

LEGACY OF ORİSHA: RETHINKING BLACK GIRLHOOD IN SPECULATIVE FICTION

O LEGADO DE ORİSHA: REPENSANDO A JUVENTUDE DE MENINAS NEGRAS NA FICÇÃO ESPECULATIVA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper aims to contextualize Black women authors' work inside the Speculative Fiction genre and to argue on how Tomi Adeyemi's Legacy of Orisha (2018, 2019) is a liberatory piece of art concerning Black girls' representation. Our scope considered Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' (2018, 2019a, 2019b) affirmation that Black girls in imaginative settings are limited and stereotyped as much as in any other literary genre. Correspondingly, we are based on the Dark Fantastic theory established by Thomas, especially focusing on the stage of emancipation where we defend that Adeyemi's books are grounded in Black feminist storytelling. Therefore, first, we address the ways in which qualities of innocence, goodness, beauty, and intimacy relationships are racialized as White in our society — consequently, having effects on the media and literature for the masses. Later, we analyze how the Black girl characters from Legacy of Orisha, mainly the protagonists — Zélie and Amari —, subvert mass media and literature limitations, since they are portrayed as having the qualities previously discussed alongside with their role as heroines. Finally, we assert Legacy of Orisha can contribute to helping us rethink our collective imagination regarding Black girlhood in Speculative Fiction.*

KEYWORDS: *Speculative Fiction; Black women stereotypes; emancipation; Children of Blood and Bone; Children of Virtue and Vengeance.*

RESUMO: *Este artigo tem o objetivo de contextualizar o trabalho de autoras Negras dentro do gênero de Ficção Especulativa e argumentar como O Legado de Orisha (2018, 2019) de Tomi Adeyemi é uma peça de arte libertadora quanto à representação de meninas Negras. Nosso escopo considerou a afirmação de Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2018, 2019a, 2019b) de*

que, em cenários imaginativos, meninas Negras são limitadas e estereotipadas tanto quanto em qualquer outro gênero literário. Correspondentemente, nos baseamos na teoria do Fantástico Escuro¹ estabelecida por Thomas (2018, 2019a, 2019b), especialmente focando no estágio da emancipação, dialogando sobre maneiras em que as qualidades da inocência, bondade, beleza, e também relações íntimas são racializadas como Brancas na nossa sociedade – consequentemente, afetando mídias e a literatura de massas. Posteriormente, analisamos como personagens Negras de *O Legado de Orisha*, primordialmente as protagonistas — Zélie e Amari —, subvertem limitações das mídias e literatura de massa, já que elas são retratadas como detentoras das qualidades discutidas, ao mesmo tempo em que exercem o papel de heroínas. Finalmente, afirmamos que *O Legado de Orisha* pode contribuir para nos ajudar a repensar nosso imaginário coletivo a respeito da juventude de meninas Negras em Ficção Especulativa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ficção Especulativa; estereótipos de mulheres Negras; emancipação; *Filhos de Sangue e Osso*; *Filhos de Virtude e Vingança*.

1 Introduction

The genre of Speculative Fiction is known for its ability to make political commentaries about our world through imaginary alternative possibilities (SCHALK, 2018). As marked by Fernanda Sousa Carvalho (2016) in her doctorate dissertation, Speculative Fiction is an umbrella term referring to the science fiction, fantasy, gothic, and horror genres. African American literature has had, for the most part, both social and political concerns aligned with aesthetic literary construction (GIBSON, 2012). On this note, Carvalho (2016) explores how Black² women writers of Speculative Fiction have had agency to replicate social problems involving race and gender. Moreover, they have been answering the ways Black women are portrayed through mass media and literature.

On this note, the unfinished *Legacy of Orisha* (2018, 2019) trilogy written by Tomi Adeyemi³ — a Nigerian American woman — is one of the most recent works of the Speculative Fiction genre which falls under the African American literary tradition of addressing real life concerns. Adeyemi creates a fantasy setting of Nigeria with all Black characters where the women have an essential voice in the narrative. These characters also represent different kinds

¹ Do termo original *Dark Fantastic* (tradução nossa).

² In this paper, we opted to use capitalized letters to the words Black and White, such as scholar Thomas (2018, 2019a, 2019b) does in her theoretical works.

³ *Legacy of Orisha* is the name of Adeyemi's unfinished trilogy. The first book is called *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), and its sequel is *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* (2019).

of Black women experiences, an important argument against stereotypes and for reaffirmation of the diversity of Black communities. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas classifies Adeyemi's first book as part of the Black Fantastic genre (2019a, p. 285) — a section of the fantastic genre which is written by Black authors with plots centered around Black characters (2019b, p. 145).

The Black Fantastic has been part of the African American tradition in the arts for a long time, preceding the nowadays better-known Afrofuturism — which, according to Grue (2019), can be defined as a fluid storytelling genre of multiple kinds of media, and it establishes dialogues with a number of speculative genres. Therefore, Afrofuturistic works “[re-envision] the past, present, and future in order to show what the Black community does and can look like in imaginative and yet intensely real ways” (GRUE, 2019, p. 2). In the same vein, Black Fantastic “has historically included liberatory, activist artistic production in the face of erasure and marginalization” (THOMAS, 2019a, p. 285).

Nevertheless, Black feminist and scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2000) asserted that the ways Black women are stereotyped, not only in fiction but also in aspects that impact their daily lives, are a component of Black women's oppression. Years later, Thomas' *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* (2019) explores how these representations in mass Speculative Fiction for youth and young adult, mostly stereotyped and caricatured, helped to shape our collective imagination. At this point, it is necessary to highlight that Afrofuturism and the Black Fantastic do not compose mass literature and media — although the popular *Black Panther* (2018) can be classified as Afrofuturistic (STRONG; CHAPLIN, 2019). As a result, Thomas (2018, 2019a, 2019b) formulates the Dark Fantastic cycle theory after finding a narrative pattern for young Black characters inside mass Speculative Fiction literature and media.

The Dark Fantastic theory developed by Thomas (2018, 2019a, 2019b) differs from the Black Fantastic, since the former is based on the pernicious movement Black characters go through, which has four stages. The first stage is the *spectacle*, when the very existence of the Dark Other — a name often used by the scholar in reference to Black characters — is a profound dilemma for the audience. *Hesitation* is the second stage, where there is no escape to this dilemma and it must be reconciled. With this realization, the third stage begins, *violence*, where symbolic and/or actual violence against the Dark Other is inflicted — frequently, resulting in their death. After that, catharsis is attained by the public. Only by going through all these, the fourth stage is formed: the present-absence of the Dark Other keeps *haunting* the story (THOMAS, 2018).

Thomas defends that the only way of breaking the Dark Fantastic cycle is through a fifth liberatory stage, the *emancipation* (2018, p. 6–7), which we are going to tackle further when talking about Tomi Adeyemi's books. Our goal is to show that positive representation of Black girlhood in Speculative Fiction is possible and, as indicated previously, has been happening in Black authors' works such as Adeyemi's. In this manner, the present research contributes to a neglected field in the literary studies in Brazil, and approaches the *Legacy of Orisha* in a new scope in view of their fairly recent publication. The following section describes the theoretical framework and data analyses chosen in this research, and after that, this paper ends with our final remarks.

2 Black girls inside Speculative Fiction and emancipation

The primary focus of *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* (2019) is based on the analysis of Black girl characters. By drawing on the concept of the Dark Fantastic, Thomas (2019b) has been able to show the limited way in which racialized girl characters are portrayed in literary expressions. Following the study, the academic concludes these kind of characters “were interpellated in imagined storyworlds as monstrous, invisible, and always dying. Their frightening fates mirror the realities of imperiled Black girlhoods in the real world” (2019a, p. 283). Then, as noted formerly, this stereotyped and destructive cycle can only be broken in literary expressions through emancipation — that can have two forms.

One form to get emancipation, according to Thomas (2019a, 2019b), is by youth restorying. Throughout her study, the scholar explores how audience takes to digital communication to respond to media production and literary subjects of her research. Furthermore, she argues the public is using social media to give new meanings and interpretations to the stories. They are doing this independently and also in intentionally contradictory ways from authorial intent, thus, restorying narratives. As indicated by Thomas, the other type of emancipation is via Black feminist storytelling⁴ — which is the case of Adeyemi's literature analyzed subsequently (THOMAS, 2019b).

⁴ Similarly, Collins (2000) argues Black women's collective knowledge aimed to oppose oppression have always been produced in a variety of formats, such as poetry and music.

Throughout the book, Thomas (2019b) articulates qualities that often are not assigned to Black girl characters in mass media and literature (not only in the Speculative Fiction genre), and when they are, audience is reluctant to accept it as true. On this matter, the scholar affirms that “[b]reaking this [Dark Fantastic] cycle requires rethinking our assumptions about magical child and teen characters” (THOMAS, 2019a, p. 283). The reason behind this reluctance, as the academic emphasizes, is because the construction of our collective imagination was formed by seeing these qualities racialized as White in literature and media (THOMAS, 2019b). In this manner, *Legacy of Orisha* helps us to rethink our imaginary presenting magical Black characters with the qualities reported by Thomas (2019b), as it will be explored in this study.

While analyzing Suzanne Collins’ character Rue from *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Thomas (2019b) notices how mass public’s imaginary cannot accept a dark-skinned youth as being innocent. Rue falls under the Dark Fantastic cycle; she was never offered the chance for emancipation. Instead, as Thomas (2019b) reasons, Rue had to die so the White protagonist could fulfill her position as heroine. The scholar states that the public’s difficulty to accept innocence in a child or teenager, character or not, that looks like Rue (played in the adaptation by the young mixed-race actress Amandla Stenberg) is rooted in innocence racialized as White (THOMAS, 2019b).

Thomas (2019b) supports her statement referring to Robin Bernstein’s (2011) study, and here the argument is deepened by Priscilla A. Ocen (2015) who traces innocence as part of the social construction of childhood that includes and excludes, at the same time, all Black children and ascribed Black girls with adult-like stereotypes. Ocen (2015) indicates perceptions of childhood and innocence as being guided by positions of race, gender, and class. The academic, additionally, indicates that Black women and girls’ unending sexual exploitations are consequential of leaving Black people out of the conceptions of childhood and innocence — which began during the slavery period and still has effects in their marginalization and how they are perceived by the justice system (OCEN, 2015).

Talking on how reality shapes art forms, Thomas (2019b) indicates how literature is still one of the tools used to disseminate this ideal about innocence and other notions:

The problem occurs when contemporary literature and media for young people include characters of color who are supposed to provide someone for every reader or viewer to identify with — and yet at the same time construct protagonists who are the only characters worth rooting for. Although the initial authorial intent may have been noble, stories constructed in such a fashion have the pernicious effect of normalizing

our existing social hierarchies — including hierarchies of race. (THOMAS, 2019b, p. 59)

These social hierarchies of race are linked with the ones of gender and class when one is addressing women of color, as can be evidenced in many Black feminist works (DAVIS, 1983; COLLINS, 2000; LORDE, 2007; CARNEIRO, 2011; WALKER, 2011; HOOKS, 2015). Wherefore, sketching the history of childhood and innocence as not racially universal, Ocen states that the simultaneous inclusion-exclusion of Black girls from these terms “also reflects the ways in which they have been subject to a process of dehumanization and othering” (2015, p. 1599-1600). The present scholar’s affirmation supports previously mentioned Thomas’ (2019a) statement about the circumstances of characters in fantasy mirroring the reality of Black girls in real life.

Our first take on innocence from *Legacy of Orisha* is an example of how race, gender and class are intertwined. Having a *maji* (people capable of using magic) as her mother and a *kosidán* (people without magical abilities) as her father, Zélie Adebola is a teenager *divîner* (*maji* waiting to be able to use their magic) and one of our protagonists. However, years before the king of *Orisha* killed all the *majis* in a single night — known as the Raid — in which none of them was able to use their power, leaving *divîners* as orphans and without any magic left. Therefore, after the Raid none of the *divîners* are expected to have magic ever again and become more vulnerable to the government’s oppression. In this scenario, the *divîners* and anyone that has any contact with them are obliged to pay increasing taxes to the king and if they are not able to do it, these *divîners* have to work as slaves to the kingdom in order to pay their debts.

Although all characters are Black, it is apparent since the start that Adeyemi uses the fantastic setting she has created as a way to give voice to racist experiences Black people endure via the manner *divîners* and *majis* are positioned in *Orisha*’s society. Following this thought, during the first day of the story, Zélie is sexually assaulted twice by the king’s guards, which we can compare to the abuse of power by the police and brutality in our society that also does not view Black girls as innocent, as already asserted by Ocen (2015). Therefore, the story mirrors our reality and yet, it is also emancipatory as the plot is about bringing magic back to *Orisha* and fighting against discrimination — which justifies Thomas’ (2019a, 2019b) classification of this work outside the Dark Fantastic cycle.

Returning to the topic of innocence, we are going to talk about a young woman character who is murdered by the king after she was forced to touch a magical scroll and then becomes a

maji before his eyes. This happens right in the beginning of our story, years after the Raid and what people trusted to be the end of magic in *Orisha*. The girl's name was Binta, she was the only *divîner* working at the palace at that time, and the only friend of princess Amari — our other woman protagonist, who saw Binta's transformation and subsequent execution from a hiding point. Amari considers that Binta's innocent blood had been spilled in a war against magic which almost everyone, including the king himself, believed was over with the Raid.

Father always taught Inan and me that magic meant our deaths. A dangerous weapon threatening the existence of *Orisha*. As long as it existed, our kingdom would always be at war. In the darkest days following the Raid, magic took hold inside my imagination, a monster without a face. But in Binta's hands, magic is mesmerizing, a wonder like no other. The joy of the summer sun melting into twilight. The very essence and breath of life— Father strikes fast. Quick like lightning. One moment Binta stands. In the next, Father's sword plunges through her chest. *No!* I clasp my hand to my mouth before I can scream, nearly falling onto my back. Nausea rises to my throat. Hot tears sting my eyes. *This isn't happening. The world starts to spin. This isn't real. Binta is safe. She's waiting with a loaf of sweet bread in your room.* But my desperate thoughts do not change the truth. They do not bring back the dead. Scarlet seeps through the scarf binding Binta's mouth. Crimson flowers stain her light blue dress. I choke back another scream as her corpse thuds to the ground, heavy like lead. Blood pools around Binta's innocent face, dyeing her white locks red. Its copper smell wafts through the crack in the door. I stifle a gag. Father yanks off Binta's apron and uses it to clean his sword. Completely at ease. He doesn't care that her blood stains his royal robes. He doesn't see that her blood stains my own hands. (ADEYEMI, 2018, p. 42–43, emphasis in the original)

In the quote above, Amari's thoughts while she sees Binta transitioning from *divîner* to *maji* are interrupted by her father's cold assassination of her friend — a young and innocent girl whose death is only justified by the magical blood with which she was born. This is a changing and decisive moment for Amari and for the story, as Binta's death is the starting point of many subsequent actions that lead to the revolution, which we are going to explore later in this paper. In this manner, we find similarities to innocent Rue's death, as Thomas (2019b) affirms, since this event begins *The Hunger Games* trilogy's revolution as well (the key difference between the two cases is the emancipatory aspect, as already discussed).

During the Raid, Amari and her brother, prince and promised future king Inan, were only children. Hence, they are innocent of the violence their father used in order to achieve his goals at that period. Withal, now Amari is a teenager and chooses to go against her father's ideals in order to do what she believes is right. Zélie and her *kosidán* brother, Tzain, as all other children that lost their parents, have been dealing with the consequences of the Raid. It is by gathering these three innocent teenagers — Amari, Zélie, and Tzain — that *Orisha*'s history tries to rewrite itself.

Goodness is another quality which has been racialized as White, and also composes the group of qualities named as essential by Thomas (2019b). Theresa H. Pfeifer's (2009) study of the linguistic connotations of the colors White and Black proved how the ideology of the former being related to positivity and the latter to negativity is embodied in European languages⁵. This is not a universal truth but is rather part of the Eurocentric binary opposition thought which is racialized by skin color, and responsible for perceiving Black in reverse to White (PFEIFER, 2009; COLLINS, 2000). Hence, "[i]n the dichotomized view of racialized social formations of the White power structure, the concepts of white and black are mutually exclusive. Blackness is only given meaning precisely by its difference in relation to whiteness" (PFEIFER, 2009, p. 534).

Furthermore, Pfeifer (2009) declared this dualistic feature is crucial to the construction of Western racism because it assigns Black and White in a battle of evil and good (2009, p. 539). Consequently, Black characters are not ascribed goodness, as well as other traits that are being discussed in this paper. They have to be the oppositional force of the narrative in mass media and literature (THOMAS, 2018). In possession of the same knowledge of Eurocentric values, Thomas (2018, 2019b) believes the feature of counterbalance with which the Dark Other is positioned in fantastic narratives is what actually guarantees their functionality. Then, giving any of the essential qualities to a Non-White character can be considered transgressive (THOMAS, 2019b).

Taking all of these into consideration, Adeyemi's story provides us with young Black characters who possess goodness, and on this account, she challenges Western racist ideals regarding this quality. Using Thomas' (2019b) words, Adeyemi's work can be perceived as transgressive for ascribing not only goodness to Black characters, but the already discussed innocence and the following qualities which are going to be analyzed in this paper. Centering our investigation in the young women characters, we are able to point out Zélie's goodness is evident during a crucial moment of the narrative. Guided by Mama Agba's teachings of helping those who cannot protect themselves, Zélie goes against her best interest and helps Amari when she has just scaped from the palace stealing the magical scroll.

Zélie does not know Amari is the princess at first, she does not even imagine magic can be brought back as Zélie believes the Gods have abandoned the people of *Orisha* since the Raid.

⁵ Although it is more common the contrary, Pfeifer (2009) asserted Black has not always negative meanings in language and White has not always positive ones, because languages used today predate this Eurocentric ideology.

Zélie recognizes the despair in Amari's eyes and helps her escape the kings' guards, putting herself in a dangerous spotlight for a *divîner*, and Zélie stays at Amari's side even when she has a chance to escape alone. This is the decision which seals Zélie and Amari's fate and their initially reluctant alliance — after her mother's murder in the Raid, Zélie started to despise the royal family of *Orisha*. Adeyemi's Black girls are not the opposing force in the narrative, and as Thomas' (2018, 2019b) theory asserts, they are rather the very ones who drive the narrative forward. Moreover, since we are talking about an emancipatory piece, here, Black youth are the voice and core of the story. Together, these two girl protagonists get magic back to *Orisha* and later continue to fight for a fairer kingdom for all, facts which further advocate in favor of the goodness in them.

In the following passage, Zélie is narrating her inner conflict and successive decision of helping a complete stranger of noble status (it is only after that action that she finds out princess Amari's identity) who is running from the brutal guards of the king. This quotation is important, as it demonstrates that Zélie's choice on helping others is part of her human quality of goodness, it is part of who she is:

For a moment, I can't breathe. The copper-skinned girl shakes with a fear so visceral it leaks into my skin. Shouts grow louder as the guards thunder by, getting closer with each passing second. They can't catch me with this girl. If they do, I'll die. "Let me go," I order, almost as desperate as she is. "No! No, *please*." Tears well in her amber eyes and her grasp tightens. "Please help me! I have done something unforgivable. If they catch me..." Her eyes fill with a terror that is all too familiar. Because when they catch her, it's not a matter of whether she'll die, it's only a question of when: On the spot? Starving in the jails? Or will the guards take turns passing her around? Destroy her from within until she suffocates from grief? *You must protect those who can't defend themselves*. Mama Agba's words from this morning seep into my head. I picture her stern gaze. That is the way of the staff. "I can't," I breathe, but even as the words leave my mouth, I brace myself for the fight. *Dammit*. It doesn't matter if I can help. I won't be able to live with myself if I don't. (ADEYEMI, 2018, p. 58, emphasis in the original)

Both Zélie and Amari are humanized and complex characters, so it is obvious they are not only led by their goodness but also for many other reasons — grieving being the most accentuated of them. As described before, Zélie lost her mom in the Raid and she loses her father by the end of the first book as well. Plus, Amari is firstly compelled after witnessing her best friend's murder by the hands of own father. However, with Amari's decision of helping *divîners* and *majis* and beginning a new path towards change, she not only disrupted the kingdom's structures but also her family's. Amari goes against every member of her family throughout the story: her brother, mother, and father. The following quote is narrated from

Zélie's point of view, and it illustrates the first conversation Amari has with her brother after she stole the magical scroll and Inan has been chasing them with the aim of putting an ending to their objective of bringing magic back:

“Those are Father's words, Inan. His decisions. Not yours. We are our own people. We make our own choices.” “But he's right.” Inan's voice cracks. “If we don't stop magic, Orisha will fall.” His eyes return to me, and I tighten my grip on my staff. *Try it*, I want to bark. I'm done running away. Amari redirects Inan's line of vision, her delicate hands cupping the back of his head. “Father is not the future of Orisha, brother. We are. We stand on the right side of this. You can stand there, too.” (ADEYEMI, 2018, p. 275–276, emphasis in the original)

Carried on by her goodness and her royal duty, she firmly believes in a better society for all of those who live in *Orisha*. Amari tries to persuade her family towards the same goal, as exemplified in the citation above. Nonetheless, she ends up killing her father in order to protect her brother, since Inan is showing signs of having magic powers, which leads the king to mercilessly speed to kill his son. In spite of that, Amari and Inan remain on opposite sides of the war, the latter counting with their mother support — which leaves Amari aligning with people she has been meeting along the way and who have similar, yet not identic, purposes as hers (a fact that can be evidenced in the passage below). And it is within these alliances that Amari explores her newly discovered powers as a *títán* (a new category of people with magical powers created, unintentionally, after the ritual performed by Zélie which connected Orisha once more with the Gods).

“I wouldn't ask if there was another way,” I sigh. “But my mother is bringing buildings down on our heads. I can't keep relying on my sword. It's your duty to fight for the maji, but as queen, I'm responsible for all of them. I have to take care of the *kosidán* who're running scared. The *títán* soldiers Mother's sucking the very life from. I'm responsible for the maji who hate my guts, and I can't help anyone until I have power of my own.” “Amari, no.” Zélie steps forward, softening her tone. “This isn't all on you. It's not your job to save Orisha.” “If I don't, who will?” I ask. “You said it yourself—you don't trust Inan to stick to his word.” I rub my tired eyes, trying to keep my pain locked inside. I think of every life my actions have ruined. Every person who's died because I'm not sitting on Orisha's throne. “I'm the only person fighting for all sides. I can't do that without my magic (...)” (ADEYEMI, 2019, p. 119)

The citation above displays Amari's determination to keep on fighting for her ideals. Now that her father is dead, she believes she can be the queen even after she finds out her brother is still alive (by the end of the first book, it was believed Inan was dead too). Taking all into consideration, Amari believes she is the only one who has the best interest of all the population of *Orisha* in mind and she is willing to fight for all of them with her new magic no

matter what. The information in the quote proves Amari's goodness once more, and Zélie's as well. Even though the two girls do not have the same goals, the continuous support Zélie gives to Amari to help the latter explore her powers advocates for Zélie's goodness. It demonstrates once again that Zélie's goodness guides her more strongly than what she logically believes to be in her best interests, as is exemplified previously with the passage where she meets Amari. Additionally, the two of them keep fighting on the same side of the war until the end of the second book.

In the course of her theoretical book, Thomas (2019b) observes how Black girl characters are commonly denied connections through intimacy in mass media, and even when it happens, the public is ready to respond with reasons why it should not.⁶ Their negative reactions are justified by how the collective imaginary is formed, as it was said previously, and how stereotypes have an important role in maintaining these restricting views. The main traits which the academic points out from the public arguments merge in another set of qualities which Black people are deprived of. The first is beauty, which leads the audience to question one's desirability. Both features help to form mass media and literature stories of romance, especially for youth audience, leading to the question: who deserves to be loved? (THOMAS, 2019b).

Beauty has been racialized as White and propagated with European physical features, penalizing those who do not meet the standard, and that impacts Black women the most (BRYANT, 2013)⁷. To illustrate, artist Ari Lennox received racist comments on social media about her facial features, not for the first time, and started a conversation about valuing Black people's beauty (GUNN, 2020). Unfortunately, this and similar cases are justified by Black women, in particular the ones with darker skin, being at the utmost point from the oppressive European standardization of beauty which only amounts to United States' racism and sexism (BRYANT, 2013). Following this thought, it is not only in fiction that Black women are denied romantic relationships, but White ideals of beauty negatively affect their chances of finding intimacy in real life (BRYANT, 2013; PACHECO, 2013). Besides, in most fiction worlds, women's esteem is directly related to beauty and sex, which can limit and harm teenager girls'

⁶ Also, in the chapter named "The Curious Case of Bonnie Bennet: *The Vampire Diaries* and the Monstrous Contradiction of the Dark Fantastic" Thomas (2019b) discusses pretext creators of mass media used to not invest in romantic relationships for Black girl characters in the first place.

⁷ Bryant (2013) lists the consequences European beauty idealization have on Black women, principally the ones with darker skin, from mental health issues to the difficulty to get better jobs and find romantic partners.

self-perceptions — distinctively Black teens that see damaging media images of both race and gender (GORDON, 2008).

One of the major ways Adeyemi challenges European standards of beauty in her story is by associating Black hair with magic. Although Zélie is described as having white coiled hair as a child — every *divîner* and *maji* possesses white hair as a symbol that they have been touched by the Gods — when the story begins her hair is straight although still white. As already stated, in the years after the Raid, it was believed magic would not come back and Zélie herself thought the Gods had abandoned them. Hence, the lack of magical presence can be supposed as the reason behind Zélie's hair texture altering and it is confirmed throughout the narrative as her hair slowly becomes coiled again. These new changes start after she comes in possession of her powers (and something similar happens to Amari as a *títán* during the second book as the princess hair gets coiler). The connection with magic is confirmed in a dialogue Zélie has with Amari: “‘It's gotten so curly,’ she says, pinning one of my coils back. ‘I think it's the magic. Mama's hair used to be like this.’ ‘It suits you. I'm not even done and you look stunning.’” (ADEYEMI, 2018, p. 371).

In *Legacy of Orisha*, Black women characters are not denied beauty and desirability, but rather the writer explores teen romance in parallel with the main plot as it is common in many Speculative Fiction narratives for youth — such as in Rick Riordan's books and in *The 100* (2014-2020) television show. Moreover, the variety of skin tones complexion Black people have is a major deal within Adeyemi's story. And with this aspect, inside *Orisha*'s society, those who have lighter skin are usually part of higher social positions such as the nobility — reflecting the benefits which Black people who have lighter skin possess in our reality. Even so, the author explores Black beauty that can express itself in more than one form: “Each *maji* shares my white coils. Their rich complexions cover a beautiful spectrum of dark and light browns.” (ADEYEMI, 2019, p. 88).

At the same time, when directing our attention to Black women characters of darker skin, Zélie is the primary case in point, and she is portrayed as beautiful and possessor of more than one romantic interest. While remembering her mother, who had darker skin as well, Zélie compares her to the sun multiple times, as a form to describe her energy and beauty. Correspondingly, that is the word Inan uses to depict Zélie: “She smiles. A beautiful smile. With it, I glimpse the sun. When she turns, I long for that glimpse again, the warmth it spread through my bones.” (ADEYEMI, 2018, p. 362). It is important to avouch, withal, that Adeyemi made sure her Black women characters' esteem was not connected with beauty and sexuality,

but instead their value inside the plot is constructed in sync with these young women's roles as heroines.

Amari's trajectory best exemplifies this idea, for her position as princess inside the palace was filled with restrictions and her appearance was taken in higher regard than her personal interests — whereas, in contrast, the crown prince is presented as leader of the royal guard. In her decision to steal the magical scroll and try to free the *divîners* and *majis* from her father's tyranny, Amari also releases herself from the limitations she had as a princess and begins her path as a heroine. However, Amari's beauty as a royal is something that follows her through her journey as a warrior, and it is noticeable by her facial features. This fact leads Zélie to describe Amari as possessing a “regal face” (ADEYEMI, 2018, p. 75). All we have been discussing so far gives a response to racist standards of beauty. On top of this, Amari represents a Black princess that girls can look up to, standing beside princess Shuri from *Black Panther* (2018) — a film which brought a Black centered Speculative Fiction to mainstream (STRONG; CHAPLIN, 2019).

At present, we are going to indicate a faction of stereotypes arguing for reasons why Black women are regarded as second bests when talking about intimacy in mass fiction (and, hence, in audiences' social imaginary)⁸. As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, Collins (2000) categorized Black women stereotypes as part of their oppression. The stereotypes have transformed through the years and gained new names, but their genesis is found during slavery times and they continue to have the same main characteristics (COLLINS, 2000). To begin with, the Mammy trope is based on the idea of Black women being submissive to the White families they worked for (or that they were enslaved by), being bad mothers to their own children, asexualized, emasculators of Black men and, therefore, having too many features designated as manly to be considered as a woman (COLLINS, 2000). Considering these images, Collins positioned the Mammy as “central to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class” (2000, p. 73).

On the other extreme of the spectrum, the Jezebel trope attributes Black women as possessors of an insatiable sexuality which, additionally, can give them the title of sexual freaks (COLLINS, 2000). This perception contrasts with the womanly attribute of purity, both

⁸ We selected a small group of Black women stereotypes which better serve to exemplify our arguments, even though we recognize there is a larger number of them as studies on this matter show — some of them are cited throughout this paper (DAVIS, 1983; COLLINS, 2000; GORDON, 2008; PFEIFER, 2009; BRYANT, 2013; PACHECO, 2013; HOOKS, 2015; CANDIDO; JÚNIOR, 2019).

concepts racialized as White, that also guarantees White women the status of truly being women (COLLINS, 2000; HOOKS, 2015). For these reasons, Collins asserted that “[i]ronically, Jezebel’s excessive sexual appetite masculinizes her because she desires sex just as a man does. Moreover, Jezebel can also be masculinized and once again deemed ‘freaky’ if she desires sex with other women” (2000, p. 83). Furthermore, the Jezebel trope serves as justification for the sexual abuses Black women suffered in the hands of White men during slavery⁹ (DAVIS, 1983) — narrated in slave narratives such as *Incidents in the life of a slave girl* by abolitionist Harriet Jacobs (COLLINS, 2000). Lastly, the Jezebel image supported the exploitation of enslaved Black women's fertility, seeing them as “breeders”, since their children were considered the slave owners' property who did not require to be bought (COLLINS, 2000; DAVIS, 1983).

It is important to state that Black women stereotypes are not a phenomenon which happens only in the United States, but rather is quite popular in Brazil’s cinematic world as well (CANDIDO; JÚNIOR, 2019). Candido and Júnior (2019) classified seven Black women tropes across the uniqueness of Brazilians’ realities. Nevertheless, we can see similarities between the *empregada* trope and the Mammy trope because, as the scholars assert, the former originated from the latter. Likewise, the *mulata*¹⁰ trope defined by Candido and Júnior (2019) has its essence from hypersexualization just as the Jezebel's. Concerning these last two stereotypes, the key difference is that the *mulata* is a mixed-race woman with lighter skin, and has closer features to the European ideals, thus, she is considered beautiful (CANDIDO; JÚNIOR, 2019). The academics, in addition, indicate that Black women are the least represented group in Brazilian movies among all the characters they have investigated. Withal, Black women characters are almost always of low-class income, stereotyped, and they are rarely positioned in romantic roles (CANDIDO; JÚNIOR, 2019).

Streaming away from mass media and literature, Adeyemi’s young women characters are allowed romantic¹¹ storylines alongside their roles as heroines. Regarding this feature, we

⁹ It is essential to point out sexual exploitation of Black girls and women are part of their lives to this day, and it has dangerous consequences as far as sexual trafficking and the difficulty of the judicial system to see them as victims — which Ocen (2015) partially attributes as consequences of these adult-like and sexualized stereotypes.

¹⁰ It is important to punctuate that many Brazilian Black movements, especially the ones led by Black women, refute the usage of the word *mulata* because of its pejorative meaning and the stereotype linked to it (SILVA, 2018).

¹¹ These romantic moments are mixed between longer action scenes and plots, which fill most pages of the books, since romance is not the center of Adeyemi’s narrative.

are about to analyze how Amari¹² subverts the stereotypes discussed above, including through her relationship with Tzain. Before all else, for being a princess, Amari does not fit in the same social economic class as the one relegated to the Mammy and *empregada* tropes. Then, in the course of the story it is possible to see princess Amari's physical attraction for Tzain and their mutual supportive alliance turn into love by a series of small and greatly meaningful moments. In this manner, Amari is not asexualized nor hypersexualized. Instead, this is a depiction of the reactions and thoughts of a teenager girl as to the body of a teenager boy with whom she will soon fall in love, as much as we can see in any mass media and literature to youth audience — as in the Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy (2011-2013) when the protagonist Tris is in love with Tobias. Besides, it is important to highlight Tzain is Amari's first love and the first guy whose skin under the shirt she ever saw, besides her brother when they were kids, which argues against the character hypersexualization once more:

I lift my head as Nailah claws her way onto the ledge. Tzain follows after, dripping with sweat. He peels off his sleeveless dashiki and I lower my eyes — the last time I saw a boy's bare body my nannies were giving Inan and me baths. A warm flush rises to my cheeks as I realize how far from the palace I've truly come. Though it's not illegal for royals and *kosidán* to consort the way it is for *maji* and *kosidán*, Mother would have Tzain jailed for what he's just done. I scoot away, eager to put more space between Tzain's bare skin and my blushing face (ADEYEMI, 2018, p. 139)

We can observe through the plot Amari's shyness in relation to her feelings about Tzain evolve to a degree of normalization and comfort with her sexuality. Nevertheless, their romantic scenes are not hypersexualized nor explicit, as it can be perceived in the passage below. Additionally, it can be argued that Amari and Tzain's romance, as much as any other romance in the novels, is displayed much more innocently than some Speculative Fiction for mass youth audience, such as *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017). The following extract describes Amari and Tzain dancing at a party the night before a big attack they planned together with other allies:

Tzain laces his fingers with mine and we sway, getting lost in the song. I place my head against his chest, disappearing into the warmth of his arms. "I've missed this." Tzain dips his chin and kisses the top of my head. He places his hands along my waist, making my skin tingle when his thumbs brush a sliver of bare skin. "I have, too," I whisper, closing my eyes. Dancing with him takes me back to the fields of the *divîner* festival, back when it felt like tomorrow was ours. I look up at him and he stares at me with a tenderness I don't deserve. It's then that I realize I don't want to spend

¹² In many ways, Zélie defies these stereotypes too. However, we have chosen to focus this part of the analyses on Amari because her trajectory with Tzain is linear and uncomplicated, which allows us to present our arguments in a clear manner. And dissimilarly, Zélie has a complicated path and relationship with both of her romantic interests, Inan and Rôen.

tonight with prophecies and palm wine. Tonight, I want him. “What’s wrong?” I lace my fingers through his and pull him toward the door. “Come on. Let’s get some air.” (ADEYEMI, 2019, p. 294)

Concerning the trait of the stereotyped women as being too manly to be even viewed as a woman at all and, subsequently, the emasculation of their male partners, again Amari offers a divergent and more positive outlook of Black womanhood and their relationship with men. Because she is a royal, Amari is not socially equal to Tzain. However, this does not diminish his role and importance inside and outside their relationship, it does not emasculate him nor does he look worried with the prospect of Amari becoming the queen. Instead, Tzain demonstrates support towards Amari’s role as queen, which it is demonstrated in the next excerpt when the couple wonder about the future of *Orisha*: “‘Imagine sanctuaries like this across Orisha,’ I whisper to Tzain. ‘Imagine cities built this way.’ ‘When you’re on the throne, we won’t need to imagine anything at all.’” (ADEYEMI, 2019, p. 94).

Furthermore, Tzain is the one person both Amari and Zélie undeniably love and want to protect. Tzain, nonetheless, proves through the books he is able to defend himself, even without magic, and helps to lead in conflictual situations and proves that he is a valuable asset in the revolution. In the beginning of the story, Tzain is presented as a strong athlete, and as the story develops, he gains the title “the Commander” (ADEYEMI, 2018, p. 260) related to his leadership aptitudes. The following excerpt explores Amari and Tzain’s relationship as leaders while being a couple. When Zélie does not agree with the plan, Tzain provides important data to a battle they believe can win the war. Amari comprehends the difficult position he is in, since he has to choose to support his sister’s opinion or his girlfriend’s, and she understandably does not reason for Tzain to take her side (although he ultimately does):

“Tzain!” I wave him over from across the dining hall. He takes a break from loading supplies with Imani, Khani’s twin and our strongest Cancer. “What’s going on?” He looks around the table and I gesture for him to sit down. “None of us have been to Ibadan, but we need a way to get in undetected,” I explain. “Is there anything you know that could help us?” Tzain’s lips part; it’s like a shadow falls over his face when he realizes who’s missing. A bitter taste settles on my tongue. It feels wrong to put him in this position. “If it’s too much—” “You’re trying to win a war.” He holds up his hand. “I’ll do whatever I can to help.” We lock eyes across the table and my skin warms under his gaze. Tzain blows out his cheeks as he stares at the crude maps, searching for a way in. “Here.” (...) (ADEYEMI, 2019, p. 288-289).

Factually, near the end of the second novel, Amari and Tzain’s relationship as a couple comes to an inevitable end when she makes a decision that could end the war but, also, most probably would kill Zélie in the process — which does not invalidate their romantic path and

not stereotyped representation of Black youth teenager love. In addition, the story is not over, as the third and final book of *Legacy of Orisha* is yet to be published, and for this reason Amari and Tzain may still end up together.

When referring to the aspects of the tropes that regard Black women as bad mothers and breeders, both young women protagonists can give responses since they are positioned in a context where they have the choice whether or not to build a family. Zélie states the uplifting image of her parent's marriage multiple times, as well as her mother's role in motherhood. Amari does not have the same image of her family, yet, the princess did escape the impositions of the monarch when she fled the palace. Moreover, there is nothing in the novels which suggests that it is culturally expected to marry young and have babies in the *Orisha* culture — both girls are seventeen years old.

On a last note, Adeyemi's story also provides response to the part of the Jezebel trope which considers women who are sexually attracted to other women as “freaky” (COLLINS, 2000, p. 83). There is no strangeness from any of the characters about the romance of two heroine *majis*. Hence, not only these young women are not hypersexualized but also, they are not considered “freaky” (COLLINS, 2000, p. 83) in *Orisha*'s scenario¹³, as it can be seen in the ensuing quote:

Our conversation draws to a halt as we wait behind Náo. She rolls out her wrists and pulls her shaved head to the side, stretching out the lagbara tattooed down the length of her neck. “Must you put on a show?” Khani arches her brow. Náo grins and kisses her girlfriend's freckled cheek. “Don't pretend you don't like to watch.” (ADEYEMI, 2019, p. 170)

This data commentary has proven that *Legacy of Orisha* is an emancipatory work of literature. We have shown Black girl characters in these books are not restrained nor trapped in the Dark Fantastic cycle. Moreover, the story helps the public to rethink what a magical child and teen looks like, and which qualities they possess. In this topic, Black young women portrayed in this piece are allowed to be innocent, good, and beautiful. Additionally, they disrupt stereotypes involving their intimate relationships and the views about Black women desirability. For these reasons, in the next section we will be giving our final regards on the

¹³ It is valid to call attention to the fact that although our analysis proves the *Orisha* kingdom subverts the stereotypes regarding relationship analyzed here, it had its limitations before the start of the revolution. It is a kingdom going through changes. In a previous quote presented in this paper, Amari talks of how her mother would judge her relationship with Tzain as inappropriate because she is a princess and he is not from the royalty. In this same citation, we can see her affirming that the relationship between *majis* and *kosidáns* is illegal (after the Raid).

importance of the kind of Speculative Fiction discussed here to the non-normalization of Black women's oppression through stereotypes.

3 Conclusion: rethinking Black girlhood through

Our aim with this study was to reaffirm the importance of liberatory Black youth representation in Speculative Fiction. We conducted the research through content analysis where our primary focus was comparing *Legacy of Orisha* to Dr. Thomas Dark Fantastic theory (2018, 2019a, 2019b), especially the emancipatory stage. We have also used other scientific sources to state our arguments when talking about qualities racialized as White. The Dark Fantastic theory proves the limited and pernicious path Black girl characters go through in mass media and literature of Speculative Fiction, adding to their oppression. However, *Legacy of Orisha* provides an emancipatory Black feminist storytelling as a way out of the Dark Fantastic cycle. Considering this, Tomi Adeyemi's work, as many other Black authors, presents a "positive representation and racial uplift" (THOMAS, 2019a, p. 290).

Going back to the main theory which based this paper, the Dark Fantastic proves that even though Speculative Fiction is an imaginative genre, Black girl characters are not rendered the same creative possibilities as White girl characters. Thomas' (2018, 2019a, 2019b) study establishes that Black girls in mass media and literature Speculative Fiction are not allowed to change their fate in narrative, which always ends with their death, symbolic or not. On top of their violent destiny, there are the restrictive stereotypes these young characters have to endure. As indicated previously, Black women stereotypes help to shape our collective imagination. All that was presented here reaffirms the necessity to rethink Black girlhood, starting with the imaginary worlds we create in our minds.

Presenting a different view, classified inside the Black Fantastic genre, *Legacy of Orisha* contributes to the rethinking of Black girls as magical beings and possessors of diverse qualities. Young Black women in this story are not limited, but in fact, have characteristics which are commonly racialized as White: innocence, goodness, beauty, and intimate relationships — as discussed in the data commentary. In this matter, alongside with their construction as complex young women protagonists, Zélie and Amari are heroine characters with magic who Black girls can look up to. Moreover, Zélie is a dark-skinned Black woman who can represent girls who resemble her — an important aspect brought up by Thomas (2019b) since dark-skinned Black women are even less represented in mass media and literature than lighter skin ones. Likewise,

they are Black magical protagonists who can assist the rethinking of the collective imagination of mass media and literature's public.

We believe researching Black girls' representation in contemporary Speculative Fiction narrative such as *Legacy of Orisha* gave us the opportunity to study the novels in a new scope that had not been examined before, in view of their relatively recent publication. Our analyses showed the means to rethink Black girlhood through magic and allowed us to prove that these kinds of characters can be innocent, good, beautiful, and have romantic relationships without the use of stereotypes — a significant feature to healthier Black women representation in literature. Following this thought, our work contributes to a neglected field of literary studies in the Brazilian context, regarding Speculative Fiction literature written by Black women authors, and assert the importance of this subject to the society we live in. As Carvalho (2016) asserted, Black women authors have been using Speculative Fiction as a means of artistic agency and here we have seen one of their versions of Black magical youth, but there are many more to be researched.

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