

Young Adult Literature for Black Lives:

Critical and Storytelling Traditions from the African Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

Academic criticism of Black African and African diaspora literature, media, and culture for youth and young adults has heretofore been largely out of the hands of scholars of African descent. This mirrors the fact that until recently, and in many cases still, people of African descent have not been in control of our stories, our images, or our presence outside of our own spaces. This reclamatory essay traces traditions of research and criticism of African diaspora young adult literature in four regions (US, UK, Caribbean, Africa), with an emphasis on key scholars and critics as well as notable authors from each area. While most work in the field has centred on United States scholarship and texts, there are promising developments occurring in other regions, from recently shuttered journals such as the Caribbean magazine *Anansesem* and *Sankofa: A Journal of African Children's and Young Adult Literature*, to the REIYL (Researchers Exploring Inclusive Youth Literature) conference in the United Kingdom in 2019. The article concludes with a clarion call to the field, delineating the

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urgency of supporting further research and criticism by Black and African scholars in the future.

INTRODUCTION

As I write these words, our species and the planet that sustains us are embroiled in crisis. We are entering the eighth month of a global pandemic that has infected millions and taken hundreds of thousands of human lives. We are facing economic recession. Millions are out of work, and millions more do not have the sustenance that they need to eat, drink, and live. The rise of nationalist authoritarianism threatens to break down the post-Cold War international community. Although we have entered the third decade of the twenty-first century, antiblackness continues apace, as it has for the long centuries since the inception of the transatlantic slave trade, and the imbuing of African heritage with permanent underclass status. Despite the United Nations declaring 2015-2024 as the International Decade for People of African Descent, slave markets are operating in Libya, the Mediterranean is filled with the bodies of refugees, the United Kingdom has threatened the elders of the Windrush generation with deportation, China and South Korea are unapologetic about blackface in their media, and the United States continues apace with its extrajudicial police murders of its Black citizenry. Such persistent and totalizing oppression seems inescapable, and demonstrates the critical need for storytelling traditions from around the African Diaspora – a tradition concerned with narrating and humanizing Black lives.

Stories matter. Who gets to tell stories, how many, when, and under what circumstances, and how the stories that we tell each other shape discourses, minds, the imagination, and entire worlds. Some stories, if told often enough, can become the *sine qua non* of a person, a group, a nation, or an entire race of more than one billion human beings, numbering more than one-seventh of our species, *Homo sapiens*. Storytelling from Black perspectives could not be more important. Stories sustain us through oppression, transmit our ancient and precious traditions through all kinds of adversity, and create palimpsests with traces just beyond our fingertips. Stories that move beyond the shadows to become known across the world are always connected to power, positioning, and privilege.

Stories have been, and continue to be, vehicles for both racism and antiracism; for both celebrating Blackness and participating in antiblackness. Black authors have long reflected on these profound stakes for their stories. As Virginia Hamilton observed in her 1986 essay “On Being a Black Writer in America”:

My view is that black people in America are an oppressed people and therefore politicized. All of my young characters live within a fictional social order and it is largely a black social order, as is the case in real life. For a score of years I've attempted

a certain form and content to express black literature as American literature and to perpetuate a pedigree of American black literature for the young. “If a race has no history, if it has no worthwhile tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world and it stands in danger of being exterminated.” So goes the warning given by the Afro American historian, Carter Woodson. The truth of that statement has been made chillingly clear. Whenever individuals are denigrated because of their ideas, color, religion, speech and further, because they are poor and deprived, and black, you can be sure those individuals are in danger of becoming non-beings and less than human. (16-17)

It must be noted that academic criticism of Black African and African diaspora literature, media, and culture for youth and young adults has heretofore been largely out of the hands of scholars of African descent. This mirrors the fact that until recently, and in many cases still, we have not been in control of our stories, our images, or our presence outside of our own spaces. This is by no means a critique of White scholars committed to both the criticism of Black children’s texts and the mentoring of Black scholars – Donnarae MacCann in the twentieth century, and Katharine Capshaw in the early twenty-first immediately come to mind. Additionally, Clare Bradford, Roderick McGillis, Perry Nodelman, Karen Sands-O’Connor, and others have provided important scholarly foundations for the study of race, racism, and postcoloniality in children’s literature. Much of this work can be – and should be – extended for the study of young adult fiction, which all too often does not take race into account, treating adolescence as a universal stage of human development independent of social contexts and cultural differences. Thus, those who have explicitly brought race into children’s literary criticism must be acknowledged.

In this birds’ eye view essay, I will: 1) trace traditions of research and criticism of African diaspora young adult literature in four regions (US, UK, Caribbean, Africa); 2) briefly narrate the present moment; and 3) conclude by delineating new and pressing areas for further research and criticism in the future.

UNITED STATES: FROM *THE BROWNIES’ BOOK* TO THE #BLACKLIVESMATTER ERA

The origin of Black young adult literature is inseparable from the study of Black children’s literature, media, and culture. One hundred years ago, W.E.B. DuBois, Jessie Fauset, and Augustus Granville Dill published *The Brownies’ Book* (1920-1921), the first magazine for Black children and youth with a national reach. There are several planned and forthcoming publications commemorating this milestone, including a special edition of *The Lion and the Unicorn* edited by Capshaw and Michelle H. Martin (2019), a special issue of *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* edited by Freeden Blume Oeur, and a centennial edited

collection by Dianne Johnson-Feelings and Jonda McNair. At the time of *The Brownies' Book*, current definitions of adolescence were only just emerging, and certainly did not include Black youth and young adulthood (Kett 355). It is unsurprising that adolescence emerged as a category during the rise of the eugenics movement and during the nadir period of race relations in the United States. G. Stanley Hall, the author of the groundbreaking 1904 text *Adolescence*, held views that were racist, antisemitic, and eugenicist. Most early theories of adolescence privileged the experiences of middle-class White boys as the nation transitioned from rurality to an urban and industrialized economy in the decades after the Civil War. The idea that Black young people were part of the extension of childhood that this economic and social change would precipitate was beyond the imagination of the first child and adolescent psychologists. Indeed, there was great difficulty in imagining that Black teens were not adults, at a time when Black adulthood itself was contested.

The adultification of Black children and teens has been documented recently by a number of emerging scholars of adolescent literature, including Stephanie Toliver in her thorough analysis of the character of Rue in *The Hunger Games*. I examined the narrative journey of the same character in *The Dark Fantastic* to demonstrate the ways that Black childhood innocence has long been contested, from the cruelty of the slave trade (Wilma King's *Stolen Childhood* traces this horror), to the trending hashtags of stolen Black child and teen life: #AiyanaStanleyJones, #MichaelBrown, #TamirRice. Christina Sharpe further extends our understanding of Black child and youth adultification in her tour de force account of the permanence of Black suffering in the Atlantic world, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*: "I am thinking of blackness' signifying surplus: the ways that meaning slides, signification slips, when words like girl, mother, and body abut blackness" (80). Black adolescence as both category and lived experience is clouded in the United States by this troubled signification.

Despite these challenges, a number of key Black scholars of literature for young people have emerged. The majority – Rudine Sims Bishop, Pauletta Bracy, Capshaw, Brigitte Fielder, Johnson-Feelings, Violet J. Harris, Martin, MacCann, McNair, Althea Tait, Nancy Tolson, Cynthia Tyson, and Nazera Sadiq Wright, just to name some of the most notable – are most keenly focused on children's literature, but some have also contributed much to our nascent understanding of Black YA literature and media. A major scholar whose career has primarily focused on Black YA and its creators is KaaVonnia Hinton, co-author of the textbook *Young Adult Literature: Exploration, Evaluation, and Appreciation* with Katherine Bucher. Hinton attends carefully to the tradition formed within the past fifty years by Black US authors, using textual analysis, historical criticism, and author interviews. Her work ranges from providing an important historicization of the genre, examining the centrality of the aftermath of enslavement, to a critical examination of the role of the United States South in the works of Rita Williams-Garcia. Hinton's scholarship does much to shed light on the substantive tradition of Black young adult literature.

Moving from English literary studies to education, Wanda Brooks and McNair are educational researchers of Black young adult literature whose joint scholarship on reader response and textual criticism has appeared in a wide range of top journals. Their edited volume, *Embracing, Evaluating, and Examining African American Children's and Young Adult Literature*, provides a snapshot of Black children's literature studies at the end of the 2000s. Importantly, their 2015 article, "Expanding the Canon: Classic African American Young Adult Literature", points to the marginalization of even well-known Black young adult authors within the field:

In our effort to identify classic African American young adult literature, we knowingly push the boundaries related to the identification of these books. While we do not argue against the notion of a classic, we regrettably contend that a number of classic books written about diverse groups (like those presented in this article) remain ignored. [...]

Teachers or librarians who maintain the typical view of a classic, knowingly or perhaps unknowingly, participate in perpetuating a narrow view of a literary classic that arguably sends subtle messages to young people about whose stories remain worth telling. (22)

Shanetia P. Clark echoes Brooks and McNair's concerns about the canonicity of Black YA in her chapter within a new multivolume series she is co-editing with Steven Bickmore, *On the Shoulders of Giants: African American Authors of Young Adult Literature*:

The themes and critical foundations of the pillars of YA literature center around identity and agency. The forefathers and foremothers of YA literature, the ones discussed in this book, sought to make visible the humanity and culture of African American youth, across a variety of time periods and places.

To invite a critical reading of literature for young people, educators must acknowledge the importance of gaining access to texts written by African American authors and illustrators [...] The literature created by the authors in this collection acknowledges the importance of their voices on behalf of their readers, both young and old. (Clark 26)

Bickmore and Clark's first volume in their three-book series focuses on four authors that they consider to be the founders of contemporary Black young adult fiction: Walter Dean Myers, Virginia Hamilton, Julius Lester, and Mildred D. Taylor. All four authors emerged during and after the crucible of the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements, were buoyed by the efforts of

activist groups like the essential Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC), and won multiple awards during their half-century careers. All but Taylor are ancestors at the time of this writing: Taylor's sequel to her classic Logan trilogy, *All the Days Past, All the Days to Come*, was published in early 2020. All four authors also wrote for children, as the category of young adult literature was much more nebulous in the past. The next two volumes of the series, which will focus on second wave YA authors like Jacqueline Woodson and Williams-Garcia, and finally on third wave authors like Angie Thomas, Renee Watson, Kwame Alexander, and Jason Reynolds, are highly anticipated.

Black young adult literature has come a long way since a youthful Langston Hughes published his first poem in *The Brownies' Book* a century ago. However, there is also a long journey ahead. Despite the strides made over the past decade by advocacy groups such as the Brown Bookshelf and We Need Diverse Books, the University of Wisconsin's Cooperative Children's Book Center continues to document the inequities faced by Black young adult literature creators, year after year (Tyner n.p.). The hypervisibility of Black life in the United States during the digital age, especially Black elites like former US President Barack Obama, media mogul Oprah Winfrey, and superstar entertainer Beyoncé Knowles-Carter obscures the real conditions of existence for everyday Black Americans who are not multimillionaires. Black authors and other creators are underrepresented in publishing, and Black scholars, critics, and reviewers who dedicate their careers to the promotion of Black YA are underrepresented in colleges and universities as well as in libraries and media outlets. Great strides have been made toward representing the lives of Black youth and young adults in literature published in the United States since DuBois, Fauset, and Dill's first magazine appeared, but the struggle continues.

CARIBBEAN AND WEST INDIAN CONTEXTS ON THEIR OWN TERMS: BEYOND IMMIGRANT PERSPECTIVES

As this is the inaugural issue of a new international journal in the field, at this point, I wish to observe that Black young adult literature is not limited to the United States. Black teens and young adults, as well as their families, communities, school settings, and social worlds appear in youth texts around the globe. However, once one moves beyond the United States, excavating the terrain becomes complicated. Part of the challenge is my own positionality as a Black American scholar working at an elite university in the US; our own pressing and persistent racial tensions and conflicts serve as a proverbial boiling-over pot on the stoves of our minds and imaginations. While many of us recognize the need to decenter the States across fields, those of us working on race and Black issues here are constantly barraged with the fierce urgency of contemporary events, the profound responsibility handed down to us by ancestors and elders who fought until their last breaths to strive toward justice and

liberation (for ourselves, our people, and all humanity), as well as the distinct challenges of Black embodiment and life on this continent.

However, Black lives are not only contested in the United States. Our siblings in the Caribbean (also known as the West Indies), especially those of African descent, are also the inheritors of the great and terrible afterlife of the transatlantic slave trade. They are also part of the ruptures caused by the forward motion of ancestors who passed through the Door of No Return, who endured the hold of the slave ships, the auction block, and the long centuries toiling in the plantations of a hemisphere whose original inhabitants were divested of their lands. While my most recently enslaved ancestors labored in the lands of the great Native nations who would come to be known as the Five Civilized Tribes – Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek (Muscogee), and Seminole – the ancestors of Caribbean slavery descendants were subjected to sugar plantations carved from the homes of the Taíno, Carib, Igneri, and Ciguayo. People from West and Central Africa, and later India and Southeast Asia, were brought to the Caribbean to toil in bondage, and enslaved people who were eventually taken and sold in the British North American colonies were ‘seasoned’ there. The Haitian revolution at the dawn of the nineteenth century, British manumission in the 1830s, the US Civil War in the early 1860s, the liberation of Cuba in 1888, the annexation of Puerto Rico in 1898, and the US occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 all brought waves of Black Caribbean people to the United States – and that is not even considering immigration between islands, to Canada and the nearby nations of Latin America, to former imperial centers in Europe like the United Kingdom and France, and around the world.

In *Soon Come Home to This Island: West Indians in British Children’s Literature*, Sands-O’Connor notes in her preface the importance of considering Caribbean children’s literature apart from contexts where authors immigrated:

By not taking into account the children’s literature about the West Indies, we also lose a literature that, from an artistic point of view, is imbued with the rhythms and cadences of people from around the world; Europeans, Africans, Asians, and Amerinidians all came together in the West Indies as in no other place in the world, and each group has contributed uniquely to the literature that is set in or written by people of those islands. (xvi)

The number of Black Caribbean adolescent books is, as Sands-O’Connor and others note, limited. Complicating matters is the fact that many notable Caribbean authors of color publish their work in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, and get counted in those nation’s statistics for Black, Asian, Latinx, and/or Muslim children’s and young adult books. Award-winning, stellar talents like Elizabeth Acevedo, Tracey Baptiste, Kacen Callender, Rosa Guy, and Ibi Zoboi in the United States, Zetta Elliott, Nalo Hopkinson, and Nadia L. Hohn in Canada, and Malorie Blackman, Patrice Lawrence, and Benjamin

Zephaniah in the United Kingdom all have family roots in the islands. Their stories, poetry, and careers have been shaped by rich histories, heritages, and present-day cultures that have contributed much to the literary landscape. Yet there is a dearth of scholarship on their work from Caribbean perspectives. Ruth McKoy Lowery and Marilisa Jiménez Garcia are two of the exceptions that prove this rule.

Anansesem: The Caribbean Children's and Young Adult Literature Magazine has been a welcome addition in the field. From September 2010 through May 2019, founding editor-in-chief and director Summer Edward, managing editor Emily Aguiló-Pérez, associate editor Kelsi Farrington, and art editor Colin Bootman produced a fantastic publication that featured stories, art, reviews, and criticism from voices around the Caribbean and its diasporas. While some of *Anansesem's* content considered issues of race, all Caribbean cultural contexts were foregrounded – Sujei Lugo Vazquez's special issue on Puerto Rican children's and young adult literature comes to mind. This incredible resource was recently shuttered during the Covid-19 crisis, which is unfortunate, for there is not much in young adult literature criticism that is like it. Given the incredible importance of scholars with Caribbean heritage to the humanities, academic criticism of young adult literature from international perspectives would do well to preserve and extend the work of outlets like *Anansesem*. Until then, the rich tradition of Black Caribbean storytelling for youth and young adults, and other ethnic and national storying traditions of the Caribbean, will remain overshadowed.

UNITED KINGDOM: WHERE ARE THE BLACK VOICES IN THE BIRTHPLACE OF LITERATURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?

The birthplace and homeland of English language literature for young people is the United Kingdom, inheritor nation of the British Empire. As Edward Said famously stated in *Culture and Imperialism*, “[w]ithout empire [...] there is no European novel as we know it, and indeed if we study the impulses giving rise to it, we shall see the far from accidental convergence between the patterns of narrative authority constitutive of the novel on the one hand, and, on the other, a complex ideological configuration underlying the tendency to imperialism” (70). The 2017 and 2018 Reflecting Realities reports from the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education show that the numbers of books by UK publishers featuring BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) characters does not reflect their percentage of the population. While there is a rich and growing postcolonial criticism of British children's and young adult literature, there are few Black authors and illustrators, and even fewer academic critics. Seventy years after the Windrush generation, and centuries after the first Africans arrived in London, critical perspectives on contemporary Black British young adult literature are necessary and long overdue.

Recently, there have been some promising developments. In August 2019, REIYL (Researchers Exploring Inclusive Youth Literature) held its inaugural conference at the Scottish Youth Theatre in Glasgow. Keynote speakers included Darren Chetty of University College London's Institute of Education. Founded by doctoral students Breanna McDaniel at the University of Cambridge and Josh Simpson at Strathclyde University, REIYL grew out of McDaniel and Simpson's concerns about the lack of sustained criticism of BAME children's and young adult literature in the United Kingdom. Their conversations occurred in the wake of the historic tenure of Blackman as British Children's Laureate, the first Black author to hold such a position. Despite the success of Blackman, as well as Lawrence and Zephaniah, the numbers of Black authors lag behind their population in UK society, as recent groundbreaking work from Melanie Ramdarsdan Bold demonstrates. In *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction: Authors of Colour in the United Kingdom*, Bold builds upon parallel movements for diverse young adult literature in the United States to issue a clarion call for action:

There is an under-representation of creative works that reflect the changing nature of British identity and society, and which challenge the notion of a fixed and singular British identity; what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls "the single story" [...] There is also an under-representation of authors of color in Anglo-American publishing. At this juncture, it is important to note that while there are differences in the history of racism, 'race,' and ethnogenesis in the USA and UK, British culture, particularly YA publishing... is influenced by, and infused with, American culture. (5)

Bold has carefully documented the persistence of publishing gaps in the United Kingdom that are analogous to the diversity publishing gap in the United States. In her statistical article, "The Eight Percent Problem", Bold found that there were less than 100 young adult novels published by UK authors of color in the decade between 2006 and 2016:

Authors of colour were not well represented in the British YA market between 2006 and 2016. If we look at the ethnicities of the authors publishing unique titles, we can see that the number of titles written by authors of colour has remained fairly static (i.e. always between 25 and 64 titles per year) from 2006 to 2016. There have also never been more than 100 titles published by authors of colour in any given year (the highest was 64 titles in 2010). Overall, authors of colour wrote 8% of the unique titles. (397)

Bold's work on the landscape of Black British young adult literature within the broader context of BAME literature and media is a welcome addition to previous criticism by Sands-O'Connor and Christine Wilkie-Stibbs. Blackman herself signals the importance of focusing on Black British children's literature. When she was first named as Children's Laureate of the United Kingdom in the spring of 2013, Blackman gave a number of interviews describing her

purpose for writing for children, specifically naming the need for a more diverse and inclusive curriculum in England. One of Blackman's first interviews appeared in the Guardian on the day her historic achievement was announced:

Malorie Blackman, the prize-winning author who has become Britain's first Black children's laureate, believes education secretary Michael Gove's proposed new history curriculum is "dangerous" and risks turning Black and minority ethnic children against education. "It's a mistake to get very inward-looking and say if you're doing history we're going to concentrate on the royals or Winston Churchill," she said of the draft curriculum published earlier this year that focused strongly on Britain. "I understand you need to learn about Henry VIII but when I was young I wanted to learn about something that felt more relevant."

Blackman, whose parents came to Britain from Barbados, said she had spent much of her 20s teaching herself Black history and said if children are not taught about Black historical figures along with heroes such as Lord Nelson, they might be turned off school altogether. "I do feel it's very dangerous if you make it seem like history is the province of a certain segment of society. History should belong to and include all of us. The curriculum needs to appeal to as many children as possible or a number of them could become disenchanted with education because they feel it's not relevant." (Rustin n.p.)

Given her passionate public critique of the ways that history is taught and narrated in the United Kingdom, it is perhaps not surprising that in her most famous work, the *Noughts and Crosses* series (2001-2019), Blackman uses the setting of an alternate universe to twist the "hectic upsets, discontinuities, and ruptures of history" (S. Hall 43). It is to be hoped that a new and rising generation of critics will see that Black British stories for young adults beyond those of its most famous authors are amplified instead of constantly relegated to the shadows.

AFRICA: BEYOND WAKANDAFICATION

In the introduction of her book *Representing Africa in Children's Literature*, scholar Vivian Yenika-Agbaw expresses some of the distinct challenges of cultural authenticity in African children's and young adult literature:

Our political survival depends on the whims of the West; our educational systems are tailored after the Europeans'. Even our art form has evolved to the point where it is hard to tell what is authentic (African) anymore. This would not have mattered if African children were spared the cultural confusion. However, it is not so. They are not only part of different African communities, but they are now members of a global culture susceptible to cultural images from media and other sources, including literature that undermines their heritage in blatant or subtle ways. As concerned individuals try to rectify the situation by filling in gaps with stories about African childhood, they produce books whose cultural content may be questionable. However, because the majority of African children may not have access to these books, they are denied the opportunity to examine these cultural experiences and either agree with the depiction of their culture, or question/challenge inappropriate images of themselves that they may find. They therefore remain marginalized. (xvi)

I quote Yenika-Agbaw at length because, while all African diaspora storytelling traditions have roots in sub-Saharan Africa, most creative and critical voices amplified in the West, and especially in academic spaces, are either descendants of the African continental diaspora, or first- and second-generation African immigrants with access to Western institutions, including publishing. Immediately, one wonders if a truly African indigenous criticism of African young adult literature is yet possible, as Africa as both region and continent is even more diverse and complex than the Caribbean, discussed earlier. The outlets for African scholarship in our field are slim. A case in point is the much-missed peer reviewed journal *Sankofa: A Journal of African Children's and Young Adult Literature*, founded and edited by Meena Khorana, whose scholarship on African children's literature in the 1990s was a vital forerunner of Yenika-Agbaw's. *Sankofa* published my first critical article, "'Everything She Knew': Race, Nation, Language, and Identity in Philip Pullman's *The Broken Bridge*", in 2008, yet much like *Anansesem*, it ceased publication, leaving a huge gap in the field.

Black scholars in the United States and the United Kingdom focus on the persistent marginalization of Black authors and critics. Outside of these contexts, there are other issues. For instance, within African letters, there are distinctions made between those who are working on the continent, and those who have immigrated to the West. Sometimes, especially in recent conversations, these differences are elided. Location matters when we consider which traditions are in the shadows of publishing, and which are amplified. For instance, recently, Caribbean and African writers have been increasingly represented within Black US young adult literature, particularly in speculative fiction, where the very basis of their marginalization – coming from a non-Western home culture – is seen as fodder for fantasy and science fiction worldbuilding. The announcement of Marvel's cinematic adaptation of its *Black Panther* comic sparked a wave of Afrofuturist and Black fantasy young adult literature being signed by major US publishers, for instance (although some African

writers have decried the film: see Teju Cole's essay "On the Blackness of the Panther" as one example of this post-filmic critique).

In my article, "Notes toward a Black Fantastic: Black Atlantic Flights beyond Afrofuturism in Young Adult Literature", I provide an ethnic sampling of recent Black speculative fiction for young adults:

[M]any of today's most notable writers of speculative fiction for youth and young adults are from around the African Diaspora: Nalo Hopkinson, author of *The Chaos*, is Black Canadian, with family roots in the Caribbean; Nnedi Okorafor, author of *Zahrah the Windseeker* and *Akata Witch* is Nigerian American, as is Tomi Adeyemi, author of *Children of Blood and Bone*. Rosa Guy, late author of the fairy tale retelling *My Love, My Love; Or, The Peasant Girl*, which inspired the popular Broadway show *Once On This Island*, was Trinidadian-American. Much like other authors in the postcolonial fantastic tradition, Hopkinson, Okorafor, Adeyemi, and Guy draw from Caribbean and African mythology, folklore, religion, and tradition in their world building. (285)

Recent additions to the authors I've noted above are Jordan Ifueko's *Raybearer*, Roseanne A. Brown's *A Song of Wraiths and Ruin*, and Namina Forna's forthcoming *The Gilded Ones*, to name a few. Award-winning author Okorafor has made distinctions between Afrofuturism, which is rooted in the experiences of Diasporans (including the transatlantic slave trade and continuing oppression in the West), and Africanfuturism, defined by as being "specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West" (n.p.).

In contrast to Marvel's Wakandan kingdom in *Black Panther*, Zamunda in *Coming to America*, and Disney's Africa in *The Lion King*, many Africans and their recent descendants have implored Black Americans, others from around the African Diaspora, and the entire world, to contend with present-day Africa – a living place of diverse peoples, different cultures, and varied concerns, and a continent with as many splendors and challenges as anywhere else in the world. It should be noted that besides the spate of *Black Panther*-like stories, and the stellar career of Okorafor, there are not yet as many young adult novels about contemporary African contexts. Perhaps the growing availability of African cinema, especially Nollywood films streaming worldwide on Netflix, will shift the literary balance from the dangers of overemphasizing the Wakandas and Zamundas of our storied imaginations to the everyday lives of youth on the continent with the youngest population in the world.

CONCLUSION: AND STILL WE RISE

Beyond notable exceptions, the field of young adult literature studies has largely left Black scholars and Black scholarship behind. Here in the United States, one might wonder whether Black critical perspectives are always welcomed, even as (some) Black authors are critically acclaimed, lauded, and (sometimes) awarded. One might wonder if there were Black scholars working on these topics in past generations whose efforts were thwarted, whether by intent or circumstance. After all, Black scholarship in our field sometimes gets compared unfavorably to White and non-Black critics of color doing the same work, weighed in the balance and found wanting. This is curious, especially because our field does not always engage with the latest scholarship in Black feminism, Africana studies, critical race theory, or critical ethnic studies. In education, critical race theory, youth participatory action research (YPAR), and Indigenous methodologies are changing paradigms. In the humanities, Afropessimism is being hotly debated. Young adult literary studies have been mainly absent from these conversations. It is my hope to see innovative scholarship on Black young adult literature, media, and culture, building on the foundational work of the scholars I have noticed in this article.

There is a growing tension among scholars, authors, and other stakeholders who have been in the field for decades, and those who began their careers in the 2010s. On the one hand, Black Millennial authors from around the African diaspora are winning significant publishing deals and are quite vocal on social media. Black Millennial scholars are eager to focus on new texts and new media, celebrating the creativity, activism, and freedom dreams of Black youth and young adults. They have started and amplified hashtags like #WeNeedDiverseBooks and #PublishingPaidMe, been vocal about growing up digital, and express fatigue over traditional Black children's and young adult literature canons of triumph over suffering and racial oppression. On the other, Black scholars and authors who have done the work for decades lament the loss of connection to all that has gone before – I have recommended Children's Literature Association President Karen Chandler's article about foundational Black children's and young adult authors going out of print, "Uncertain Directions in Black Children's Literature", to several writers of my generation.

As we honor our rich history and ensure our young people have stories of the past, we also turn with anticipation toward brighter futures. Over the past millennium, the African continent has lost an incalculable amount of human and material wealth, across sand and sea. We have endured much, from slavery and colonialism, to manumission, emancipation, and independence. Our collective struggle continues, but Black African diasporic imagination endures, and so do the stories first seeded in the flickering shadows beyond humanity's first fires. The creativity of Black storytellers is infinite. Let us honor, publish, and thrill to the stories they have to tell, and let a new generation of those invested in scholarship and criticism of these texts arise.

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