Elaine Ostry and others have all made valuable contributions to the interpretation of the *Harry Potter* series, for instance, but largely to comment upon the implied moral or social theory the books deliver to readers, and less to observe how such messaging acts upon them. As such, the accumulated insights settle into the same impasses that mark any too-tight correspondence between the social world constructed within a fiction and that which the fiction is constructed into. On the one hand, emphases on the narrative's 'correctness', according to whatever preferred sociological or ethical referent, render the reader a bystander in the process of interpretive meaning-making. Crucially, this minimizes the role of the reader's own subject position in determining the significance of the text. On the other hand, presumptions of the literary text's unity or finality serve to marginalize the author from the social work of meaning-making. Such exclusions are often necessary, insofar as an author's declared intent does not counteract the social and political antagonisms manifest in the text. However, as J.K. Rowling's public presence has made clear in recent years, revelations of an author's role as a social or political antagonist does inevitably inform readerly sentiment. On both of these fronts, fan reception becomes the prism by which the reader and the author are reintroduced as key social agents in determining the significance of the text.

Mendlesohn touches upon this latter issue in her 2002 study of the series' internal dynamics of authority, in noting that critique of the texts' social hierarchies can only ever be provisional until the publication of the final book (159). In 2010, Horne proposed to begin a definitive assessment, but Rowling's continued, extratextual stewardship of her wizarding world has since demonstrated the ongoing mutability of the texts' social politics (76). Through continuation projects like "Harry Potter and the Cursed Child", *Pottermore*, and the *Fantastic Beasts* film franchise, but also through regular elaboration on her creative intentions through interviews and Twitter, Rowling's negotiation of the texts' external dynamics of authority pushes conclusive analysis of *Harry Potter* ever onto the horizon. Where attention to fan reception extends this analysis, however, it faces its own set of constraints. The field has historically done a poor job of attending to fan communities of color, (L. Bennett; Fiske; Jenkins, "Fandom Studies as I See It") and, while Black scholars have worked to correct this record (Carrington; Goward; Martin; Wanzo), their work has thrown into relief the constraints of disciplinary orthodoxy.

The disciplinary constraint most at issue in this article has to do with fandom studies' own oversimplified account of the relationship between authors and readers, particularly with respect to the identity politics of *Harry Potter*. Taking cues from fans' explicit, anti-racist activity, the field has regarded 'racebending' in fan production as a transgressive and recuperative act. The term derives from popular criticism of M. Knight Shyamalan's live-

action film adaptation of the fantasy TV show *Avatar the Last Airbender* (2005), derisively comparing the whitewashed casting to the protagonist's ability to manipulate or "bend" the elements (Gatson and Reid, par. 4.10). Since the term was coined in 2009, in continuity with a larger wave of popular criticism referred to as "racefail" (par. 2.3-4), it has conversely come to describe a similar ability as wielded by fans themselves: connoting the same upward-punching cultural critique through fans' own cross-racial adaptations of white-by-default source materials. Such practices are interpreted in continuity with the multicultural refashioning of Western liberal democracy, as well as with the decolonial work of provincializing the West in the cultural worlds of the global south (Gilliland; Pande). Further, this tradition of critique properly informs observations of Rowling's thoughtlessness toward race both before and after the Black Hermione spectacle, pointing (for instance) to the seemingly made-up names given to East and South Asian characters Cho Chang and Panju (Gohil; Rostad). Where the corrective function of critique may seem to be made manifest through racebending fan production, however, we risk neglecting the identification and desire which precedes (and endures beyond) the act of protest.

A useful example has emerged in the years since the Black Hermione spectacle, as since 2019 the whispers of Rowling's anti-trans gender politic have graduated to shouts. This anti-trans position, more than anything else, has prompted Rowling's aging fan constituency to regard enduring affection for *Harry Potter* as increasingly untenable (ContraPoints n.p.). Yet, such disavowals defy the reparative framing of fandom in the same way enduring loyalty would, in that both treat the author as indissociable from the artifact. In each case, entreaty and refusal become quickly legible as two sides of the same coin. If the imperative to disavow the author tacitly rejects any latent desire for her embrace, for instance, the most-cited harm done by Rowling's trans-exclusive crusade in fact contradicts the notion that such a clean break is possible. As Mermaids UK, an advocacy group for trans youth, wrote in August 2020: "We are aware through our work with families that there have been cases of self-harm and even attempted suicide following J.K. Rowling's statements and the public responses in social media and the press" ("A Call to J.K. Rowling" n.p.). At the intersection of childhood, depression, and embattled identity, emotional attachment is not entirely optional. As Black trans theorist Cameron Awkward-Rich observes, the depression inherent in being the antagonized subject of trans-exclusive feminism involves the slippery distinction between "the feeling of annihilation" and "actually being annihilated" (832), an investment in the point of view that refuses you and that becomes continuous with later suicidal ideation. With recourse to his own treatment of children's fantasy literature in the relationship between Wendy and Peter Pan, Awkward-Rich suggests that this sadness rests in the mutually exclusive and self-interested desires that the trans-exclusive feminist and the transmasculine subject place upon each other, asking: "what if we think of the relation between *trans* and *feminism as love*?" (837).

Awkward-Rich advances “depressed” (819) reading as a means of differentiating the feeling and the fact of annihilation, supplying a practice (and a tradition of practice) that inspires this project (Cvetkovich; Sedgwick). Love, we might surmise, is the invisible emotion that invests fans’ outward demonstrations of rage with meaning, making discernible its enunciation of a suppressed despair, and therefore marking the distinction between a fraught fandom and the more direct form of focused dislike described as “anti-fandom” (Click). Sandvoss argues for greater attunement to such socially invisible dimensions of fan experience, observing both a disciplinary reluctance to risk “pathologizing fans” (67), and a methodological preference for social scientific methods. For similar reasons, Cheng observes that scholarship on race and culture has been more comfortable addressing grievance than grief, the former being the social and legal – and therefore correctable – articulation of the latter (3). Those invisible dimensions of fandom which intersect at the juncture of social malady and the privacy of impacted fans’ interior experience of it therefore struggle to find articulation, leaving an evasive strain of melancholy unattended in the ongoing life of fan practice.

By contrast, the field of Black cultural studies (particularly in the Black feminist tradition) has often advanced its theoretical project through critique of the social sciences. Regarding the social psychological work of Steele, which inspired the term “the imagination gap”, the decolonial Black feminist theorist Sylvia Wynter’s remarks that his attention to academic performance produces too narrow a diagnosis. Steele’s landmark conclusion on this work is the concept of “stereotype threat”: the anxiety felt by a member of a stereotyped group when called upon to refute said stereotypes, and which – with a sort of tragic irony – can compromise one’s performance so measurably as to actually appear to confirm them (616). In an interview with *Proud Flesh* Journal, Wynter broadens Steele’s scope with reference to Carter G. Woodson’s theory of “miseducation” (Wynter n.p.). Wynter emphasizes that Black students’ dissonant relationship to their curriculum is too tidily explained by stereotype threat, because this presumes the overall consistency of the knowledge under examination, with the only dissonant component being the Black student’s failed assimilation of it. But that student’s uncertainty, their damned-if-you-do relation to a regime of truth that requires them to always defy expectations or confirm falsehoods, is in fact a profound indictment of the epistemological system itself. If tests of Black students’ knowledge show a performance gap, then the problem is not with Blackness but with knowledge.

Just as Wynter compels us to see the boundaries that condition Steele’s social scientific inquiry and then launch our investigations on the other side, I draw upon Black Studies’ tradition of interdisciplinary critique to consider fandom studies’ boundedness when observing a racial melancholy too easily concealed in the pleasures of fandom. In the 2016 study *Speculative Blackness*, andre m. carrington describes speculative fiction as a predominantly white cultural tradition with an inevitable alienation for Black participants

(17-18). But as carrington demonstrates with reference to “The Remember Us Archive”, fans themselves tend to resist such framing. This archive was an online resource to counter the erasure of characters of color in erotic fan writing, and in its manifesto the archivists implore fanfic writers to sexually objectify Black characters as readily as white ones. Of the objections this may raise, they stipulate: “If this was a less shallow archive, we might address those issues. As it is...we’re shallow.” (“The Remember Us Manifesto”, qtd. in carrington). Both acknowledging the potential harm of their cultural engagement and nonetheless disregarding it, this avowal of shallowness captures the catch-22 of Black fan experience within the imagination gap: that one might object to anti-Blackness in fandom, or participate in fandom’s escapist gratification, but not both. The structure of ‘Hurt/Comfort’ erotic fanfic (which carrington then attends to) captures the double-bind nicely, as a genre that constructs hurt as the narrative precondition of erotic care (Bacon-Smith; carrington 225). Eve Sedgwick’s framework of reparative reading, which carrington applies, is similarly premised on hurt and a depressive response to it, but the “Remember Us” archivists’ resignation to the likelihood of harm avows no faith in a broader arc of repair, rather recognizing hurt as the water Black fandom is swimming in – opting not to linger on the matter and instead go the way of Zora Neale Hurston, sharpening their oyster knives. As such, their stated embrace of shallowness and comfort might be better understood as palliative reading instead.

A fan practice unwilling to derail itself by voicing grievance might nonetheless express grief on a less socially observable register. If, as Cheng demonstrates, grief is not so much a consequence of raced/racial subjectivity as it is a constitutive factor of it, the melancholy which springs from such unacknowledged grief inheres to all facets of racially inscribed culture, and its critical study requires a mode of non-prescriptive critique: criticism reconciled to the inability to correct. As Saidiya Hartman and Stephen Best indicate in their co-edited special issue of *Representations*, the introspection afforded by Black racial grief has had to stand as its own form of reparations, as conventional attempts at repair have worked to delegitimize hurt more than they have actually served to heal (1-2). Black cultural practice has therefore learned to treat articulations of grief as a resource, because as Hartman more famously writes elsewhere, they are “perhaps the only kind [of reparation] we will ever receive” (“Venus” 4). Black fandom is another extension of this – both the site of grief and its most immediately available recompense. In supposing that the fantasy of a Black Hermione is one partial expression of this otherwise unvoiced grief, the non-prescriptive critique we now undertake requires that we extend our archive of referents. To do so, we might regard the desire for a Black Hermione as an artifact of a Black fan’s readerly habitus and ask: what is the grief which subtends that desire? What do we stand to learn from it?

I first came to know the contours of my own depression during a two-week period in the summer before I turned 13, days spent mostly alone, listening to my disc set of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* from sun-up to sundown. For most of the following year, *Harry Potter* was the backing track to my daily life: every school day passed with pirated

audiobooks fed through a wire along my jacket's sleeve, so when I rested my head in my hand with my elbow on my desk a concealed headphone would read steadily into my ear. To this day, peace of mind sounds to me like the voice of Jim Dale returning Harry and Hermione (and me) to Hogwarts. But the circular and self-consuming quality of melancholy makes such respite continuous with that melancholy's propagation. Surely my peace of mind is jeopardized when the voice I hear it in is not my own.

Recognizing that *Harry Potter* has supplied me with narrative logics and structures of feeling that I now register as my habituated default, I cannot describe my relationship to the series as emancipatory, which is what inspires my metaphor of manumission. The stakes Thomas presents in the introduction to *The Dark Fantastic* draw a tacit equivalency between the freedom of emancipation and the imaginatively enabling escapism of science fiction and fantasy genres. By the routine operations of the dark fantastic – the genre conventions by which Blackness is primarily imported to the fantastical imagination through hauntings, monstrosities, and negations of the good and pure – Thomas argues these conventions structure readers' encounters with an imaginative plane of experience that, for Black readers, foreclose the imaginative escape supposedly enabled by genre (7). The assertion is that the dark fantastic is at once deeply immersed in the generic conventions of fantasy literature, and yet runs deeply counter to the imaginative escapism assumed as fantasy's *raison d'être*. It is this dissonance that presumably produces the imagination gap – presenting young Black readers with the promise of limitlessness and yet the lingering sense of their own segregation within the fantastical imaginary.

THE DISCIPLINING FREEDOM OF FANTASY

Without models to demonstrate the possibility of Black fantasy, and encountering the genre's persistent employment of tropes that cast Blackness as fantasy's unspeakable Other, young readers are argued to experience the imagination gap as a structural restriction upon Black self-conception. They would thus internalize the message that the means of imagining an otherwise most associated with the genre (dreaming, fantasizing, speculating) are by design outside their reach. As such, the nascent contradiction that this argument orbits around is the role genre plays in governing freedom – or, said differently, the inherently structuring role narrative conventions play in facilitating slippage from constraint. In this way, Thomas supposes that dark fantastic conventions are bugs and not features in the design of science fiction and fantasy. And so the mission of *The Dark Fantastic* appears to be the pursuit of a sort of natural equilibrium: releasing the genre from its restrictive racial politics, thus emancipating both the reader and the genre from the ghostly chains of racial slavery. The argument advanced here is simply that no such natural equilibrium exists. The future-orientedness of Thomas' project allows time for experimentation and transformation –

sufficient opportunity to square this circle and arrive at a manufactured equilibrium for a reconstituted genre. But for our present, within the gap, the equilibrium between race and fantasy does not come to a rest in the perfectly emancipated position but rather the point of perfect constraint.

In arguing as much, I am observing the intense rule-boundedness of science fictional and fantastical constructions, as the necessary companion to a limitless speculative imaginary (Le Guin; Miéville). The metric of the reader's transportation to the far reaches of the author's imagination lies in the didactic rigor of these texts.¹ Thomas' observation of the impact of dark fantastic genre conventions is only strengthened when we note that the fantasy reader's experience of imaginative escapism is keyed to their observation of certain rules. As the reader of science fiction and fantasy adheres to certain rules and performs certain labors, the paradigm of the text extends the scope of imaginative possibility. As a process that is slow, rule-bound, and still nested in precarity, manumission proves an apt metaphor for the imaginative freedom Black children may experience through their adherence to a rigid generic constraint.

While this rule-boundedness is widespread, *Harry Potter* is among the clearest about its contingencies of entry. Access to magic is not entitled in *Harry Potter*, but reiteratively earned by abiding by the laws of the magical community. Throughout his adventures, Harry faces constant anxiety about this access, knowing that for any of his (numerous) misbehaviors he could be forced back to the nonmagical world; at the end of each book he is forced back nonetheless, so the start of the next might show him again endangering and earning back his access. Hermione is the other central character whose access to the magical world is in similar jeopardy. Though by the novels' focalization we know the matter is never far from Harry's mind, Hermione lays claim to the most succinct and memorable statement on the matter. Early in the first book, after escaping a murderous Cerberus and breaking school rules, she scolds the other characters for having jeopardized her new life at Hogwarts: "We could all have been killed", she tells them, "or worse, expelled" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 162).

Through Harry and Hermione both, the reader's disciplining into fantastical freedom is modeled. With Harry it is through continual brushes with law-enforcement, punishment, and risked expulsion, and with Hermione – more consistent with the reader's own experience – it is through reading and meticulous study. Hermione offers us the clearest glimpse of fantastical manumission's contradictions. Of the series' core trio, she is the most risk-averse and rule-abiding. She is the most diligent in her study and in demonstrating the responsibilities required of magical citizenship. And it is by this same intense disciplining that she becomes the most magically proficient witch of her age, achieving the fantastical freedom of this magical world specifically by abridging the freedoms of her own agency. Rather than the sense of rupture invoked by escape, or the jubilee imagined through emancipation, the example Hermione sets for the reader is more consistent with what

1 Credit to my colleague Nichole Nomura for this framing.

Hartman describes as “the burdened individuality of freedom” (*Scenes*, 115). In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman theorizes the reconstitution of liberal individualism at the moment of race slavery’s abolition, to reconcile the erstwhile category of the slave to the (previously mutually exclusive) category of the citizen. Pedagogy and literature directed toward the freed people emphasized the duties expected of a citizen, rather than the rights guaranteed to them. If there is a model of fantastical freedom to be inferred from Hermione Granger, it is surely this one, in which agency and power is iteratively earned and always at risk of being taken away.

Harry’s, Ron’s, and Hermione’s progression through the series, from childhood to adolescence and adulthood, is most notably a process of political education. This requires us to discern between the fictional structures of governance (represented by the Ministry of Magic) and the more fundamental law governing Rowling’s magical world. Through the latter, which all through the series structures moral and magical desert in this fictional universe, the character system disciplines the protagonists (and the readers) into ethical modes of relation that repeatedly set them at odds with the standing social and legal order. In this way, the series structures a normative mode of being, largely oriented around bravery, empathy, and love, which is the measure of the character’s and reader’s deservingness of the pleasures *Harry Potter* has to offer. This is all to the good, when the characters and readers are construed to be the universal subjects such metaphysical dynamics of ethics and affect orient around – a universalism which, in the time of Rowling’s writing, might generously be called ‘color-blindness’ but by a degree of translation further would always have meant ‘white’. The series’ morality is most notably geared against the wizarding bigotry of blood purity, to which Hermione’s universalized protagonist status is deployed in refutation (Ostry). Hermione is a “mudblood”, a witch of non-magical parentage, and so stands as the narratological center of gravity for the story’s moral regarding the illegitimacy of race-like logics. It was thus predictable, if thematically contrary, that Hermione would be a character with whom young Black readers identified. However, by the logic of her race-like marking-and-then-unmarking, such an identification tastes like fruit from a poisonous tree: as Samira Nadkarni and Deepa Sivarajan observe in more general terms, even to identify with a Hermione imagined as Black is to identify with a Hermione who, in the end, gets to be white (123).

Importantly, Hermione then also serves as a sort of lightning rod for racially identified readings, allowing the overtly anti-racist thematic to obscure the many ways in which *Harry Potter*’s ethical and affective universalism (like all universalisms) rests upon a logic of otherness. Giving the *Harry Potter* fan a type of cover absent from overtly racist genre fiction, the series’ ever-present disapproval of bigotry was nonetheless compatible with the racial Chain of Being implied by the existence of half-giants; of servile house elves, and scheming goblins; of territorial centaurs and warlike merpeople, cordoned into reservations marked by the forest and the lake (Horne). Just as Morrison did in *Playing in the Dark*, our

identification of dark fantastic presences in the make-up of the wizarding world ultimately excavates whiteness, rather than haunted Blackness, in the fantastical imagination. In this way, there is hardly a page of the *Harry Potter* series that does not register as a part of a general project to render racial logics legible within a white imagination. Most notably, the ethical and affective prescriptions habituating the reader offer little-to-no-script for action along these subordinate links on the Chain of Being; rather, they direct the protagonists in correct action in relation to these subordinated beings – most emphatically, directing them to behave as if such subordinations do not exist. For the purposes of this article, it is less important to lodge any particular critique of the symbolic relations Rowling produces than it is to observe the limitation of this literary imagination: that its thematic blend of universalism and multiculturalism is necessarily bounded by Rowling’s imaginative wingspan, reaching from her own centered subject position.

In considering the 2015 discourse on the Black Hermione, then, two crucial points arise. First, to the degree that the ‘truth’ of *Harry Potter*’s wizarding world is tethered to the authority of Rowling’s imagination, its capacity to be representative of a diverse fan constituency is necessarily constrained by Rowling’s own ability to imagine them. Second, fans’ investments in the representativity of Rowling’s cast of characters reflects their desire to reconcile their difference within Rowling’s universal, a melancholic incentive to identify with the novel so as to believe that it identifies with them in turn. In attending to the 2015 discourse which first spectacularized the Black Hermione, we can therefore extrapolate the terms by which Rowling’s explicit engagement with the fantasy structured fans’ continued indulgence in it. From there, we may consider whether, under those constraints, it remains a fantasy at all.

FANDOM’S BABY, J.K.’S MAYBE

In February 2015, a BuzzFeed article titled “What a ‘Racebent’ Hermione Granger Really Represents” first raised the notion of a Black Hermione to a popular audience. Previously the province of a subculture within the *Harry Potter* fandom – a niche within a niche – imaginations of a Black Hermione assumed a temporary virality, likely informing the announcement made that fall that the Black South African actress Noma Dumezweni had been cast to play Hermione in J.K. Rowling’s new *Harry Potter* stage play. Now elevated to the level of popular contention, the ensuing flare-up surrounding Hermione’s race brought the nature of different parties’ investments briefly to light. A clamor of racist outrage from one segment of *Harry Potter* fandom prompted J.K. Rowling to defend the casting decision and affirm the vision of Hermione as Black (Ratcliffe). Rowling went so far as to tweet the following: “Canon: brown eyes, frizzy hair and very clever. White skin was never specified. Rowling loves Black Hermione 🍌”. The tweet was read as Rowling contradicting those fans

who claimed that Hermione Granger was authoritatively written as white. A reprimand to bigots on the Internet, the tweet was taken as the centerpiece of an emergent, multiculturalist consensus in *Harry Potter* fandom.

The full implications of Rowling's contradiction, however, remain unclear. Within the scheme of the *Harry Potter* "canon"– the body of official, authorially sanctioned 'true' information about the book series and its fantasy world – what does it mean for Rowling to "love" the Black Hermione? Many took her contribution to affirm the common sense within fandom and fandom scholarship, that racebending fan interpretations are progressive, protestatory, and politically recuperative acts which transgress the canon on behalf of its fans (Connor n.p.). As a contributor to *The Guardian* asserted two days after the tweet, this racebending triumph means that "Hermione is not white, or mixed-race, or any other ethnicity. Hermione is a blank canvas for the reader to draw upon, to project themselves on, to reflect their own appearance if they so wish" (Hawwa n.p.).

This is the consensus affirmed in the coda to *The Dark Fantastic*, when Thomas names the counterstory of a racebent Hermione as an example of the emancipatory Black fantastic in action, an expression of fan communities' agency in the face of a slow-to-change culture industry (154-6). Consistent with the foundational precepts of fandom studies, the transgressive potential of racebending was thought to translate consumer frustration with cultural artifacts into the culturally productive first step in an already assumed telos of repair (Coppa; Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*). But the vectors of protest and triumph get crossed here, with the racist mob supplying an easy antagonist for this multiculturalist consensus to form against. Rowling's denunciation of the mob distracts from the fact that whatever protestatory politic inheres in racebending must necessarily be directed against Rowling herself, making Rowling's sanction of the same anathema. That is, if racebending is a corrective protest against the absence of adequate representation, the protest is lodged against the means of cultural production by which Rowling is empowered, and of which she is a part. Rather than assimilating this episode into the conventional understanding of racebending, we might instead understand Rowling's tweet and the popular response as being arranged around a contradiction, an ideological fissure between the progressive dictates of multicultural representation and the commitments both Rowling and her fans maintain to the authority of her canon.

The determination that imaginations of the Black Hermione were racebent has been inconsistent with the intimate exchange that the Black Hermione is herself the medium of: implicitly, a desire on the part of Black fans to be seen by Rowling and a willingness on Rowling's part to encourage it. This is most clearly understood when we note that early interpretations of Hermione's Blackness were rooted in textual ambiguity, rather than a transgressive statement – most notably from a description in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* wherein Hermione, fresh from summering in the south of France, is described as "very brown" (55). Prior to Dumezweni's casting, representations of the Black Hermione

were primarily trafficked through fan art, a medium which cagily resists interpretation as either a propositional or declarative statement. Fans' speculations about the character's potential to be Black were only branded as racebending after Alanna Bennett's BuzzFeed article brought them to popular attention; and when J.K. Rowling joined the conversation to defend the casting decision, her rejection of the racist fan discourse provided superficial support for the politics a racebending interpretation implies. While the ostensibly anti-racist conclusion to 2015's Black Hermione spectacle would appear like a happy ending, the staging of this exchange reveals a more fundamental concern about fandom's cultural objects and the types of authority and desire that define them. Though first produced by fans themselves, the Black Hermione only outraged and awed *Harry Potter* fans when gathered under the umbrella of Rowling's creative authority. What is there, then, about J.K. Rowling's sanction that seems to activate – or fulfill – the fannish imagination invested in the Black Hermione?

Fan productions of the Black Hermione rooted in textual ambiguity do not repudiate authorial intent but rather coopt it into the conventional logic of the headcanon. A natural consequence of fan communities' collective policing of the canon, the headcanon is a fan's private speculation, which is neither confirmed nor denied by the text and which therefore may be granted the provisional status of a belief. Both the collective practice of affirming a canon and the private practice of indulging a headcanon avow far greater investments in authorial intent than orthodox fandom studies would allow. In guarding against the policing of a fan community, however, the headcanon grounds this investment in a sort of melancholic intimacy with the text and thereby the author. By limiting the headcanon's discursive life to a perpetually partial expression, the fear of its rejection and the longing for it to be embraced stand in balance and may grow in proportion. Rowling's embrace of the Black Hermione is best understood as an embrace of this headcanon's pluralism, in the face of a normatively white policing of the canon.

When read in the greater context of Rowling's public persona and her interactions with fandom, the range of possible commitments intimated by the tweet narrows. Despite affirming pluralistic interpretations, Rowling's sanction nonetheless reasserts the authority of her canon: by listing the non-negotiable traits with which she endowed Hermione and simply allowing that race is not among them. As such, this is both consistent with Rowling's authorial persona and anomalous. She has famously exerted careful control over the texture and population of her magical world, denying others the license to adapt or retailor it (Eligon n.p.). Rowling's control has notably applied to character demography, which she has retroactively diversified through tweets and interviews: for example, she – announced in 2007 that Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore was gay (Smith n.p.; Tosenberger) and stated in 2014 that minor character Anthony Goldstein is Jewish ("J.K. Rowling on Twitter"). These announcements have always operated as if to institute a personalized infallibility doctrine, asserting that Rowling's mandate over the *Harry Potter* universe exceeds the

boundaries of its text. Never before had Rowling's interest in affirming the identities of her fans through representation in her work operated through the preservation of ambiguity or encouragement of the reader's prerogative to imagine.

This is to say, the mechanism of Rowling's *ex post facto* inclusion has always been to make headcanon into canon – or indeed, to write, issue, and authorize her fans' headcanons for them. As Jennifer Duggan observes, “Rowling has spent considerable time and effort cultivating a specific type of fandom – one that bows to her interpretive whims – and quashing dissenting voices and movements” (n.p.), and in so doing, Rowling offers a remarkable demonstration of the investment authorial intent actually holds in the persistence of headcanon, just as headcanon is invested in it. Fundamental to the logic of an ever-expanding franchise is the audience expectation that there remains a hidden truth still longed for, and that the author alone can provide it. Fan service, the practice of including allusions to fan discourse and areas of fan speculation in later installments of a serial form, is frequently a covert acknowledgment of cultural producers' material (and often creative) dependency on the fans' imaginative investments. In Rowling's case, however, the singularity of her extratextual authority appears to come into conflict with the desire, expressed in headcanon, to believe that Hermione is Black – a conflict between the publicity of the author's encouragement and the privacy of the fans' emotional attachments.

Dumezweni's casting certainly registers as such a form of fan service, one that cagily avoids claims upon the canon. As observed in *The Los Angeles Times* four years after Dumezweni's debut in the role, each of the eight other actresses playing Hermione have also been Black, evidencing a casting convention that the play's producers have declined to explicitly confirm (Milvy n.p.). The two clear choices here – to make Blackness a convention of Hermione's casting and to refuse to admit as much – conspire to produce a Hermione who is only Black for three hours at a time, embracing canonical ambiguity with the unique affordances of the dramatic medium. Any further fan service on this front would seem to conflict with Rowling's own investments in the canon as such. Unlike her other pronouncements, the Black Hermione tweet almost disavows Rowling's claimed authority even in exerting its privileges. The description of canon (“brown eyes, frizzy hair and very clever”) conceals her prescriptive power while also revealing an anxiety over it, like the monarch casting power onto the crown and the throne. The passivity of the next sentence maintains this same referent, writing that in the canon “White skin was never specified” as if to deny that she herself never specified it. The third person self-reference in the final sentence makes the dissociation complete.

Based on previous pronouncements, no one can doubt that it would be consistent with Rowling's self-conceived power to write instead: “Rowling *declares* a Black Hermione”. She instead elects for a final sentence that affords her the enlightened political praiseworthiness of “loving” Black Hermione without actually recognizing her; condemning racists for their desire to erase Black Hermione from existence but never committing to the opposite: to do

with Hermione's Blackness what she did with Goldstein's Judaism and Dumbledore's sexuality and actually pronounce it into being. By distancing her voice from her person and therefore her ostensible knowledge of her own intention, Rowling has refused to confirm what she has likewise refused to deny. In the rush to decry the racism of Internet trolls, Rowling thus produces the Black Hermione as a discernible chink in her literary imagination: a point of rupture between Rowling's political motivation to retroactively diversify her character map and the creative and discursive will to actually commit to it.

If we are to regard fandom as an emotionally invested and often melancholic process of call and response, we must take seriously here that by Rowling's handling, Hermione's Blackness is thus bound into canon as an absolute and intractable 'maybe'. Nowhere else in Rowling's canon is such a maybe allowed; for every other detail, from the early adulthood of Minerva McGonagall to the history of plumbing within Hogwarts school, non-specification has never implied indeterminacy. Rather, it has been treated as an occasion for Rowling's continued stewardship of the franchise, either in her expansion projects (Pottermore, "Harry Potter and the Cursed Child", the *Fantastic Beasts* film franchise) or in her regular resolution of queries on Twitter. Discerning fans might note that Rowling has come to resemble the Hogwarts professor she shows the most transparent narratorial disdain for, and like Professor Sybil Trelawney – making endless declarations of arcane knowledge, infatuated with her own authority – her memory only seems to fail her when speaking the truth. As if speaking in the riddle of prophecy, Rowling's declaration that no one can know Hermione's race (even, apparently, Rowling herself) confesses the limit point at which authority and ideology conflict. It is at this point that we find the Black Hermione trapped in her cage of a 'maybe'. In a play upon Hortense Spillers' famous statement on Black womanhood, the Black Hermione has been invented such that she is not here (65).

Reading with our melancholy, we can approach the truth concealed in Rowling's elliptical, amnesiac prophecy. Most straightforwardly, we note that the exceptional form of Rowling's affirmation of Blackness as a possibility, contrapositively returns and reinforces whiteness as Hermione's (now all but guaranteed) certainty. This is certainly a twenty-first-century update to those tactics Morrison identifies as making the canon appear "naturally or inevitably white", but it is no less studious ("Unspeakable Things" 139). But if this 'maybe' marks the limit of a fantasy, we can begin, more indirectly, to imagine what and who the Black Hermione is when unburdened with our demands of her. This is a Black Hermione – from beyond Rowling's boundary, from within our imagination gaps – who we can encounter as a certainty, if we choose to. As a final turn upon the manumissive Black fantastic, with my conclusion I propose we linger seriously with the implications of a Black Hermione and, with her as a companion and critical focalizer, stage a reencounter with the *Harry Potter* series. Such a sustained interrogation requires us to consider what it would take for Hermione to be Black in the world Rowling built her into, and then consider how unprepared – or, worse, prepared – that world was to accommodate her. Crucially, this

critical return does not reject Rowling's authority but insists upon it, does not transform Rowling's world but uncovers it. Morrison remarked: "how compelling is the study of those writers who take responsibility for *all* of the values they bring to their art" (*Playing in the Dark* xiii). Perhaps unwittingly, Rowling's 'maybe' has given us occasion to imagine the full scope of that responsibility, by rereading *Harry Potter* and imagining what the writing of a Black Hermione would require.

TO ENTER THE GAP

Stepping into the gap alongside the Black Hermione invites what Frank Wilderson III describes as "objective vertigo", "the sensation that one is not simply spinning in an otherwise stable environment, [but] that one's environment is perpetually unhinged [...] a life constituted by disorientation" (3). How might Hermione have encountered this wizarding world? What fundamental disorientation must she have endured, as a Black girl dropped within a white woman's racial fantasy? We never see Hermione's vertigo on the page. Though an artifact of Rowling's design, it is not a part of it. But if we were to imagine a chapter, or even a page, composed in that forgotten space of a maybe, what would Hermione say or ask? What would she whisper in a moment alone with Angelina Johnson, Dean Thomas, or us? And what even would there be to say, upon realizing that for all her time at Hogwarts she has not been a student so much as the thing being studied – that surrounding Hermione, in a thicket of irregularly distributed metaphors, has been a long sustaining effort to make sense of *her*?

This tense position as the simultaneous student and subject is what makes the Black Hermione so revealing a travel companion in this return to the wizarding world. Characteristically studious, Hermione knows what she needs to know or she finds it out in order to provide the catalytic information that escalates *Harry Potter*'s plots. But how does she respond when the narrative's unfolding demands that she ignore what is in front of her? What would it mean for Hermione's studiousness to be constituted by a more fundamental refusal to know? Put differently: we know that Hermione has read multiple books on wizarding history before her first day at Hogwarts (*Sorcerer's Stone* 106). We might surmise then that she is conversant in muggle history as well, and that a Black Hermione would be aware (however dimly) of Black people's world historic place within it. At 11 years old, we can allow that the vertigo might not have set in yet – not in a way she is equipped to understand. But how about at 12, when *Chamber of Secrets* introduces mudbloods and enslaved house elves? Thirteen, when *Prisoner of Azkaban* introduces criminalized and vagrant werewolves, 14 when *Goblet of Fire* introduces Death Eater lynch squads and the race science of half-breeds – when, during this process, does Hermione start to cry foul?

The answer, of course, is that she does not. Black or not, Hermione progresses through the *Harry Potter* series the same way: according to the narrative constraints conditioning her. When figured as Black, Hermione assumes the same aspect of manumission and melancholy as those fans who imagine her – collecting the reward narratively afforded to her in exchange for her cooperation. If we allow ourselves that quiet moment with Hermione, both within and beyond the terms set down by the text, we can perhaps imagine what that internal struggle would look like – posing the vertigo to her (and by extension, to ourselves) like a question or a choice.

The series is riddled all throughout with such moments for Harry, whereby some magical contrivance an inner truth is given material (and often climactic) consequence. By contrast, Hermione is given conspicuously few magically mediated occasions for introspection. More often, we are given to understand that Hermione lacks the negative capability called for by such magic, that – in the words of Xenophilius Lovegood – Hermione is “not unintelligent, but painfully limited. Narrow. Close-minded” (*Deathly Hallows* 410). In the context Rowling provides, we understand that Hermione’s weakness is inversely proportional to her strengths, and that her “books and cleverness” are merely good when compared to the virtues of spirit, “friendship and bravery”, which make Harry great (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 287). When we reencounter the text with a Black Hermione in mind, the general opacity of Hermione’s inner life affords an opportunity – the narrative space to imagine the headcanon a Black Hermione might disclose of herself. By way of closing, I take us to a moment in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* that by all rights should have been the climax of Hermione’s arc as heroine: when she, during the series’ culminating battle, plays her equal one-eighth role in sending the villain Lord Voldemort to his grave. By all precedents, the destruction of a horcrux (a dark magical artifact which anchors Voldemort to earthly life) must be precipitated by a moment of profound personal struggle, a temptation that – like Dumbledore, putting on the ring that withered his hand and shortened his life – Hermione could very well give way to. In visiting that unwritten scene and sitting with her through it, we can speculate that our Black Hermione would be confronted with the vertigo of her existence, presented with the racial grief she must ultimately decline to feel. Entering the imagination gap with her, we may then choose to feel differently.

“Where the *hell* have you been?” Harry shouted.

“Chamber of Secrets,” said Ron.

“Chamber – *what?*” said Harry, coming to an unsteady halt before them.

“It was Ron. All Ron’s idea,” said Hermione, and she proceeded to recount with Ron the abridged sequence of events. She allowed Ron to carry the story, letting herself be the hero he thought he saw plunge a basilisk fang into one of Voldemort’s last remaining horcruxes.

She knew this version of the story would grow and become glamorized each time Ron told it. Ron was never able to tell a story without reinhabiting it so thoroughly that he changed it, allowing himself to choose differently and better, becoming braver, if he liked. She was almost amused then, remembering how it irked her when Ron retold the story of their captivity by the merpeople under the lake. Now she was glad to be enshrined in Ron's version of events. This had always been Ron's world, really. Hermione wanted nothing more than to live in it.

But it had not been as he said. When he imitated the hiss and snarl of parseltongue and opened the entrance to the chamber, he had jumped in first and she was not quick to follow. She had read about the Chamber, about Hogwarts, and learned to distrust the omissions. There was too much known and never said about Salazar Slytherin for Hermione to take lightly that this was a Chamber of *Secrets*. She belonged in the world of known things. Knowing that there were exceptions was just another kind of certainty, an acknowledgment of the unknown that allowed it to be cordoned off and excluded. Ron would never think of such consequences, and in truth for people like Ron such consequences did not exist. But too much time had passed and Hermione knew she could not stall much longer. Eventually, she lowered herself into the pipe and let go.

It was like rushing down an endless, slimy, dark slide. She could see more pipes branching off in all directions, but none as large as theirs, which twisted and turned, sloping steeply downward, and she knew that she was falling deeper below the school than even the dungeons. When she at last shot out of the pipe and steadied herself against the slimy stone walls of the Chamber, she was met with a sense of anticlimax. At 12, invasive thoughts of the Chamber's horrors used to creep upon her unbidden, and when Ron and Harry *entered* the Chamber, *returned*, and reported there was nothing so special about it, the thoughts had not gone away. A part of Hermione remained certain that the horrors of the Chamber wouldn't emerge for Harry or for Ron – that they were specifically reserved for *her*. She expected she might be able to tell when the very architecture hated her, but arrived here now, the Chamber of Secrets really seemed to only be made of bricks. All the difference between this hall and the ones leading to the potions classroom was that it seemed to have never been touched by house elves. Whatever in the scenery wanted her gone was bigger and less perceptible than this hidden amphitheater buried beneath the lake.

Ron led her to the tunnel he collapsed, and she cleared it with a wave of her wand before he could strain his back pushing. They came upon the basilisk corpse quickly, sunken now from five years of decay. The anticlimax was angering to her now. Was *this* the sole horror Slytherin left to his heir? The snake's body was mostly hidden by the now-shedded skin it had died in. Her anger felt tinged with hysteria, then terror. The monster charged to kill her was dead. The bigot's chamber abandoned. Voldemort and his army still laid siege on the castle several thousand feet above her head, but down here the simple obsolescence of their hate had filled the cavern with a heavy earthen stink, and all the urgency of the

moment seemed to flee from Hermione. Life and death struggles in this world somehow lacked the gravity of those she'd read about before she turned eleven. And the emptiness of the Chamber terrified and infuriated her.

Now walking up to the monster's rat-eaten skull, she remembered the day it came to kill her for her muggle blood and she foiled it with a mirror. Ron had started tugging at its teeth, and Hermione motioned him aside then performed a simple severing charm. A mirror, and now this – such a monumental symbol of her unwelcomeness in this world, so easily defanged.

“Hermione, you've got to stab the cup.” She turned to see that Ron had set Hufflepuff's cup upon the chamber floor. He picked up a nine-inch fang and held it out to her. “You should do it.”

“Me? Why?”

“Well—” Ron gestured around. “Look where we are, Hermione. Look what I'm holding. It's just got to be you, I reckon.” His thoughts had crossed the same territory as Hermione's. Ever since he grasped Dumbledore's message with the deluminator, he was sincere in his belief about this certain kind of magic, about the incalculable power of acts with only single meanings. On these grounds, Ron knew that Hermione had to be the one to hold the basilisk's fang. But Hermione looked at the cup with a certain sadness. The horcrux in Hufflepuff's cup was like the chamber in Hufflepuff's school. She, of any of the founders, had never wished Hermione ill.

“It's your turn. I'll be right here, and you stab it. But be ready – the locket put up a fight. It...well it didn't try to kill me, but it tried to make me kill Harry.” This was news to Hermione, but she had surmised nearly as much. Harry and Ron had declined to tell Hermione what happened when Ron destroyed the locket, so she understood that whatever the locket had done must have shamed Ron. The locket had known Ron well, then. Being seen in his humiliation, and by Harry no less, was always more than Ron could bear. If there was even a small part of Ron that could want Harry dead, Harry *seeing* that part would be the surest way to bring it out.

Ron prompted her again. “Mine had an eye in it, and it made me see things. Just be ready.”

Cornered, she took the fang and bent down on her knees in front of the cup. “Tell me when,” she croaked.

“On three. One...two...three. Stab!”

The moment Hermione raised the fang, ready to plunge it down into the cup's open mouth, a shimmering liquid rushed to the goblet's brim. Prepared for one eye, Hermione had not expected two – and had not expected them to be her own. A crystal-clear reflection sprang from the liquid's surface, and the moment's hesitation caused was all the cup had needed. Time slowed around Hermione. Thinking slow, but moving slower, from the corner of the cup's reflective surface Hermione saw the fang in her hand. Once, she recalled, she

had seen the basilisk it belonged to. Also in the corner of a mirror. It had stalked her, around the bend in a hallway. The ring of the goblet's metal lip resembled the silver frame she'd held that day. As if responding to the memory, the reflection shifted so the chamber tilted behind her, reconfiguring the room according to a more fundamental shape than the one defined by gravity and the floor. Now Ron stood in a line with the fang in her hand, beside the basilisk, just as his sister had been when scared and pale she watched Hermione's muscles turn to stone. But Hermione saw that none of the terror of that moment was reflected here in the liquid's surface. For the second time in her life, she caught the basilisk's gaze from the corner of a mirror, and now it had no power to freeze her. She was the one holding its gaze and its bite in frame. In the reflection, the venomous fang in her hand looked to be dangling eerily above her own neck. With a gentle exertion of will, Hermione *turned*, and Ron, the basilisk, the fang, spun out of view.

No voice issued from the cup, but in the grip of her own gaze understanding arrived to Hermione as if by memory. In the reflection her jaw loosened, and – seeing that she was no longer tense – Hermione unclenched her teeth as well. She could tell from looking at her that the Hermione in the cup knew that there were no surprises left. And if her reflection had known it, then naturally Hermione had already known it as well. After further study of her expression, Hermione was satisfied that she understood the situation. Perhaps with enchantments Helga Hufflepuff cast herself, the cup transported its holder to a place of contemplation. She knew that within the cup she could not be rushed or monitored, that the chamber and basilisk and Ron were all still spinning behind her, and so long as Hermione kept her face turned in time would stand still. If this was the trap of Voldemort's horcrux, it was a poor one: in the deepening crease of that line between her eyes Hermione knew she could leave by simply turning back. But in the quiver of her upper lip she knew that if she returned to destroy the cup and rejoin the battle then this quiet, this simple sovereignty over herself and the truth to be found in that, would never be hers again.

Hermione dealt in knowledge, not in truth, which is why she knew how poorly one substituted for the other. Perhaps if she had found some truth and lived in it, the cup's reflection could not have held her. If she had that anchor of certainty like Harry did whenever he rode a broom or summoned a patronus or decided what he would live or die for, it would mean very little to look away now from her own distressed expression, which was telling her that they had never truly met before. Even five years ago, when she first discovered that her saving grace would be the reflection she saw in the mirror, she kept her eyes in the corners. But now that biggest, earliest thing that had not killed her was rotted and dead at her feet. She had learned to never look at muggle-hatred straight, but now that meant looking forward at her own brown face.

She made a tentative first effort to turn, shifting her gaze slowly leftward. But as she did, she caught a glimmer in the corner of her reflected right eye. Snapping back to center, Hermione found that the reflected light remained – that no matter how narrowly she

focused, her reflection's gaze had somehow widened. She could not see it but her reflection could – in its periphery danced a white and shining figure.

Focused now on the corner of her eye, that reflection became the new center. Each time she looked away it pulled the thing closer into focus. It was her patronus, she could now see, a gleaming white otter, but she had only just concluded as much when it pulsed brighter and pulled her closer. It was not her patronus – it did not waver or flicker, it did not and would not fade. In that way it was nothing like hers, which she had never quite been able to summon properly. No sooner did the thought occur to her than she flinched away from it, and in so doing was drawn yet closer. Yes, this was a patronus she had never summoned, could never summon.

A prickling cold now had Hermione by the neck. She had a sense where this was leading, the way one senses horrors in the dark. She wanted nothing more than to return to true center, find the serenity again of matching herself to her reflection. But the more she searched for it the further she was pulled into the reflection in the corner of her other self's eye. She knew where the patronus was leading her and she wanted a way out. Even she alone was too much witness.

At the center of the otter's crest a speck emerged, just shade duller than the uniform glow, eggshell rather than blinding white. And staring ever inward (Hermione's eyes locked as they rolled, writhing in psychic devil's snare) she saw as it took a shape, with arms and legs and flappy, batlike ears.

It had been a late and sleepless night during her third year at Hogwarts when – reading about patronus charms – a thought had crept in among the books and notes. Like when a dream arrives as the frontal charge of sleep, briefly allowing the false to become the real, this notion joined the ranks of Hermione's meticulously memorized facts.

- Patronuses are expressions of yourself.
- Patronuses are magical projections of creatures, representative of yourself.
- My patronus must be a house elf.

She had shocked herself to wakefulness when she thought it, and shocked herself further when she began to cry. In short order she began to laugh, dismissive, and she never did finish crying about it, even when two years later she was assured that her patronus was a perfectly lovely (regular) creature. Each time she summoned the otter she was relieved, as if concerned this would be the time when she spoke the magic words and the charm at last betrayed her secret. When the otter appeared she could not help but feel like she had carried off a deception. And once that guilt returned the otter would begin to flicker, and within minutes disappear.

She had refused to linger on the thought after that night, but insisted on knowing everything she could about house elves. A meticulous inventory of wizarding knowledge regarding the poor creatures would dispel her of these notions, she believed, setting the elves in their corner of reality like butterflies pinned to a board. Advocacy for house elf

rights had become a natural extension of this – anger stoked by learning what *her* race had done to *theirs*. The more she researched, the more her outrage grew and protected her. Written out of all the major wizarding histories, their magics and traditions afforded none of the consideration given to goblins or centaurs, the elves barely appeared on a single shelf in the Hogwarts library. Only one book had attended to them as fully their own subject, and Hermione had needed a note to go find it in the restricted section. Hagrid had signed the slip with a hollow sort of sadness in his eyes, and Hermione guessed the reason when she found the same-authored text on giant anatomy, shelved directly beside her quarry. She had closed that book almost as soon as she had opened it, shocked by the moving diagrams sketched on many of its pages. But the book on house-elf breeding was no better. Its introduction observed that their floppy ears and enlarged eyes developed in much the way puppy dogs had diverged from wolves. Tears welled when Hermione crossed passages on “gelding” and the advantage of keeping “capon elves.” The appendix included instructions for the taxidermic preservation of their heads.

Remembering this, not able to *not* remember it, Hermione’s gaze at last relaxed, having fully seen now the crouching elf contained within the otter’s glowing chest. Like a deep exhale, Hermione turned again to see her own face, now with nothing reflected in her eye. But in this slackened state of mind the reflection itself seemed to lose its shape, as if the reflective liquid which filled the cup had begun to ripple. She felt tears welling in her eyes.

The elf was out of sight like the basilisk now – just another thing to be seen at the edge of a mirror. There was order to this place, she began to understand. There was side-eye and center, and she had to use them to keep herself in view. The corners here were gazing at her, every angle another mirror and a different face to match in it. She knew they were there and needed to know that, so she would keep her eyes facing forward. Brown eyes, frizzy hair. Cleverness, and books. Dark skin, but somehow lighter than both her parents. She had read that was possible. Her parents were muggles – she’d also read about that, also possible but no one knew why. Some said it was dirty – her dark parents were dirty – no, they were *dentists* – but dirty muggle dentists –

It was no longer sufficient to keep looking forward. “Forward” was shifting, as if directions in this place had lost their meaning and whatever was holding Hermione in place was unmoored from the cup now. She followed her reflection as it spun, trying to hold on to her center, but whenever she slipped the corners crept in and refused to recede. Her face changed—in small ways at first. Her wideset nose spread further, then expanded out. Her jawline tapered and shrank. Her skin remained the same, and if anything her curls became tighter, splaying topsy-turvy around her now floppy ears. She had never seen a Black house elf before, had never imagined that one could ever exist. Looking at herself now she understood why. It simply could not be believed. The thing before her would bankrupt this world, disallow her from continuing to live within it. The fates of mudbloods and house elves could not concern her, truly – not when the world itself was in error.

Spun into the far corners of her line of sight, Hermione did not need to turn away from the cup anymore – she simply allowed it to finish turning away from her. It was her remaining option for relegating the blackened elf face back to the side of her eye. Returned to the chamber, aware that she never left, she felt the basilisk fang in her hand again. Tepidly, without conviction, she brought it down to sink into the liquid of the cup. She did not press hard enough even to dent the metal at the bottom of the cup, but pressure released the venom in the fang and it spread crackling through the substance contained within. Distantly, Hermione registered a shrieking sound. The cup shook and warped as the venom burned all through it. Ron was then cheering, and hugging her. So far as he could tell Hermione had not hesitated, had not even blinked.

By the time they made it back to Harry, Hermione had reassembled some of her composure. *Cruelty to elves*, she reminded herself. *Violence to muggle-borns*. *The so-called purity of blood*. Explosions shook the castle, and already they passed bodies on the floor. She had no idea how long she might have stayed in the cup if she were able. But here again, now, Hermione found that the flow of this world had current enough to carry her. Ron was already done with their story and Harry had moved on to the diadem – Hermione even smiled to think how classic it was of these boys, to pass it all over so quickly. *The emotional range of a teaspoon*, she remembered absently. Ron really should have been the one to take on the cup.

Hermione barely processed the rush of interactions that came next, as Ginny, Tonks, and Augusta Longbottom rushed into the scene and just as quickly out again. Then Ron, apparently unprompted, shouted. “Hang on a moment! We’ve forgotten someone!”

He looked to Hermione, just the slightest note of appeal in his voice, and a preemptive self-satisfaction in his eyes. Hermione looked back. Unlike in the Chamber, she was *now* aware of that sort of unspeakable magic binding her choices in this moment to destiny. More than when Ron would later propose, more than on their wedding day exchanging vows, she understood that Ron right now was offering her a certain kind of shared life, if she would accept it. “Who?” she asked.

“The house-elves, they’ll all be down in the kitchen, won’t they?”

The brittleness of this world was at last plain to Hermione – she felt it, now, how easily it could all crumble based on any number of choices she might make. She could stomp down hard and all of Hogwarts would fall. “You mean we ought to get them fighting?” asked Harry.

“No,” said Ron seriously, looking surprised at Hermione that he had to explain this. The magic of the moment was splintering. “I mean we should tell them to get out.” The choice was at last before her, whether Hermione could live in this world or live without it. “We don’t want any more Dobbies, do we?” She allowed the magic in. It propelled her forward. “We can’t order them to die for us--”

There was a clatter as the basilisk fangs cascaded out of Hermione’s arms. Running at Ron, she flung them around his neck and kissed him full on the mouth.

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Ben, Charlotte, and Neomi are the very best friends. Lydia holds my joy close at hand.

Since I was six years old, friends, family, and strangers on the Internet could have told you that I would someday be a *Harry Potter* scholar. I am both happy and sorry to now be proving them right.

Note: since this essay was written and prepared for publication, the University Press of Mississippi has released a new volume of essays titled *Harry Potter and the Other*. This volume contains many essays pertinent to the subjects addressed in my article, including three on the Black Hermione. Though I was not able to respond to their interventions here, I am very happy to be joining them in this growing conversation.

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