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Inheritance and Appropriation: Confronting Privilege in Magical Young Adult Fiction

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This thesis investigates the way that magical ability and the lack thereof has been racialized through the deployment of blood-based models of inheritance in young adult fantasy literature. Because of the connection between blood and biology, texts that only allow magical transmission from parent to child place significant limits on who can access witchery, creating systems of privilege that enforce racial and classed hierarchies. I will use magical novels written by Laurie Forest, Graci Kim, Nnedi Okorafor, Amy Rose Capetta, and Daniel José Older to illustrate the hierarchies created by blood-based models, as well as to demonstrate the possibilities that exist when authors utilize open community and mentorship models of magical transfer instead. I will then explain the risks of open systems of magical inheritance, primarily cultural appropriation, that exist in both fantastical texts and in the contemporary magickal community. By utilizing an intersectional feminist approach, this thesis will draw connections between racism, classism, and sexism, and modes of magical transfer that both reinforce and resist these power structures in young adult magical texts (YAMs).

KEYWORDS: racialization; appropriation; young adult literature; magic; fantasy; queer

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

"A new magic is awake. The trees feel it. The trees feel everything" (Capetta 77). Like this quote, from *The Lost Coast*, myself and many others have looked for magic in the natural world. Interest in magic, both fictional and actual practice are on the rise. Magical literature has been a source of comfort and exploration for me, both as a child, and today as an adult. During my childhood, I consumed every story of witchcraft and magic that I could get my hands on. When it was time to do a research project, I chose to look at the Salem witch trials. When it was time for reading fiction, I was consumed by the *Harry Potter* series. When playing in the woods of our backyard, I was an apothecary or magician and would mix potions using any herbs and berries I could find. If there was a way for me to work witchiness into an activity, I found it. I was inspired by the magic of nature and the way that witches seemed to connect to the elements. I was very connected with the natural world and felt like when the wind would blow in, there had to be magic in it.

Because of this early connection, the witch archetype has had a special place in my imagination. The witch is someone who possesses incredible powers, and in the world of young adult literature, most often uses those powers to resist bullying, oppression, and evil. As a kid who stood out for all the wrong reasons, I identified with characters who could use their powers to protect themselves and others. While there are endless magical worlds that have been created by authors, there are specific features about the way magic functions in fantastical settings that seem to follow certain patterns and frameworks that also reenact and support systems of privilege and oppression. Specifically, the ways in which magic is transferred in fictional spaces, from one witch to another, tends to follow a set of rules and customs that are deeply imbricated with categories of racism, settler colonialism, ableism, and sexism. This thesis will focus on the

way that fictional blood-based transfer of magical abilities enacts systems of privilege and oppression in ways that are both racialized and classed. I will be focusing on young adult magical texts (YAMs) because of both the number of fantastical representations of magic, as well as the important intersectional work that is emerging in the genre.

Magical transference is something that all world creators have to consider and explain to readers of their novels. In order for magic to function in a text, it needs to be clear how that magic is shared or inherited between characters. While there are different models of transfer that occur, blood-based models are the most prevalent in the texts that I have engaged with. In texts with blood-based models of inheritance, there is a connection to race and class as inherited traits and identifiers. Sometimes these magical abilities are marked as explicitly physical, and other times they are less obvious. Regardless of the visibility of magical ability, there is always a system of folx with and without access to witchery. Because young adult literature often features overt discussions of power and privilege, these texts are an ideal platform for intersectional analysis (Trites 23). YAM texts have also historically centered white stories, although as evident by the texts I am exploring, there is a shift happening (Thomas 6–7). The centering of whiteness in these texts creates an opportunity for analysis of white supremacist messaging that is vital to the work of critiquing blood-based inheritance.

In this thesis, I observe that the process of magical transfer follows two primary paths in young adult magical (YAM) texts. The first and most common mode of magical transfer is through blood. Magic is often portrayed through imagery of blood and genetic material, much like phenotypical characteristics of race and ethnicity are imagined to operate. Many of my favorite magical characters such as Harry Potter, Eragon, and Percy Jackson inherited their magical abilities from the blood of their parents, providing them with access to magical abilities

that those without blood ties are often unable to access. By utilizing a blood-based framework for magical inheritance, magic, in my reading, is laden with white supremacist assumptions about how characteristics are transmitted from one group of people to another that parallel racist and outmoded understandings of race. By considering magic as a racial identifier, I analyze YAM texts for notions of biological essentialism, race science, and eugenicist ideas. In YAM texts that focus on blood ties as the exclusive or primary mode of magical transfer, those with power experience the benefits of white privilege (McIntosh, Mills), while those without are often discriminated against and racialized.

The second mode of magical transfer, although less common, focuses on spiritual and community connection. Magical ability can be transferred through spiritual connection or community mentorship instead of through a physical source like blood. Mentorship includes formal training and education or having one specific magical mentor who initiates new practitioners. By shifting magic from being a physical characteristic to something less tangible, magical ability shrugs off blood-based inheritance, in favor of more open and non-hierarchical forms of connection, that nevertheless sometimes take on class-like attributes. Community mentorship in particular provides opportunities for a come all approach to the craft that opens doors to diverse magical practitioners. It enables folx to come to magic on their own terms, regardless of their parents' support or lack thereof.

Although I didn't notice it as a child, the fantasy genre has been dominated by whiteness, a problem that has limited the types of stories that can be told. Much of the fantasy canon has based their world creation on medieval Europe (Cecire, Young). While these are fantastical versions of the medieval motif, not the actual world of the Middle Ages, certain traits have been replicated. Sword play, dragons, castles, and white heterosexual characters have been centered in

the genre through the grounding of European mythology and histories. This makes stories that incorporate other types of mythology and folklore, such as those of African, Asian, and Latinx cultures less visible, and ultimately, less likely to be published. It also leads to the exoticizing and orientalizing of non-Western traditions when they are represented. Many white audiences are much more familiar with Arthurian stories, than those that discuss the Day of the Dead, for example. The reality of this trend is that the majority of fantastical YAM texts are written by white authors, and feature white characters (Thomas, Young). It isn't an accident that many of the most famous YAM literature characters are cis, straight, white, and male. Some of the most popular YAM texts including *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Eragon*, *The Lightning Thief*, and of course, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, center white characters while partaking in the exoticization of non-Western characters. By centering blood, which has historically been a marker for race, as the primary means of magical inheritance, these systems of privilege and power remain intact, and ultimately, limit who is seen as engaging in the fantastical. Even in contemporary settings, blood is something that we use to shape our identity. Consider for a moment the way that genetic testing is now being used to determine ancestry. The connection between blood, DNA, and identity holds power both in the history of the witch, and contemporary understandings of identity and ancestry.

Witch Studies and Historical Significance

Since this thesis will focus on witchcraft, it is important to consider the historical and contemporary frameworks of witch studies. The witch as an archetypal figure is full of complexities and contradictions. "You can find the legacy of the witch in Sumerian tales of Inanna, in Egyptian legends of Isis, and in Hindu myths of Kali. The wonders and horrors of

womankind were embodied by these generative, destructive mother goddesses who symbolized both birth and death, light and dark" (Sollée 21). The witch has been a dangerous outsider, a rebel, and a source of feminist collectivity. For much of human history, the witch has been demonized as a dangerous woman who threatens the powers that be. Scholar of communication and bruja feminism, Lorraine Monteagut writes, "Not long ago witchcraft could get you killed. Witchcraft was a bad word, a dangerous word that colonizers used to demonize Indigenous practices or denounce progressive ideals" (14). It has been used as a label for people who resist oppressive forces, and as a way to tarnish the images of those participating in progressive efforts. Because of this label, many societies both past and present have engaged in the violent act of witch hunting, in an effort to root out resistance and rebellion.

While much of the research and pop cultural representations of witchcraft in the United States centers on the witch hunts of Europe and Salem Massachusetts, witchcraft has been documented throughout much of the world. For instance, witch hunting was practiced in much of South America and Africa, though it doesn't get the same visibility in popular culture and news coverage (Federici, Skotyt-Myhre). Philosopher and witch studies scholar, Silvia Federici, has explained that witch hunting has been used as a patriarchal and colonial weapon against Indigenous and female populations (220). Even when witch hunting disappeared from the U.S. and from Europe, that didn't mean it was gone worldwide.

> Witch hunting did not disappear from the repertoire of the bourgeoises with the abolition of slavery. On the contrary, the global expansion of capitalism through colonization and Christianization ensured that this persecution would be planted in the body of colonized societies, and, in time, would be carried out by the

> subjugated communities in their own names and against their own members (Federici 237).

In many countries where this violence has been imprinted, the fear of being called a witch still surfaces. For example, in the film *Witches of Gambaga,* viewers can hear from contemporary women and girls who have been accused of witchcraft and violently rejected from their villages and sent to witch camps in Ghana (Badoe). This contemporary witch hysteria continues to punish and isolate women who challenge patriarchal control and supremacy. It also is a cause of very real violence that can damage not just those who are accused, but also their families and communities.

While being called a witch is an othering tactic, there is also a burgeoning focus on feminism and rebellion being attached to the label. Psychology scholar, Kathleen Skott-Myhre writes, "The term *witch* has historically been fraught with genocidal implications as well as holding potential for rebellion premised in the subjugated knowledges and alternative create potential of women's ways of knowing" (26). Reclaiming the witch as an identity is engaging in the feminist action of reclaiming the knowledges and practices of women worldwide. According to Kristen J Sollée, a lecturer and writer on witch studies and feminism, "the witch is at once female divinity, female ferocity, and female transgression" (15). The witch embodies a variety of roles, but all of them focus on the power of the feminine. "Feminist witches are breaking free of stereotypes and religious stigma. They are figures of empowerment. Their magic is associated with natural science, self-care, rituals, and activism" (Monteagut 15). This activism is a key feature of the work that the modern witch is engaging in. Montegut explains that the witch has been connected to the feminist movement of the time for several decades (13–14). The witch has been a symbol of women's liberation, environmentalism, anarchy, sex positivity, and

intersectional feminism (Montegut 13–14). The witch, "stands at the borders of complicated racial, class, and gender identities. She's a reflection of the feminism of these times, always shifting in response to political, social, and environmental problems" (Montegut 13–14). By embodying the needs of feminism through the decades, the witch remains a complicated and constantly evolving individual.

The popularity of witchcraft is increasing as many young people have decided that they are interested in a less dogmatic practice for their spirituality. According to scholar Marisol Charbonneau, "Some have also noted that, in spite of their celebrated religious diversity, Pagans tend to be mostly white, middle-class, English-speaking individuals with a predominantly Judeo-Christian religious background" (6). In fact, in a study of US witches, over 90% described themselves as caucasian (Charbonneau 6). This overrepresentation of whiteness within modern pagan communities is also present in the representation of white witches in fictional texts. Charbonneau also identifies the flexibility of paganism as a draw to new practitioners and to the general growth of this community (20). Some of this flexibility can be seen in the inclusion of the queer community. As practicing witch and author Misha Magdalene explains, "Whether you call it witchcraft, sorcery, or something else, all magic is innately, inherently queer, and the queerer it is, the more powerful it can be" (1). While many witchy and polytheistic practices have embraced the male/female binary, this is shifting through the more inclusive models of magickal practice that are being both reclaimed and re-envisioned by LGBTQIA+ folx.

One of the most recent feminist actions that the witch has engaged with is the reclamation of the magics from Of Color communities. There have been so many images of the stereotypical white witchy type represented in our popular media as well as in the real world magickal[1]

[1] For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the spelling of 'magic' for fictional worlds, and the spelling of 'magick' for real world magickal communities.

community. If we consider characters like Hermione Granger, the Halliwell sisters, and Sabrina, there are a lot of white witches in both literature, film, and television. This is not an accurate picture of what the history and contemporary world of magick looks like, despite the overrepresentation of whiteness.

> Witches of color—compromising Black, Afro-Caribbean, and Latinx witches and spiritual practitioners of Indigenous ancestry—are increasingly reclaiming their ancestries and speaking out against the internalized colonialism, cultural appropriation, and spiritual consumerism that mars mainstream spirituality (Montegut 16).

By finding ways to reconnect with their heritage, Of Color witches are reclaiming their rituals, spirituality, and connection to the natural world. This reclamation and pushback to white practices of cultural and magical appropriation serves the purpose of both decolonizing magic and making visible the importance of being aware of appropriative behavior. An example of this reclamation is the Facebook group, Curanderas sin Fronteras. They are a mobile clinic practicing Indigenous and Latinx herbal and spiritual healing to at-risk populations (Curanderas sin Fronteras, np). This proud and visible demonstration of traditional medicines and magic is at the heart of brujx (witch) feminism. Monteagut explains, "The brujx feminist is the other woman. She does not fit in. She does not stay on the track laid before her. Brave and naked, warrior and lover, dark and light, she honors her voyage and trusts that she is always guided" (207). There are also artists, such as Princess Nokia, claiming her bruja identity and expressing her spirituality and practice through song (Flores, np). Even podcasts like *The Witch Wave* have been featuring record numbers of witches Of Color and discussing issues like cultural appropriation and the importance of recognizing the difference between open and closed practices (practices that are

exclusive to specific cultures and those that are open for anyone to participate in). This increased visibility and vibrant reclamation seeks to both pull in decolonial work and push out appropriative practices. The feminist work being undertaken by these communities is opening up the world of magick to a broader audience, one in which the knowledges of women and Of Color Communities have a powerful voice.

Finally, the shifting attitude towards witchery also maintains a racialized edge through the preference of "white" magic over "black" magic. White magick has strong associations to wellness culture and is often used as a hashtag through social media platforms like Instagram in order to show someone's positive witchy practice (Villarreal). Meanwhile, other types of magick like animal sacrifice, sex magic, and necromancy are left out of the digital space and places like WitchTok and Instagram (Villarreal, np). "Seen as "dark" or "black" magic, these practices remain taboo because they are racialized, exoticized, or they are Indigenized as backward and morally reprehensible" (Villarreal, np). In popular films like *The Craft* and *Hocus Pocus*, these types of black magic are portrayed as evil and untrustworthy. The association of blackness and darkness as threatening continues the trope of the dangerous other in the modern magickal community and perpetuates racist attitudes towards Of Color magicks and magickal practitioners.

Young Adult Magical Texts

While I didn't approach this project with the explicit intention of making it into a young adult literature thesis, I have always had a special place in my now adult heart for the genre. Part of my interest in young adult texts is the way that they often explicitly interrogate institutions and power, a topic that has been meaningful for me. I spent hours reading fictional books about

witches and magic including *The Discovery of Witches, Practical Magic,* and *Circe*, but the texts that were doing the most interesting work with intersectional representations were all part of the young adult literature canon. I believe the reason for the intersectional approaches to magic can be tied to the way that young adult texts often center challenges to authority. Sometimes this is challenging the authority of parent or teacher roles, but often these texts push against institutional authority at large. According to children's literature scholar, Roberta Seelinger Trites, "virtually every adolescent novel assesses some aspect of the interaction between the individual adolescent and the institutions that shape her or him. When adolescent novels problematize institutions, they instinctively explore the issues of language in which the institution is immersed" (23). Through their intentional problematizing of institutional power and oppressive forces, young adult magical texts (YAMs) provide fertile ground for intersectional analysis. In addition, many of the texts I have chosen are intersectional by nature, which further allows for interrogation of power. This interaction between individual characters and the institutions of power, in this case magical power, puts pressure on what it means to possess magic, and questions who makes the decisions of who can and cannot access that magical ability. Trite continues, "Although most adolescent novels are not directly involved in political commentary, they invariably reflect some cultural biases, most of which are likely to be veiled in ideological discourses that affirm widely held societal views" (29). When reading YAM texts for race and privilege, the biases of our society float to the top through both literal and metaphorical methods. Scholar of fantasy literature, Rosemary Jackson, explains that "Like any other text, a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social context," which like Trites' work, requires that the positionality of the author and the world they reside in be considered in

the interpretation of fantastical texts (3). The focus on institutional power and privilege in the young adult literature creates opportunities for robust intersectional analysis.

Another reason I chose to center young adult fantasy texts is that they are often treated as less worthy of teaching and analyzing by the academy. As literature scholar and former K-12 teacher Donald R Gallo explains, “It bothers me a great deal when high school English teachers or university professors condemn young adult books because they believe they are shallow or poorly written. Those people are ignorant elitists who haven’t done their homework, haven’t read even an adequate sampling of novels, short stories, nonfiction, and poetry for teens that is available for classroom use and independent reading” (37). There is a hierarchy of what is considered important or valuable literature, much of which is part of the classical canon written by white, male authors. Even when fantastical literature is researched, much of the work that has been pursued has been focused on Tolkien and Lewis, white male authors who use European medieval inspired world creation models (Cecire). I chose to center fantasy texts written by women, BIPOC folx, and queer identified authors in order shift the focus of the canon away from white patriarchal control. Scholar of young adult literature, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, discusses how the overwhelming whiteness of the fantasy and young adult canon has created an imagination gap for students Of Color (6–7). She suggests that this gap in representation and connection to the fantastic can negatively impact literacy, reading ability, and interest in literature (6–7). Gallo also explains that by persisting in exclusively teaching the classical canon, we are creating students who have no desire to read for enjoyment, a huge problem if we are to have a society that cares about the written word (34). My hope is that by recentering analysis of the fantastic on the works of female authors, queer authors, and BIPOC authors, I will engage in the work to shift what we as scholars view as valuable works of literature and challenge the

teaching of elitist white canonical works. Through this thesis, I will continue to emphasize the importance of the representation that many of these texts are engaging in, while still centering my argument on the problems of blood-based inheritance of magical systems.

Primary Argument and Chapter Outline

In my thesis, I will be analyzing five YAM texts, two that follow the blood-based inheritance pattern for magical ability, and three that subvert it through a focus on spirituality and community mentorship. The texts I will be considering are: *The Black Witch* by Laurie Forest, *The Last Fallen Star* by Graci Kim, *Akata Witch* by Nnedi Okorafor, *The Lost Coast* by Amy Rose Capetta, and *Shadowshaper* by Daniel José Older. I endeavor to critique the way that blood-based magical inheritance creates and sustains racial hierarchies and systems of privilege and power. I will demonstrate how blood-based systems of inheritance racializes non-magic users, through othering tactics and stereotyping. Using the scholarship of Nikki Khanna, Kēhaulani J. Kauanui, and Kim TallBear, I will establish racial frameworks for magic that seek to privilege certain groups. I will rely on the definition of racialization provided by scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant who describe it as the assigning of racial identifiers to groups or practices that are not conventionally raced, in order to create hierarchies and establish systems of power (64). I will focus on how some texts racialize non-magic users as Black and discriminate against them in ways that follow the conventions of anti-Blackness. I will also examine how other texts use a fractional approach to determining blood-based magical inheritance that utilizes the colonial practice of assigning blood quantum to create artificial scarcity and penalize folx without access to witchery through the logic of settler colonialism. Conversely, I will demonstrate how spiritual and community mentorship modes of magical

transference challenge ideas of racialization, and instead either establish a class system of magic, or provide completely non-hierarchical magical communities. While these may not completely erase the privilege of magical users, they challenge notions of eugenics and biological essentialism. I will also explore the potential risks of more open models of magical inheritance, particularly the risk of colonization through appropriation of Of Color magics. Importantly, in real world magickal communities, Of Color magics have been both demonized, and exoticized by white practitioners which suggests that there is a connection between the way fantastical magic functions, and the challenges that exist for real world magickal practitioners. I will also engage with the challenges of inherited supremacy and cultural appropriation in contemporary magickal communities, and the way that these systems of oppression are mirrored in fantastical texts.

Through my analysis, I demonstrate that there is a need to embrace models of magical inheritance that don't privilege blood and biology. When blood is prioritized, many readers of YAM texts will never see themselves represented in the fantastic. There are artificial limits placed on what stories can be told, and by whom. When magic is centered on community, anyone can learn to practice magic, regardless of parentage. Open models of magical inheritance invite new stories, abilities, and community models to be shared. While there is a risk to open magical models, both in the real world and in literature, I argue that there are more benefits than harms in this model.

In chapter one I focus on two texts that feature the blood-based model of magical inheritance: *The Black Witch* (2017) by Laurie Forest and *The Last Fallen Star* (2021) by Graci Kim. I will establish a framework for racialization in the text relying on scholarship from Nikki Khanna, Kēhaulani J. Kauanui, and Kim TallBear, focusing on Blackness and Indigeneity. *The*

Black Witch is the first in a four-part series and follows the protagonist, Elloren Gardner, a Gardnerian mage, on her journey to understanding her own privilege and the violent cruelty being enacted by a white supremacist patriarchal government. Elloren grew up in the shadow of her grandmother, Carnissa Gardner, the last black witch. Because of her bloodlines, she is treated as an idealized member of her race. Forest's world creation includes explicit racialization of a diverse range of magical and non-magical peoples, as well as a focus on racial purity. While many types of magic exist in the text, Gardnerian wand magic is presented as the ideal and the only sophisticated form of magical ability. I analyze the blood-based inheritance of Gardnerian wand magic for whiteness and privilege. *The Black Witch* also enacts racial tropes in the form of Selkies (seal-shifters), Lupines (wolf-shifters), and Icarals (winged demons). Elloren is portrayed as a white savior in the text, learning about her own privilege and becoming a rebel in an effort to save her marginalized friends from the push for racial purity and eugenics being enforced by the Gardnerian systems of power. While Elloren pushes back against racist and patriarchal systems of power, the way the text is constructed leads readers to empathize with her journey to wokeness and white feminism. Elloren's role in the story reinforces the white savior myth, instead of pushing against white supremacist understandings of heroism. I will demonstrate that by focusing on blood-based systems of magical inheritance, this novel reinforces racialization and stigmatization of characters who don't fit into the magically gifted Gardnerian ideal.

The Last Fallen Star by Graci Kim does important representational work through its focus on a Korean American magical community, but it continues to utilize the blood-based inheritance model. This text follows an adopted tween, Riley Oh. She and her sister Hattie (biological child of their parents) decide to perform a spell to share Hattie's magical ability since Riley has been banned from being initiated due to her lack of blood inherited magic. The

discrimination based on disability creates an opportunity to question the ableism in the novel. The initiation process involves determining fractionally based magical elements, which I will argue can be read through the colonial practice of blood quantum, creating an artificial scarcity of magic users. Ultimately, Hattie's spell goes awry, and Riley has to explore her heritage in order to save her sister. Through this quest, Riley discovers that she has magical heritage, just not the kind to be proud of, again demonstrating the importance of blood and biological essentialism. While this text does engage in representations of marginalized communities, the focus on blood-based magical transference perpetuates systems of racial hierarchies where some are considered worthy of magic based on their genetics, while others are left wanting.

Chapter two will focus on two texts that take different approaches to resisting blood-based inheritance model of magical transference: *Akata Witch* (2011) by Nnedi Okorafor and *The Lost Coast* (2019) by Amy Rose Capetta. Okorafor's novel is part of a three book series focusing on Nigerian magic. *Akata Witch* centers magical transference on the spirit, although spirit lines often exist in families primarily due to the mother's spiritual bond with the developing fetus. Magical ability marks one as a Leopard person, while those without are Lambs. *Akata Witch* also utilizes community mentorship for the young Leopard people, a feature that is vital given that the protagonist, Sunny, is a free agent, or someone with no clear tie to a spirit line. Despite being an outsider to what is often an ancestral community, Sunny is able to develop her skills in juju (magic) through the assistance of the Leopard mentors and her peers and is able to help take down the ritual killer, Black Hat Otokoto. While Okorafor's novel presents alternative paths to obtaining Leopard ability, there is still a system of race and class oppression. Free agents are treated as second class citizens due to the international and often colonial educational materials with which Sunny is provided. Sunny also experiences marginalization

because she has albinism. While this condition gives her additional powers in the Leopard world, amongst her Lamb (non-magical) peers, she is bullied and faces very real violence because of superstitions surrounding albinism. While the magical ability of Leopard people resists the biological essentialism found in the texts featured in chapter one, there are still systems of privilege and oppression based on class and race.

The Lost Coast features the most open and accessible model of magic that I found. This text follows Danny, a recent transplant to California and her experiences with a group of teens who call themselves the Grays. The Grays are a group of queer witches, only one of whom has any familial connection to magic. Danny has been brought to them by a spell that the Gray's cast to help them find their friend, Imogen's, missing soul. Danny learns of her magical ability through collective magical praxis with the Grays, all of whom view magic as a group practice, and not something to be done for individual gain. These witches work together to discover what has happened to Imogen and seek to foster each other's skills and to build collective magical knowledge. In addition to presenting a completely open magical system, this text incorporates notions of chosen family and kinship that resist biological ties. It also centers queerness through character representations and the meandering nature of the novel. *The Lost Coast* suggests that anyone can find magic through solidarity and community membership.

In chapter three I endeavor to connect the fantastical world of magical inheritance to real world magickal communities through engagement with the concepts of decolonization and cultural appropriation. The novel I analyze for these themes is Shadowshaper (2015) by Daniel Older. *Shadowshaper* follows Sierra Santiago, an Afro-Latina teen who is informed of her magical ability by a friend, Robbie. He teaches Sierra how to shadowshape, or infuse art with spirits, and together they work to track down a white anthropologist named Dr. Wick, who seems

to be at the center of a mystery involving murder and magic. These teens have gained their magical ability through an apprenticeship model, which challenges blood-based inheritance patterns, but also ultimately made it possible for Dr. Wick to appropriate the shadowshaping ability and colonize this community of urban spirituality. Sierra and Robbie actively work to decolonize not just shadowshaping, but also forms of knowledge and art. While this text provides another alternative to blood-based inheritance patterns, it also demonstrates the risk of open magical practices that mirror much of the appropriation currently happening to Of Color magickal communities. After discussing the novel, I provide evidence for the types of cultural appropriation in contemporary magickal circles, especially the appropriation of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous magicks and knowledges. I use Sephora's witch kit as an example of the commodification of Of Color magical items and practices. I also discuss how capitalism has exoticized these practices to flood the market with culturally specific items, like white sage, to appeal to white hipsters who are coming to the craft. While the fictional world of magic is fantastical in nature, many of the issues being grappled with also exist in contemporary magickal communities.

While these chapters will focus on a diverse range of texts, I will seek to connect them through the systems of power and privilege that exist in all of the novels and the real world magickal community. I intend to juxtapose blood-based magical transference in the first chapter to the more open models of magical transfer in the second and third chapters. While there are still some sources of privilege and inheritance in non-blood-based systems, these mentorship and community models create space to imagine a less hierarchical approach to witchery. There will still always be those with more or less power than others, but the opportunity to gain skill in

magic is visible in community and mentorship versions of magical transfer. Ultimately, I aim to demonstrate where there is possibility in world creation to remove inherited privilege.

As a white woman, one who is inclined towards herbs and witchery, it is vital that I also acknowledge my own privilege and positionality. It was never unsafe for me to claim a connection to magick and witchery. As a child, my excitement surrounding the fantastic was treated as normalized and appropriate. I have always been able to express my witchy interests without fear of reprisal or discrimination. It is important to acknowledge that the reclamation of the witch is something that has seen differing levels of approval based on race, class, gender, and sexuality. It is important for myself and others who are white and interested in or identified as witches to be a part of the progress towards a magickal practice that doesn't steal from the practices of Of Color communities.

CHAPTER II: IT'S IN THE BLOOD: BIOLOGICALLY INHERITED MAGIC

Blood is often viewed as a physical imprint of our identities. The possibility of this life-giving substance to define who we are as individuals has both created divides and a sense of belonging amongst constructed groups and categories of humanity. In children's and young adult fantasy texts, magic is most often depicted as being transferred through blood—parent to child—reinforcing the myth of biological essentialism. Biological essentialism is the understanding that our abilities and characteristics are determined exclusively by our bloodlines and genetics (Pinho and Gaunt, Byrd and Hughey). This transmission method provides fertile ground to consider the way that magical ability functions as a method of assigning race, much like phenotypical physical characteristics that are viewed as racially specific. In this chapter, I argue that blood-based magical transference, which relies on biological essentialism, works to reinforce whiteness and white supremacy in both the YA fantasy canon and within the texts themselves and the worlds that their characters reside in. Towards this end, I will focus on three main goals in this chapter: analyzing the role that race and whiteness play in the fantasy genre, demonstrating how blood-based magical transference functions as a racialized force, and illustrating how biological magics reinforce white supremacy in Young Adult Magical (YAM) texts.

This chapter begins by analyzing racism and racialization of the fantasy genre by illustrating the white supremacist practices that have formed the canon and reduced opportunities for authors and characters of color. I will then analyze two YAM texts to explore racialization, reading for whiteness, and privilege: *The Black Witch* (2017) by Laurie Forest and *The Last Fallen Star* (2021) by Graci Kim. Laurie Forest is a white author from the U.S. who has written *The Black Witch Chronicles,* of which *The Black Witch* is the first text. The novel follows the

Gardner siblings (Elloren, Rafe, and Trystan) who head off to university in a society that is ruled by an extremely racist, patriarchal, and oppressive regime. Elloren, the protagonist, struggles throughout the first novel to understand the lies she has been told about other races and cultures, and to deprogram herself from those discriminatory behaviors. She also faces pressure to wandfast (marry) to secure her family's social status by maintaining pure magical bloodlines through reproduction. She spends the bulk of the text reckoning with the lies she has been told and working against her country in order to protect her friends of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. In this text, I read being a Mage (Gardnerian) as whiteness. I argue that many of the other races represented in *The Black Witch* experience similar mistreatment, enslavement, and genocide that has historically been inflicted upon Black folx and Indigenous communities throughout the history and contemporary United States, and because of the racialized traits they are assigned, can be read as Black and Indigenous.

After analyzing *The Black Witch*, I will transition to discussing *The Last Fallen Star* by Graci Kim. This novel focuses on Korean magic and myth, and follows Riley Oh, the protagonist and adopted daughter of a family of Gifted Clan members—a Korean American community who possess significant magical abilities and reside in modern day Los Angeles. Because Riley is adopted, she is believed to have no magical ability, and therefore can be read as disabled, unlike her sister Hattie, the biological daughter of their parents who has significant magical ability. In an attempt to share Hattie's power so that the sisters can both be Gifted Clan members together, Riley discovered that she was actually born into a Gifted Clan, but unfortunately, to the one that had been cursed and outcast after a grab for power amongst the Clans. Because magic in this text is dealt with in a fractionalized way that attempts to quantify power, I argue that it can be read as a method of challenging blood quantum through creating artificial scarcity. This blood-based

transfer maintains social hierarchies and enacts violence amongst those deemed to be less worthy of magic due to their lack of blood inheritance.

The Black Witch features an explicitly racialized, patriarchal, and homophobic society, as well as robust examples of the link between blood, magical power, and dominance. *The Last Fallen Star*, despite engaging in important representational work, still falls back to blood-based transference in a way that creates racial divides amongst those with magical blood (gifted clan), and those without (saram) despite all characters being identified as Korean, as well as introducing disability and privilege to the complex hierarchical system. Between these two texts, I will engage with scholarship focusing on race and whiteness, gender and sexuality, and disability. Although the racialization of magical inheritance is my primary objective, the intersectional nature of these identity categories makes it impossible to disentangle them.

Blood, Race, and the Fantastic

Throughout colonial history, ruling colonizers have sought to connect blood and race to create distinct categories of humanity. Science historian and journalist Angela Saini explains, "Race is at its heart the belief that we are born different, deep inside our bodies, perhaps even in character and intellect, as well as in outward appearance. It's the notion that groups of people have certain innate qualities that are not only visible at the surface of their skins but also run down into their innate capacities" (xiii). The creation of race science has been one of the driving forces that has established the link between blood and physical characteristics of race.

Race science has a long and disturbing history dealing with attempts to distinguish physical differences between races, as well as to keep races separate and discrete through reproductive eugenics. For example, according to scholar of women's, gender, and sexuality studies, Siobhan B. Somerville, sexologists during the 19th century used racist methods to

categorize Black women's sexual organs as abnormal and establish white women's bodies as ideal (27). Because Blackness has been assigned based on blood, even one drop of blood, comparative anatomy serves to further racist goals of creating distinct categories of race. Paul Broca, a founder of neurosurgery, spent much of his life attempting to prove that skull shapes and sizes indicated racial difference and therefore superiority and inferiority (Biddiss 245). Historian Craig Steven Wilder explains that "enslavement in the Americas provided fertile ground for race science, even amongst different skin tones of enslaved Africans" (191). He discusses how a white surgeon; T. Aubrey, developed the belief that there were four sub-groups of African enslaved peoples whose skin tone depicted personality traits that made them 'good' or 'bad' enslaved people for white owners (Wilder 191). While the racializing of bodies served white supremacist purposes, eugenics provides 'scientific' authority to notions of blood and ancestry to be used towards racist goals. Eugenics movements were developed in North America to prevent people with disabilities and those framed as the poor, racialized, and "unfit" from reproducing, and were later applied by Nazi Germany to advance a white supremacist ideology of "übermensch" or superior humans. "In the United States, eugenics advocated selective reproduction and 'race hygiene,' a political and scientific response to the growth of a population beginning to challenge the dominance of white political interests" (Somerville 30). This selective reproduction was meant to keep white bloodlines pure and untainted (Somerville 30). Bloodlines, and their connection to racial purity, function as a symbolic representation of white supremacy and are often employed to the detriment of communities Of Color. The preference for 'pure' white blood also feeds into reproduction, and the discriminatory practice of the forced sterilization of People of Color in North America. Between 1950 and 1966, Black women were sterilized at three times the rate of white women (Stern, np). The United States Holocaust

Memorial Museum explains that "Enlisting the help of physicians and medically trained geneticists, psychiatrists, and anthropologists, the [German] Nazis developed racial health policies that began with the mass sterilization of 'genetically diseased' persons and ended with the near annihilation of European Jewry" (np). The German Nazi party used both sterilization and genocidal policies to eliminate this 'dirty' blood and maintain Ayrian racial supremacy. Through colonial and white supremacist use of blood quantum and the 'one drop rule,' blood has continued to be important in applications of racial privilege and categorization.

Although traditional notions of race science have faded from legitimate scientific circles, sorting and categorizing data by race remains a common practice. Scholars Karen Fields and Barbara Fields state, "In our race-conscious world, virtually anything that can be counted, will eventually be sorted, classified, and published by someone according to 'racial differences'" (213). We can see this tendency to sort and classify by race in the Covid-19 statistics that continue to fall on us in a deluge, although it is worth noting that refusing to use categories can also be a tool of white supremacy, used to mask discriminatory practices that lead to racial disparities. Scholar AnaLouise Keating explains, "Categorizing people by "race" has become an accepted way of comprehending and explaining ourselves and our world. Surveys, census forms, birth certificates, and job applications often ask us to identify ourselves according to our race" (Keating 909). This practice has become so normalized that we don't often recognize that it is an unnatural differentiation and doesn't actually provide much information about who we are as people. This normalization of identifying whiteness in opposition to Blackness and Brownness is built specifically to create a social hierarchy that privileges white, and therefore racially invisible peoples (Mills 16). Further, categorization based on race refuses to acknowledge the multiplicity of racial and ethnic identities that coexist, as well as the intersectionality of identities, and this

perpetuates a false belief in racial purity (Keating 910). The notion of racial purity neglects the identities of people of mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds and insists that people pick one identity category over the other. Despite the knowledge that race is a construct, our society continues to link blood, race, and biology together in order to create discrete categories and enforce hierarchies.

Blood and its connection to biological essentialism are important to the analysis of magical ability and race because most children's and young adult texts depict magic as being inherited directly through the blood, and therefore being biological. Because blood, biology, and race have been intertwined, the practice of transmitting magic through blood and ancestry can be read as racialized. According to scholar Helen Young, "race in the twenty-first-century Western society is the category of identity most closely linked to descent by far: neither gender or sexuality, for example, are generally considered to be carried through multiple generations of a family line even when they are constructed as essentialized and biological" (144). This essentialization of race as being exclusively biologically constructed and implemented means that race is treated as permanent, having inherited limits, and being familial. When looking at many of the most popular magical fandoms, *Harry Potter* for example, magic is depicted as being based on blood ties to the craft. Young explains that most magical protagonists "inherit their supernatural identity components biologically, that is through their family" (144). This connection to blood and family resonates with the depiction of race as an exclusively biologically inherited trait, and also as one that can either privilege or oppress depending on one's racial or magical category. Racist histories of the 'one drop rule'—or the idea that having any Black blood identified one as Black—and blood quantum—the practice of assigning fractions to Indigenous identity in order to limit who can claim Indigeneity, demonstrate the deep

links between racism and ideas of blood-based language and familial ties. This blood-based language illustrates the important role that blood has held in our collective imaginations about what race is, and who gets to define racial identities. I discuss racist deployments of blood quantum and the "one drop rule" later in this chapter, drawing on Indigenous and Black scholarship.

When considering race in fictional texts, there is always a danger in using race purely as a metaphor. Throughout my analysis, I am discussing actual harms being done to characters based on systems of racial privilege within the world building of the author. I am not only reading the racialization in the text as a metaphor for the way race is treated in U.S society but am analyzing the colonial and white supremacist tactics in fictional worlds in order to demonstrate the privilege that blood holds through racialization, even in the fantastic. As scholar Ebony Elizabeth Thomas explains in her book, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and Imagination from Harry Potter to The Hunger Games*, darkness never functions purely as a metaphor, there is always the reality of race and racialization hidden within (20). In the following subsections, I will illustrate the ways that magic is racialized through evaluation of blood purity.

The Black Witch

The Black Witch (2017) by Laurie Forest is the first book in *The Black Witch Chronicles* series. It takes place in a fantastical land called Erthia. The world created by Forest maintains the medieval fantasy motif, meaning that it is a story, although imaginary, which features characteristics that mimic those of medieval England (Cecire 186). While the title could be assumed to refer to a character who is identified as Black, the word black in the title actually refers to the raven black hair and clothing that is standard for all Gardnerians. The story centers

on a family of Mages including Elloren Gardner, Trystan Gardner, and Rafe Gardner. Elloren, the protagonist, is a seventeen-year-old woman who leaves her sheltered home in the country to study at Verpax University, a place where she will not be surrounded only by her fellow Gardnerians, but by a diverse range of races and cultures. Her brothers have been attending the university for several semesters, and Elloren is the last to head off to school. The Gardners' country of origin, Gardneria, is run as a strictly religious entity that is extremely racist, patriarchal, and homophobic. These conservative and rigid beliefs are also tied into the way that Gardnerians view their magical abilities (wand magic) and its transmission through blood, or more accurately, pure blood. While it would appear that the author is intending to critique white supremacy and systems of racial, class, and gender oppression, I contend that this text actually reinforces many of these damaging systems of oppression and also plays on the white savior motif which works to devalue the important resistance work of characters who should be read as People of Color. Instead of finding ways to push back against biological essentialist frameworks for magic that enable inclusivity, *The Black Witch* provides an example of how to follow existing frameworks that uphold oppressive systems of power.

Whiteness and Wand Magic

When considering magic and race, it is vital to begin by engaging with concepts of whiteness and privilege that are illustrated in *The Black Witch* through the ability and right to control magic. Peggy McIntosh described white privilege as "an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious" (10). This set of unearned assets doesn't mean that white folx don't have struggles in their lives, but it does mean that there are certain obstacles that aren't erected in front of them on

account of their race. Critical whiteness studies scholar Allison Bailey adds that "advantages are earned more easily when they are accompanied by gender, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, or white privilege" (12). What this means is that if you happen to identify in a privileged category, you are more able to access earned privileges in addition to the unearned ones that come from identifying in dominant categories. An essential component of white privilege is the way that whiteness is viewed as normalized or the default setting for humanity (Mills, Dyer). Scholar Richard Dyer states that "For those in power in the West, as long as whiteness is felt to be the human condition, then it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it" (9). When whiteness is identified as normal, Blackness and Brownness are then marked as abnormal or deviant purely through existing outside of white privilege.

One of the biggest benefits of whiteness is its ability to remain unmarked and naturalized. AnaLouise Keating explains, "the most commonly mentioned attribute of 'whiteness' seems to be its pervasive nonpresence, its invisibility" (904). This invisibility that is mentioned by both Keating and McIntosh is essential to maintaining white supremacy. Remaining unmarked means avoiding being labeled as the 'other,' and ultimately, that othering is what distinguishes oppressed groups from privileged ones. Scholar Charles W. Mills describes this otherness or alienation as being associated with being subhuman, less cognitively capable and repulsive (59–61). Being marked racially, removes one's ability to move easily through society. In *The Black Witch*, being Gardnerian is the default and the norm, while being any other race is marked as the 'other.' Being unmarked, especially for those who benefit from white privilege, has enabled white supremacy to maintain a hold on feminism and other progressive social movements. If the privilege can't be seen, it can't be identified, and it can't be critiqued. For the purposes of my

analysis, I will use invisibility and 'normality' as markers to help make whiteness markable and identifiable.

Although many races in this text possess magical powers, because of many magics being demonized by Gardnerian systems of power, I will be focusing on the ability to possess wand magic as a marker of whiteness and privilege. Because wand magic is something exclusive to Gardnerians, it marks their magic as inherently different from that of other races, but also as invisible in the sense that it is the most common type of magic featured in the book, and the many others who connect directly to the elements or who use rune magic have their craft marked as the 'other'. What makes Gardnerian wand magic an excellent marker for whiteness is that to use wand magic, one must be able to obtain a wand, and therefore utilize societal privilege to access the restricted items. Part of accessing a wand is having the phenotypic characteristics of Gardnerians including black flowing hair, pale skin with a slight green shimmer, and green eyes. Because wands are only allowed for Gardnerians possessing these phenotypic characteristics and 'pure' bloodlines, those men who fit the normalized ideal don't face any barriers to wand ownership. Wand ownership is restricted much more tightly amongst women, as they can only obtain a wand with explicit approval from the Mage Council, which demonstrates the sexism and patriarchal organization of Gardnerian society (Forest 19). This restriction in ownership or in this case possession of privilege is racialized though its exclusive control by Gardnerians.

Part of what makes wand magic match the ideological framework for whiteness is its cultural status as a symbol of purity and strength. The white wand, also known as the wand of myth, plays a significant role in the Gardnerian religion and lore. Elloren receives this wand from a friend, Sage, and can't believe that it is the wand of myth, or that Sage got access to it on her own (Forest 44). Elloren believes that Sage had stolen the wand because of its expensive and

forbidden nature (Forest 44). The white wand is described as an object that led the Gardnerians out of oppression through its wielding by Galliana, a "first child" as their religion identifies the Gardnerian race, and through its magic she smote the "evil ones" (Forest 132). This religious ideology about a white wand, especially with white being associated with purity and privilege, suggests that it is the idealized Gardnerian magical item. This purity belief in wand magic's supremacy is exemplified when Elloren discovers that Gardnerians are not the pure-blooded race she has always believed. Professor Kristian explains to Elloren that the likely origin of the Gardnerian race is that they were born of a mixture of Kelts (humans with no magic) and Fae Dryad (Tree Fae) (Forest 388). Professor Kristian explains,

> Dryad blood lived on in the Mage line, giving the Mages their characteristic black hair, and shimmering skin. And branch magic lived on as well, although at a very weak level—only intricately laminated wooden wands could bring forth a fraction of the same magic Dryads could access through simple branches (Forest 389).

Elloren has been taught to believe that wand magic is superior to branch magic and thinks, "Gardnerian's have wand magic. Not crass branch magic" (Forest 388). Her belief that wand magic is more refined, purer and more desirable, further presents the inheritance of wand magic as whiteness, and even as a white supremacist weapon of control and subjugation.

Wand ownership is also classed amongst the ranks of Gardnerians. The practice of wand testing children for power and assigning them a certain level as a Mage creates a hierarchical structure that raises a small segment of the population above the rest. Although Elloren does indeed have power, when she is wand tested, she appears to have no magic (Forest 167). The man who wand tests her states, "'you are hereby placed at the Gardnerian Wand Level one'"

(Forest 167). When Elloren arrives in her first apothecary class she discovers that they are partnered based on wand level (Forest 282). The text reads,

> I walk around a maze of tables to the very back of the laboratory, self-consciously embarrassed over my lack of power. In wider Gardnerian society, my wand level is a common thing, but not here. These are the best of the best apothecary scholars. Most of the young women sport military-style silver bands pinned around their arms—almost all of them Level Two (Forest 282).

The clear privileging of mages with upper levels of wand magic presents itself through the lens of social class with the majority of the population identifying towards the lower end of the spectrum, while the elite few with significant wand magic (level 4 and 5) control the government and hold the power to oppress those lower in the mage hierarchy. Elloren's apparent lack of magical ability, despite her powerful bloodlines, leads her to feel frustrated with her body in a way that scholar Trites describes as, "psychologically at war with their bodies" (86). According to Trites, this is a common theme for female protagonists in dystopian texts, of which *The Black Witch*, with its intense racism, religious insanity, and sexism could be classified (86). Class privilege also influences the wandfasting arrangements with those of significant power or higher social class typically fasting to each other.

The practice of wandfasting is vital to the blood-based transference of magic in *The Black Witch*. Wandfasting is essentially an arranged marriage that is magically and religiously binding for women, but not for men. If broken, it leaves horrible painful gashes along the fasting lines that appear like tattoos on the hands and wrists of a woman who was unfaithful to her fasted partner (Forest 47). Wandfasting often occurs when girls are as young as 13 years old (Forest

214). Elloren's Aunt Vyvian, a powerful mage council member, explains, "Wandfasting is a beautiful sacrament, meant to keep us pure and chaste" (Forest 48).

This purity and chastity is tied not just to sexual purity, but to racial purity and eugenics as well. Aunt Vyvian pontificates that wandfasting is "'one of the many things that sets us apart from the heretic races all around us'" (Forest 48). Wandfasting is only performed between two Mages (Gardnerians) and is used to discourage and punish those who "taint" their bloodlines. In order for wandfasting to be complete, it must also be sealed, which involves physical consummation, and because birth control is a banned substance in Gardnerian society, eventual reproduction of pure Gardnerian children. It is impossible to separate sex and race because of the way that sexual reproduction reproduces phenotypically specific characteristics, and in the case of *The Black Witch*, the ability to access wand magic. In this sense, sex can be thought of as the act that determines racial identity.

Wandfasting to preserve magical bloodlines also diminishes the value of other types of kinship, mentorship, and friendship in favor of sexual bonds that are often chosen for the partners, not by the partners. The focus on reproductive relationships also isolates LGBTQIA+ people from Gardnerian Society. Trystan, Elloren's brother discloses his identity as a gay man, which in Gardneria could mean being sent to prison (Forest 374). Whether it be queer relationships, interracial relationships, or friendships and other types of relationality, Gardnerian society privileges only those that can lead to more racially pure and ideally powerful offspring, which ultimately identifies Gardnerians with high levels of wand magic as both having white privilege and class privilege. Because race and wand magic are determined by blood in this text, it is impossible to interrogate the racialization of magic without exploring the sexual behaviors and practices.

Given Elloren's familial connections, even with her apparent inability to practice wand magic, she is a desirable mate because of the potential in her veins. Much of the book is devoted to the pressure and punishment Elloren receives from her aunt because of her refusal to be wandfasted before finishing her education. Aunt Vyvian believes that their family will give birth to the next Black Witch (Gardnerian mage with unimaginable power) stating, "One of your children will hold that title," and "That power is our legacy" (Forest 66). This belief in the power of blood is also acknowledged by Elloren's love interest Lukas, a powerful level five mage. Lukas states, "you look exactly like your grandmother, and her blood runs through your veins" (Forest 139). Lukas and many of Elloren's peers frequently cite her physical appearance and bloodlines as justification for her having powerful magic buried somewhere inside, even if it can't be accessed. Priest Vogel, later named high mage and the ruler or Gardneria, explains that because of Elloren's bloodlines, she must be wandfasted to someone with impressive magical power (Forest 91). This obsession with blood and vein imagery even makes it to the front cover of the book which reads "Some echo of her dark power courses through my veins…waiting to be released" (Forest). It is important to acknowledge the patriarchal power structures utilized to maintain bloodlines in this text, as those practices inform wandfasting and reproduction, therefore furthering racialization and blood purity in the text.

While *The Black Witch* is full of institutional systems that oppress certain groups, the focus of discrimination and oppression is centered on racial groups that don't experience the white privilege that wand magic entitlement that Gardnerian folx claim. This text marks characters as explicitly racialized, but also uses wand magic as a racial marker for whiteness and blood purity. By reading wand magic as white privilege it is possible to see the privileges that being Gardnerian and possessing wand magic bring forth including: wealth and status,

employment, lack of law enforcement, and societal acceptance and inclusion. Elloren herself benefits from many of these privileges, even though her magical abilities don't become apparent until later in the series. The ability to access witchery is also tied to the power to make decisions in institutions and government. Holding power over oppressed peoples in a way that is socially defined as "normal" demonstrates the white supremacy in the text that has also been normalized in contemporary US society (Mills, Bailey, McIntosh). While reading for race in this text could be taken as metaphorical, I want to be clear that I am talking about actual racism, discrimination, and racially motivated violence within the text.

The Racialized Other

Now that I have established the requirement of blood and sexual behavior in the transference of magic in *The Black Witch*, I will look at how racialized "others" are treated in the text. Racialization is defined by scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant as, "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group" (64). Although Forest does create explicit races in the text, I contend that they function as racialized others because of the way they utilize negative tropes towards real racialized groups, specifically People of Color. According to scholar Elizabeth Ebony Thomas, "Darkness has never been just a metaphor. Darkness is personified, embodied, and most assuredly racialized" (20). Using the dark or the color black has been a trope throughout fantastical literature as a way to mark characters as racialized others and to assign badness or evil to characters or environments. In *The Black Witch*, many of the racialized others possess dark skin, or dark features, and those associations are an embodiment of race and the source of their discrimination by Gardnerian society.

When considering racialization in the fictional realm of Erthia, it is important to remember that the primary characters of the text all identify as Gardnerian—Elloren, Trystan, Rafe Gardner (siblings and grandchildren of the last Black Witch). In this text, being Gardnerian, and therefore having a connection to wand magic, is readable as white identity. Gardneria is a country that holds immense power, a strong military, and a deep belief in the importance of racial purity. One of the earliest examples of this obsession with racial purity is exemplified by the treatment of the Gardner's neighbor and friend, Gareth. Elloren states, "Gareth's black hair has a trace of silver highlights in it—very unusual in Gardnerians, and read by many as a sign of his less-than-pure blood" (Forest 22). Gareth's difference in appearance, especially these phenotypically read traits, marks him as the 'other' and directly affects his treatment in this fictional world. Gareth's presumably impure blood seems to function through the one drop rule of the Jim Crow Era. According to scholar Nikki Khanna, "Growing fears that any amount of black blood might 'taint' white blood prompted state legislators to carefully define who was black" (98). Because any shift in physical characteristics in Gareth is perceived as dirty or less-than-pure, his description of not being a 'true' Gardnerian fall into this method of categorization.

Once the Gardner siblings reach Verpax University, characters of a variety of races are introduced and used as a foil to the whiteness that the Gardnerians represent. While there is a long list of races identified in the text, I am going to focus on those who are most discriminated against for the purposes of my analysis. This includes: Selkies (seal shifters), Lupines (wolf shifters), and Icarals (considered winged demons). Many of these groups have historically reversed roles as oppressors and oppressed, but in Elloren's time the Gardnerians are the dominant group and, as I have argued, experience white privilege. In addition to embodying whiteness, they also function as colonizers, repeatedly taking lands from other races and

communities in ways that scholar Maria Sachiko Cecire states, “perpetuate[s] the underlying colonialist sentiments and presumptions of whiteness that characterize the genre” (186). The other racial groups that are both treated as less human and colonized—are in some cases outright treated as non-human animals, or as less than human. Considering animality as a dehumanizing force does have limits as scholar Zakiyyah Iman Jackson explains, “Antiracism has too often limited our critique of ‘animalization’ to a critique of the term’s scope instead of disrupting its authority in the management of life” (53). Jackson continues explaining that power has been established through destroying and controlling what is deemed the animal (53). While I agree that shifting away from a species hierarchy is important, in *The Black Witch,* Gardnerians pride themselves on conquering nature and the animal through burning down forests, eliminating species, and enslaving both animals themselves and animalized humans. Gardneria is very much at war with nature, and part of that war includes animalized humans. Because of this negative viewpoint of animality and their clear hierarchy, I argue that negative animalization is an essential consideration in the racialization of this novel.

The treatment of Selkies, also known as seal shifters, is a clear example of the way that some races are animalized in ways meant to deny their intelligence and emotional capacity. Elloren first sees a female Selkie in a cage while traveling and is initially shocked and upset because she looks like a human woman with silver hair (Forest 54). Aunt Vyvian tries to calm Elloren by saying, “they may look like humans, Elloren, but they aren’t” (Forest 54). Further into the text, Elloren discovers that Selkies are in fact traded and enslaved amongst Gardnerian men for sexual purposes (Forest 361). This refusal to see them as human, but also to view their bodies as property, resonates with many of the abusive, violent, and dehumanizing sexual practices that white enslavers inflicted on enslaved women (Livesey).

Lupines are also treated as an animalized race and are characterized by many of the negative stereotypes applied by settlers to Indigenous peoples to justify land theft. Lupines are described as shapeshifters who live in packs in the woods and idolize nature. As jaye simpson explains in an episode on the *Witch Please* podcast, there are a lot of stories in Indigenous communities about people who have the ability to skin walk or transform into animals (25:30). In this case, the problem isn't that mythology about shapeshifting is used, but the way that the Lupines are also viewed as predatory and criminal due to their shapeshifting. By being deemed threatening, negative tropes about Indigenous peoples are being perpetuated. A classmate of Elloren's explains, "They're wild Elloren. Like Animals. And the males are immoral and dangerous" (Forest 237). Gardnerian women have been taught to believe that male Lupines are sexually predatory and even likely to physically carry them off to mate in the forest if they don't guard their chastity (Forest 74). Between their love of nature, hunter gatherer lifestyle, and the shapeshifting legends surrounding Indigenous communities, Lupines seem to be stereotypical representations of animalized and racialized others. The predatory sexuality that is assigned to them through Gardnerian racism also mirrors the captivity narratives that were popular amongst European settlers in North America that falsely painted Indigenous men as kidnappers and rapists of white women (Vickers, Kosman and McGregor). I also argue that describing their communities as "packs," of which there are several that function autonomously, can be read as a misunderstanding and appropriation of Indigenous nation and community structures. These characteristics of the Lupine community mark them as racialized in ways that mirror the stereotypes deployed against Indigenous communities.

Probably, the most discriminated and animalized group in *The Black Witch* are the Icarals, people with black wings and fire abilities (Forest 98). Icaral children can be born into

any racial group but are treated as demonic and evil almost universally. They are treated by the Gardnerians as spiritually polluting, and even looking at them can destroy one's purity (Forest 244). Elloren describes her lodgings—which she shares with two Icarals—as "living barely a step above animals" (Forest 243). Icarals are criminalized by the Gardnerian justice system including through all males being imprisoned and having their wings removed, being locked in a Sanitorium for the criminally insane, and being executed for crimes they haven't committed (Forest 140, 219, 530). The criminal industrial complex in Gardnerian society serves as a way to incarcerate People of Color. The treatment of the Icaral group as subhuman and in need of containment shows just how deep the white supremacy and anti-Blackness goes in Gardnerian society.

The overt racism towards Selkies, Lupines, and Icarals can be read as an expression of white supremacy. The Selkies are traded as property in ways that mirror enslavement in the U.S and the sexual exploitation of Black and Indigenous bodies. The Lupines are animalized and viewed as sexually aggressive, a risk to pure Gardnerian women that resembles the fearmongering of relationships between Indigenous men and white women. And finally, the Icarals are policed by the government, locked in prisons, and subject to brutality from the criminal justice system. The discrimination and oppression are compounded by sexism, classism, and homophobia. Because of the extremely patriarchal and elitist attitudes in Gardneria, the intersectional identities of the characters in this text make many multiply marginalized and thus more likely to be targeted for violence and abuse. Even amongst those experiencing the white privilege associated with Gardnerian's wand magic, women and queer folx are treated as objects instead of people.

Finally, it is important to note who this novel appears to be written for and who readers may be pushed towards empathizing with. While this text does highlight the injustice of racism, sexism, homophobia, and class hierarchies, it also seems to attempt to forge a relationship between the reader and the protagonist Elloren Gardner. Despite her support of oppressed groups towards the end of the book, readers travel with her on her journey towards what could be described as 'wokeness'. Because the text is written through first person narration, readers are likely to connect with Elloren. For example, on Elloren's first day of kitchen labor, she is kicked into the mud and manure by the Orisk and Kelt workers (both oppressed races) (Forest 190–191). While Elloren is treated cruelly, in comparison to the abuse's other races face, this is a minor incident, yet her emotional pain takes up four pages of text. Additionally, although it is common for oppressed peoples to have work assignments and to be living in poverty at the University, there is a large amount of time spent despairing over Elloren's circumstances, meanwhile hardly any time is spent on the work assignments and lack of funds for Keltic students, Icaral students etc. While I don't think this text is written to make people with racist views feel validated, it is written in a way that suggests Elloren is heroic for the bare minimum of change: recognizing humanity in other races and speaking out on their behalf. In the way that white feminism has often neglected the concerns of folx who are also marginalized by race, sexuality, and financial status, Elloren's wokeness fails to recognize her own privilege in other areas. The fact that the series makes the heroine a cishetero white woman of a wealthy social class doesn't break any conventions of the genre, or resist the white savior myth, the text endorses it. While the work happening to proclaim the harms of racism is effective, it feels overshadowed by the privileged perspective of the text's protagonist. Because young adult novels are often written to interrogate our real-world social institutions and problems, it is important to question the intended audience

of a piece, and whether it resists or reinforces the harmful practices of racism and white supremacy. In this case, I would articulate the discussion of racism and white supremacy as complicated. Forest uses Elloren to enact important work to challenge stereotypes, and model how people can change and become more mindful and critical of their previously held beliefs. In my opinion, where the text falls short is the way that the white character who has a change of heart is portrayed as a hero, meanwhile, the characters of color who have been resisting oppression all along are treated as less worthy of praise. Ultimately, this book models the danger of inherited magical power, and the whiteness it represents.

The Last Fallen Star

When analyzing *The Last Fallen Star* (2021), I first want to acknowledge the vital representational work being done in this novel. Kim's book focuses on Korean mythology and magic, a move that pushes against the predominately white genre of fantasy and the children's and young adult cannon. Children's and YA literature scholar, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, states that, "when people of color seek passageways into the fantastic, we have often discovered that the doors are barred. Even the very act of dreaming of worlds-that-never-were can be challenging when the known world does not provide many liberating spaces" (Thomas 2). The world that Kim has created seeks to enable the stories of People of Color, and for People of Color to be told and valorized. Kim engages in important representational work by creating characters with a diverse range of experiences as Asian Americans, much of which push against the model minority myth. Historian, Erika Lee, explains that the model minority myth paints a single picture of Asian Americans as exceptionally smart, high achieving, and rule-following (373–374). This myth discounts the struggles that Asian Americans continue to face in U.S.

society, as well as refusing to acknowledge lived experiences that exist outside of the stereotype. By creating characters who can be read as disabled and who disregard authority, yet are also the heroes, Kim challenges this myth, as well as the whiteness inherent in the fantasy genre.

Graci Kim's debut middle grade novel, *The Last Fallen Star*, follows the journey of Riley Oh, an adopted Korean tween who is being raised by Korean healing witch parents, and a sister who also possesses their magical ability and blood (1). The Oh family lives in modern day Los Angeles and are part of the Gom clan, one of several gifted (magical) clans who all have specific types of magical abilities (Kim 1). While it could work to read the gifted clans as white, because characters are explicitly identified as Korean American, and the way their magical inheritance functions, I argue that a better and more complex reading of magical transference in this text can be made using the concept of blood quantum, with some implications potentially for ability and disability. I will first discuss the possibility of disability being tied to saram identity (people without magical ability living in a magical world), and then progress into my main argument for reading gifted clan membership as a practice of blood quantum gatekeeping.

Disability and Saram Identity

The novel begins a couple days before Hattie, Riley's sister, is set to take her place in their society as a healing (Gom) witch (Kim 1). There is an immediate discussion in this novel of blood and lineage. Riley thinks of Hattie, "it's her birthright. Healing magic flows in her blood, as it flows through our parents' blood, because we, the Gom clan, are descendants of the Cave Bear Goddess—the patron goddess of service and sacrifice" (Kim 1). Riley also identifies herself as a "non-gifted person without a lick of magic. I'm a saram" (Kim 1). In gifted society, Riley is accepted as a member of her family, but deprived of the inherited right to power and magic that

all blood-related children have access to. Her lack of ability is treated as more than a simple lack of skill, but as a lack of community membership and a disappointment to the rest of the Gifted world. Riley narrates,

> "I'm told my biological parents were of Korean ethnicity too. But that's about where the similarities end. Where my Gom family are round, petite, and unblemished, I'm tall and freckled. I'm all pointy chin and high cheekbones, with more angles than curves. I'm the one people raise their eyebrows at when they look at our family photos" (Kim 6).

Riley's feeling of exclusion certainly appears to be grounded partially in her status as an adopted child, looking and feeling different than her parents and sister. While the physical differences are important, I think the larger issue is grounded in her lack of magical ability. I argue that part of the reason for her feeling 'less than' could also be connected to her being marked as disabled by her lack of magical giftedness, at least in the early part of the text. Scholar Jes Battis explains disability as "living in a world not designed for you," and this is exactly Riley's situation (22:30–23:10 Kosman and McGregor). Riley is in the minority in her community, one of the only people associated with the gifted clans to be a saram. The world of the gifted clans is not created for her, and there seem to be no accessibility tools for her to utilize. Riley is denied access to a Gi bracelet, the only way to even attempt to access magic as an uninitiated minor (Kim 3). Unlike simply lacking a skill, Riley is assumed to be incapable simply because of her identity as a saram (Kim 8). Hattie explains this injustice well stating, "'If she tanks the initiation and the Cave Bear Goddess doesn't give her a Gi, then fine. Or if Riley doesn't want to do it, then that's also fine. But not giving her the freedom to choose? That's wrong on so many levels'" (Kim 8). Instead of providing Riley with reasonable accommodations, because she is perceived is disabled, the

elders of her community don't even allow her the opportunity to attempt to learn magic. This is fundamentally different from *The Black Witch,* where the protagonist Elloren is part of the majority in her community, where the ability to access significant wand magic is rare. Riley is living in a community in which she lacks the ability to access services and membership because she is one of the few who are not able or allowed to use magic. Because disability is usually marked by characteristics labeled as 'abnormal,' Riley's rare lack of magical talent can be interpreted through the medical model of disability as a magical disability. Disability scholar, Allison Kafer, writes that "the medical model of disability frames atypical bodies and minds as deviant, pathological, and defective, best understood and addressed in medical terms" (Kafer 5). Riley's saram identity is considered abnormal and is the cause of her being bullied at school (Kim 35). Since a large portion of the text centers on Riley's and Hattie's scheme to fix Riley's lack of witchery, not fix the system that refused her magic, this framing can be read through the medical model of disability that seeks to fix the disabled person's 'problems' rather than make societal changes towards accessibility. The gifted clans don't make witchery accessible to Riley by adjusting the requirements for initiation, she pursues gaining magic in order to fit the existing societal structure. Riley further describes her lack of witchery stating, "But let's face it—compared to my confident and composed family, I'm flawed. It's yet another piece of evidence that I'm not a true Oh. That I'm weak and don't belong" (Kim 6). Riley's view of herself as less valuable and less capable emphasized the internalized ableism she has absorbed due to her exclusion from magic.

While the notion of Riley as a disabled character is useful in the first third of the text, we later discover that she does have some magical ability. Because of that shift in her characterization, it seems appropriate to also consider the blood quantum methodology in

relation to membership in the gifted clans. In order to thoroughly analyze gifted clan membership for blood quantum, it is important to consider how magic is not just inherited but authenticated in *The Last Fallen Star*.

Blood Quantum and the Search for Authenticity

In order to thoroughly consider the concepts of blood quantum for magical transference and clan membership, I need to create a framework for how Indigenous blood quantum practices can intersect with this fictional world. So, what is blood? According to scholar of Native Studies, Kim TallBear, in the US and Canada, "Blood is identity" (50). As a concept, blood is associated with genes and inheritance. These traits are often viewed as essential and natural. When considering race and fantasy, it is important to engage with the concept of biological essentialism. Biological essentialism is a concept that suggests that much of our identities, including gender, and race, are encoded in our genes or blood and that these characteristics are unchangeable and natural (Pinho and Gaunt, Byrd and Hughey).

The concept of blood quantum, a method of defining Indigenous identity, is one example of the way blood is seen in the real world as a racialized form of inheritance and biological essentialism. This colonial framework of blood quantum discounted Indigenous knowledge and according to scholar of American and Native Studies J. Kēhaulani Kauauni, "is a demeaning alternative to Hawaiian kinship and genealogy as inclusive and expansive Indigenous models of belonging" (38). This exclusion of alternative forms of relationality in practice restricts group membership to people who are able to meet an arbitrary set of biological markers in order to prove authenticity. For example, DNA tests that are said to measure one's racial identity, misconstrue what it means to be Indigenous by grounding it in abstract biological proof rather

than the relations and communities one is a part of (TallBear 4). Although we now understand that there is a difference between genes, DNA, inheritance, and blood, its symbolism as a marker of identity remains powerful. “If the material properties of blood—the red fluid itself—are no longer legitimate for the study of race, symbolic blood remains very much at play in twenty-first-century socio-political formations of the Indian” (TallBear 47). This symbol of blood as a measurement and marker of authenticity functions in a way that marks both members and non-members through racialized terms. In *The Last Fallen Star*, this marking of members and non-members either expands opportunities or limits them in ways that are cultural, financial, and institutional, just like real world blood quantum policies.

Kauauni states that “Blood quantum is a fractionalizing measurement—a calculation of “distance” in relation to some supposed purity to mark one’s generational proximity to a “full-blood” forebear” (2). For example, in order to prove one’s Native Hawaiian blood quantum, one must demonstrate that they possess a minimum of 50% Hawaiian blood (Kauauni 3). This would mean having either one parent who was 100% Native Hawaiian, or two parents who are 50% Hawaiian. In the U.S. and Canada, Indigenous tribal communities often set their own blood quantum requirements, typically between 25% and 50% (TallBear 61). This practice of fractionalizing blood has often been used as a colonial tool to enable gatekeeping of benefits that are supposed to be available to Indigenous communities both in the continental U.S. and to Indigenous Hawaiians. TallBear explains that the practice of enforcing blood quantum “emerged as an incisive social technique for managing Native American lands and peoples” (55). This can mean that it is used to limit access to both Indigenous lands, Indigenous identities, and Indigenous government benefits. For example, the state of Hawaii has a policy that is set up to provide leased lands with low to no taxes for up to 99 years to residents who can meet the 50%

Native Hawaiian blood quantum (Kauauni 4–5). While this seems like a financial benefit or step toward rematriation for the Indigenous community, only 8,000 leases have currently been granted (Kauauni 4). The state has in fact been charged with violations of their own leasing policies in refusing to provide the lands as the leasing policies require (Kauauni 4). In fact, Kauauni states, "it is thought that, by measuring identity through 50-percent blood quantum, U.S. legislators presumed Hawaiians would eventually no longer qualify for lands" (7). The use of blood quantum to create an artificial scarcity of Indigenous identities and therefore, a scarcity of Indigenous benefits and access to land, mirrors the way that magic is treated in many YAM texts as both racialized and as being artificially low in supply. I will be connecting this practice to the requirement of being gifted (magical) enough, by considering the privileges granted once proof of magical elemental power are established in *The Last Fallen Star*.

Gifted membership is first and foremost a matter of blood ties. Even though Riley's family advocated for her being allowed to initiate despite her being adopted, this was refused by the clan's leadership (Kim 7–9). Emmett, Riley's friend, is the product of a gifted mother and saram father, which was widely considered unacceptable (Kim 35). His 50% blood tie did allow him membership, but Riley's lack of any blood tie is viewed with more suspicion.

As I previously explained, the clans have different types of magic, and different professions based on those abilities. Abilities of the witches are based on five elements: wood, earth, water, fire, and metal (Kim 16). When a child born into the gifted clans is 100 days old, they participate in a ceremony that identifies which elements they have power with and create a Gi (magical bracelet) that supplies the missing one and enables them to perform magic when supervised by an adult (Kim 15–16). Riley explains, "the catch is that witches are born with only four internal elements. Which is why they must wear the fifth element—the one they lack around

their wrist" (Kim 16). Once a child is of age 13, they get initiated into their specific clan with a magic marking, or permanent Gi, holding a color specific to their clan identities (Kim 2). When Riley was 100 days old, her parents had her participate in the elemental ritual and she received four fire elements (Kim 18). Witches must have four different elements, which proved that she was a saram, and not entitled to magic (Kim 18). This practice of requiring proof of a specific quantity of elements and authenticating one's identity as a gifted clan member has a lot in common with the practice of proving blood quantum in order to have one's community membership recognized. Gifted members must first prove a blood tie to the clans through direct ancestry of at least one parent, but preference is granted for two parents. New members must then verify their authenticity through possessing a quantity of at least four magical elements. Riley, having one element appear four times, was rejected and refused the possibility of magical power and gifted clan membership. Losing this membership denies her power, economic opportunities, as well as the sense of community that she is so desperate for. Riley feels deep sadness at this apparent lack of magic stating, "'Do you think maybe…that perhaps…they don't want me to have magic? They think I'm not good enough to be a healer and I don't deserve to be a Gom?'" (Kim 48). This failure to pass an authenticity test based on blood can be compared to the practice of authenticating blood quantum. While the context is different because we don't have knowledge of a colonial past with the Gom community, this practice still enacts harm upon folx without access to witchery, and without the bloodlines to prove it.

While Riley is originally described as having no magic, she discovers that while she was indeed adopted, her birth parents were members of a gifted clan, the Horangi (Kim 59). The Horangi clan was banished after an attempted power grab from the other clans, and they were cursed (Kim 62). Understandably, Riley is outraged at having been lied to stating, "Everything I

have ever known about me, about my identity, about my heritage…it was all just a made-up story" (Kim 61–62). The Ohs are told that they have two choices, they can banish Riley and keep their powers, or keep Riley and have their powers removed by a curse (Kim 65). This revelation is what sends Riley on her adventure to save her family from losing their magic, and more importantly to save her sister, Hattie's, life after a summoning spell goes wrong.

While this revelation that the protagonist does have magic seems to follow a similar course to *The Black Witch* Chronicles, what sets it apart is the way that Riley chooses to resist the societal pressure she is experiencing. Instead of seeking to obtain membership in the clan she was adopted into, Riley chooses the clan that embraces her for the abilities she does possess. Although Elloren does rebel from the Gardnerian's religious ideology and institutions, she always seems at war with her body, her power, and her belief system. Although this internal discomfort doesn't change Elloren's magical ability, it does destabilize her confidence in herself. Riley on the other hand, seems to welcome ideas that complicate her antecedent knowledge, and embraces her power and her identity. When visiting the expelled scholar clan (Horangi), Riley discovers that they have found a way around the curse against their magic. Sora, a Horangi clan member explains, "'In a traditional Gi ceremony, the cauldron reveals the element you're not born with. The focus is on what you lack'" (Kim 172). She continues, "'What if, instead of focusing on what we lack, we focus on what we already possess?'" (Kim 172). This switch from focusing on what is missing, to what is already in possession suggests a change in mindset that pushes against the idea of scarcity. This revelation acts as a boost of confidence in Riley, and that confidence in a female protagonist feels like a reclamation of the representation of young women. Riley thinks, "I grew up thinking I didn't have a drop of magic in my blood. Now I find out there's a way I could control the thing I've always been ashamed of" (Kim 173). In this

moment, Riley realizes that she doesn't need to fight herself, her body, or her power. She can instead lean into what she has an abundance of. While her embracing of her blood and inheritance does present inherited privilege, she is doing so in a way that goes against the societal pressure to conform to blood quantum strategy employed by the rest of the gifted clan community. It is a refusal to treat the Gom ceremony as the only way to access magic, or even as the right way to practice witchery.

Despite this strategic resistance to the idea that she is lacking, it is still important to keep in mind that a blood-based transfer of power is a requirement. When Riley is debating whether to initiate into the Horangi clan, Sora says, "'You are of Horangi blood,'" and "'It is time for you to return to your rightful clan'" (Kim 184). Riley does initiate into the Horangi clan and uses her fire, her once despised element, to uncover the truth behind the uprising in the clans and defeat the Cave Bear Goddess who was the mastermind behind all of the deception and death amongst the gifted clans.

While this text does important representational and resistance work, seeking to challenge notions of whiteness surrounding fantasy and magic, it still presents the only way to access magical power as biological inheritance. This is problematic because the history of race science and blood purity has been used as a tool of white supremacy and colonial genocide. By focusing only on traits defined by blood, there is no room for characters to seek their own fates, engage in alternative forms of kinship, or challenge barriers to become their best versions of themselves. The Oh family, and even their adopted daughter, Riley, must have blood ties to be able to access their power, although those ties can be with any of the gifted clans. These blood ties are also required to be authenticated through an initiation process that necessitates a specific quantity of magical elements in order to be given a Gi to access magic freely. The quantification of magical

ability resonates with the colonially imposed practice of blood quantum, in that it creates barriers to access based on perceived lack of authenticity. It also functions through the premise of artificial scarcity, making it seem like there is a limited supply of magic, and only those with true blood connection are allowed to access the supply. This text provides a more diverse representation of blood-based magical transference, yet it still relies on biology as the guiding principle.

Inheritance and Privilege

Both *The Black Witch* by Laurie Forest and *The Last Fallen Star* by Graci Kim, feature representations of magical biological essentialism, specifically the blood-based transfer of magical ability. The language of blood, veins, and heritage is prevalent in both texts in ways that point to the absolute requirement of biological relationships to magic. Characters without those blood connections are treated as racialized, classed, and not able-bodied in order to reinforce notions of magical supremacy. Even though the one drop rule and blood quantum use blood-based notions of race differently, they both were created as tools of white supremacy and settler colonialism with the intent to discriminate against groups deemed 'non-white' and gain increasing access to land and bodies (McGregor and Kosman 33:20–36:45). Blood quantum and the one drop rule both serve to benefit white people through the removal of rights and services from BIPOC communities, with blood quantum making it harder to claim a minority identity and access to one's land and the one drop rule making it hard to claim whiteness and sovereignty over one's own body, so the hypocrisy of these systems and those that benefit from them is clear. While Elloren in *The Black Witch* demonstrates explicit whiteness, despite her low-class status due to her apparent level 1 magical ability, further into the series she realizes that she is in fact

the most powerful mage to have ever lived. Her identity as a white, cisgender, heterosexual, wealthy, and able-magiced character places her in a position of privilege and sets her up as a white savior in the text. She is an idealized mage in Gardnerian society, who decides to resist the oppressive government, but who still is able to leverage her privilege of magic in a variety of ways. Meanwhile, Riley is born into a distinct lack of privilege, believing she has no magic, only to find out that she is a member of an excommunicated clan, a blood link worse than simply being a saram. Magic in *The Last Fallen Star* is required to be authenticated and quantified in order to be deemed worthy of gifted clan status. While Riley does find a way to access her magic, it is by leaning into the clan that has been demonized and learning to love herself and her power as is. Riley is still inheriting her magic through blood, but she is refusing to follow the rules laid out through the blood quantum system of initiation. That rebellion pushes against the notion of blood purity in a way that feels important to the narrative. Because of the blood transmission required in both of these magical systems of inheritance, one's ability to access magic is predetermined with no room for outsiders to eventually become a part of the community. The blood-based model of magical inheritance makes it impossible to create open and accessible magical communities, and ultimately creates oppressive systems of power based on race. While the trend of blood-based inheritance remains popular in fantasy texts, there are novels that are attempting to model spiritual, community, and mentorship transferences of magical ability. The next chapter will explore novels that attempt alternative methods of magical transfer, and which open up magic to new relationalities.

CHAPTER III: IT'S IN THE COMMUNITY: MENTORSHIP AND SPIRITUALLY INHERITED MAGIC

This chapter has three primary objectives: to articulate challenges to blood-based inheritance patterns in YAM texts, to consider the class hierarchy that still exists in some community based magical models, and to explore opportunities for alternative and queer kinship that are created by open magical systems. I argue that while there are still ways to privilege certain groups in community based magical transference, these non-biological models open more possibilities for marginalized communities to be represented in YAM texts, including BIPOC and queer characters. The removal of biological essentialism also creates space for characters in YAM texts to grow and change with more fluidity than they have in biologically defined models where their destiny is ultimately decided for them. By working with both mentorship and spiritually inherited magic, inheritance practices function less as a given, and instead value relationality with one's mentor or fellow practitioners.

In this chapter I will begin by analyzing magical transference patterns that focus on mentorship, kinship, and spirituality. I will consider two primary texts, *Akata Witch* (2011) by Nnedi Okorafor and *The Lost Coast* (2019) by Amy Rose Capetta. Okorafor is a Nigerian American author of science fiction and fantasy novels for both adults and teens. *Akata Witch* (2011) is part of a three-book series written as a young adult fantasy novel. *Akata Witch* follows 12-year-old Sunny Nwazue, who was born in the U.S. and has recently moved back to her parents' home country of Nigeria. Sunny is both Black and albino and struggles to make friends. Sunny is marked as disabled by her albinism which puts her at risk of violence due to people with albinism being dismembered for magical purposes in parts of Africa (Bianco, Gibbons, Dixon). Her representation of disability and African magic is particularly important to the novel

as a whole. Sunny meets some classmates who help her discover that she is what they call a Leopard person, someone who is capable of juju (magic). Unlike her friends, Sunny spends most of the book thinking she is what they call a 'free agent' or someone whose spiritual connection to the Leopard community is unknown, which leads to her feeling like a second-class citizen despite her group affiliation. Sunny and her new friends are mentored by other Leopard people and spend much of the novel searching for a mysterious killer who is targeting the Leopard community. Sunny suggests her second class treatment as a free agent Leopard person is a demonstration of racism (Okorafor 97). Although this novel challenges notions of biological inheritance, I argue that because of her second-class status in the community, and the lack of familial linkage, the Leopard hierarchy in addition to upholding racial hierarchies, also enacts conflicts between high bourgeoisie and the nouveau riche. Because race and class are interlocking systems of oppression, these two forces function in the Leopard community despite the lack of blood-based inheritance of magic.

Capetta is an American author of LGBTQIA+ young adult novels, as well as an activist for the queer community. She helped found an organization that sends queer inclusive books to shelters across the country. *The Lost Coast* (2019) is a standalone young adult novel that follows six queer witches, called the Grays, with the most recent addition to the group being Danny. These witches reside in California near huge redwood forests and are intimately connected to the natural world. Danny discovers that the Grays cast a spell to bring her to California to help her find their friend whose soul and personality have suddenly disappeared. The Grays investigate some mysterious deaths and work together to find the soul of the missing member. Throughout this book, magic is shared generously amongst this alternative kinship band of queer folx. This novel illustrates the one of the most open and non-hierarchical magical structure I have found in

YAM texts. I argue that the generosity of shared magic in this text creates new opportunities for relationality that challenge both biological essentialism and the notion of privileging inheritance at all.

Both of these novels present opposition to blood-based models of magical inheritance and engage in vital representational work with *Akata Witch* focusing on representations of disability and African folklore and magic, and *The Lost Coast* engaging in positive representations of the LGBTQIA+ community and of BIPOC witches. It is important to note the connection between open systems of magical transfer and the opportunities for diverse representation I will focus on reading *Akata Witch* for disability, mentorship, racial and class privilege, and oppression. Meanwhile, I will focus my analysis of *The Lost Coast* on completely open and community guided magical practice and the possibilities for queer kinship and family structures. Although my primary focus will be on the possibilities of community-based magical inheritance, I will also acknowledge the important work in challenging compulsory (hetero)sexuality that takes place in the Capetta's novel.

Challenging Biology

As I argued in chapter one, the dominant method of magical inheritance in YAM texts has been based on blood and biology. Most of the popular fantasy canon uses biological essentialism as the prerequisite for accessing and possessing magical abilities. By focusing on defined biological traits, this approach to magic creates a racialized system where character's abilities are predetermined and unchangeable. Not only does this limit the types of characters who can be created, but it plays into the medieval fantasy myth which relies upon medieval European imagery and settings to tell fantastical stories (Cecire, Thomas, Young). Although there are other

types of privileges that can be associated with inheritance, the removal of blood and phenotypical characteristics from magical power and politics pushes against the white supremacy of both the genre and of the internal struggles of characters. The opposition to white supremacy in the text also applies to who is identified as a hero or heroine. As I argued in chapter one, *The Black Witch* follows the white savior complex through Elloren's work to save her peers of other ethnic and racial groups at the University. In both *Akata Witch* and *The Lost Coast*, the protagonists are people with multiple marginalized identities. Sunny from *Akata Witch* is Black, albino, and female; while the Grays include members who identify as BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and fat. I argue that more diverse and complex representations of marginalized communities are possible, when authors create magical systems that resist biological essentialism.

Akata Witch

The system of magic in *Akata Witch* is complex and international, although readers are only exposed to the West African community of magic users, usually called Leopard people. The way magic is portrayed in the novel utilizes traditional magical lore and practices that deviate from much of the European and Western wand magic, such as that of *The Black Witch*. This pushes against the European fantasy model as described by scholar Helen Young. Sunny discovers that she is a Leopard person when her friends Orlu and Chichi take her through a magical ritual (Okorafor 33–34). Following the ritual, Sunny searches for answers asking, "'So you all are—witches or something?'" (Okorafor 35). Orlu explains, "'Here in Nigeria, we call ourselves Leopard People'" (Okorafor 36). One of the books Sunny is given for her training explains,

> A leopard person goes by many names around the world. The term 'Leopard Person' is a West African coinage, derived from the Efik term 'ekpe,' 'leopard.' All people of mystical true ability are Leopard people. And as human kind has evolved, so have leopard folk around the world organized (Okorafor 6).

Although they may go by different names, there are Leopard people of every race, ethnicity and community (Okorafor 45). People without the mystical abilities are called Lambs to distinguish between magic users and non-magic users. In West Africa, the headquarters of the Leopard community is called Leopard Knocks (Okorafor 79). Leopard Knocks is where the bulk of decisions are made regarding community organization, secrecy, and education. A bit later in the text, Sunny asks whether the Leopard community has anything to do with the real women and girls being accused of being witches in West Africa and is told that the accused are unrelated to those with actual magical ability (Okorafor 78).

During her education as a Leopard person, Sunny learns that juju magic functions through a natural balance of light and dark (Okorafor 158). This detail is important because instead of demonizing black magic like many fantasy texts, Okorafor instead suggests that there is no good magic and bad magic, merely a natural balance of juju that doesn't privilege one type of magic over another. *Akata Witch* by Nnedi Okorafor features a unique method of magical transference that doesn't require blood or biological transfer. This resistance to the white and black binary pushes back against the racism that is often inherent in systems of magic in YAM texts. When magic is viewed through a racialized lens, it further stigmatizes Of Color magics, and supports the belief of white purity. Removing the labels from magic, creates possibilities for less binary readings of power and practice.

Spiritual Transference of Magic

Now that I have provided the general framework for magic in this text, I want to examine how Leopard ability is transferred in *Akata Witch*. Unlike *The Black Witch* and *The Last Fallen Star*, magical ability is not transferred through blood and genetics. That said, there is still often a familial connection. "'Anyway, being a Leopard person is not genetic really,' Chichi continued. 'It's spiritual. The spiritual affects the physical… It's complicated. All you need to know is that Leopard people tend to keep it in the family. But sometimes it skips and jumps, like with you'" (Okorafor 78–79). This explanation is still quite confusing and convoluted. In the beginning of the novel, Sunny does not have a known connection to the Leopard community. Anatov, one of the mentors to this group of young Leopard people, tries to explain that the ability often travels from mother to child since the spiritual bond between them is so strong, but that it is not blood-based (Okorafor 53). Anatov states, "'In any case, you're what we call a free agent Leopard Person. You're in a Leopard spirit line…somehow. It's not a blood thing. Leopard ability doesn't travel in the physical. Through blood is familiar with spirit'" (Okorafor 52–53). This explanation creates an opportunity to consider the intersection of race and class in combination due to the multiple ways familial relationships create hierarchies. At the end of the book, Sunny finds evidence that her grandmother was a Leopard person, which establishes her connection to the community, although this connection still refuses blood-based inheritance models and also pushes against the notion that to be powerful, one must have two Leopard parents (Okorafor 344). The final piece to becoming a Leopard person is to be initiated. Although one may have ability, Chichi explains that to be a "functioning Leopard person," one must be formally initiated into the community (Okorafor 64).

Because of the lack of a blood-based inheritance model, magic in this text can be read as both racialized and classed. Although a family connection is typical in the magical transmission of Leopard ability, I argue that this magical transmission fits into multiple frameworks of oppression and privilege. The text is explicit that there is no blood involved in the transmission, in favor instead of spiritual connection and relationality, which could include race, but also can be centered on class, especially given the interlocking nature of these systems of oppression. Without blood-based transfer, there is the possibility of magic spreading amongst diverse groups of people and identity categories. The magic in this text is also explained as existing in all races and ethnic groups which pushes against notions of it being exclusively racialized. Unlike the Gardnerian specific wand magic, and Korean Gifted Clan specific magic, Okorafor discusses the fact that the US has its own Leopard community with headquarters in New York, while the African American headquarters is in South Carolina (79). She also discusses the tension amongst the different racial groups who have mystical Leopard ability. Sasha specifically discusses the racism in the Leopard community in the United States and how there is segregation between African American Leopard people and white Leopard People (Okorafor 79). Sasha says of the New York headquarters, "'It doesn't represent black folks. We are a minority, I guess. As a matter of fact—everything's biased toward European juju'" (Okorafor 79). This open discussion of magic being available across racial groups illustrates the way that this type of magical transference avoids biological essentialist methods.

Leopard ability maintains distance from the physical, although that doesn't mean it is free from privilege and oppression. Sunny herself refers to her second-class status as a free agent as racist (Okorafor 97). I want to acknowledge Leopard ability can and should be read as both racialized and classed. Children's and young adult literature scholar Bevin Roue has analyzed

Leopard ability, and more specifically the discrimination against free agents as being a colonial white force. Roue states, "What must be reiterated is *Akata Witch*'*s* explicit highlighting of the misguided inspiration for the demeaning caricatures of free agents is colonial (and racial) attitudes picked up by the author of FFfFA [Fast Facts for Free Agents] during her time in the West" (90). This colonial framework of FFfFA is also acknowledged in the novel when Anatov states,

> 'It was written by a woman named Isong Abong Effiong Isong, one of the most knowledgeable Leopard People of all time, of the world. She passed the fourth level. The problem was, for her learning experiences, she chose to move to Europe and then America, where she thought the truly civilized ideas were being knitted.' (Okorafor 112)

Anatov's ability to critique the viewpoint that marginalizes free agents as being developed in the United States and Europe highlights the colonial power structure as well as the institutionalized racism that has persisted, even in the Leopard community of Nigeria. Because race, especially in the west, is tied to class, it is important to consider the ways that Free Agents are treated as second class citizens in the Leopard community.

Free Agents as Second Class Citizens

Although there isn't a blood-based connection to magic in *Akata Witch*, the familial privilege that exists does provide fertile ground for analyzing the text for class privilege, which intertwines with racial notions of power. The Combahee River Collective explains, "We often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously" (Taylor 19). Scholar Cathy Cohen also discusses how race,

class, sexuality, and gender are all interconnected through overlapping systems of oppression (481). It is impossible to separate these institutions because in lived experience, they are often layered on top of each other to create a wide range of barriers to people experiencing differing combinations of oppressions. In analyzing *Akata Witch*, while acknowledging the racial and gendered systems of power and the ways they intersect, I am going to focus on the way social class functions in the Leopard world, specifically the way free agents are treated as the nouveau riche and pure spirit Leopard people are treated as the high bourgeoisie. Free agents are treated as outsiders, with a lack of understanding of the social customs of the ruling class and with a lack of knowledge about the world they have recently joined. While there is a familial connection, without the blood-based transmission of magic, there is an opportunity to consider the ways that familial wealth and social class are established in *Akata Witch*.

First, I want to create a framework for the conflict between old money and new money, or the high bourgeoisie and the nouveau riche. Scholar of education, Alpesh Maisuria, explains that neoliberal classism functions under the belief that anyone can be successful in raising their class status, even the poor, if they put in enough effort and energy into their work (302). This 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps' mentality is critical in understanding the nouveau riche, who are new money and self-made. Scholar Reinhild Kreis describes the three main characteristics of the nouveau riche and their distinction from the high bourgeoisie: they must have risen quickly (ideally in a single generation) to upper class status, they must have a counterpart to distinguish themselves from (in this case old money elite), and the nouveau riche must be uncomfortable, unfamiliar, and threatening to the elite community (383). These characteristics function as a way of othering part of the elite in a manner that lowers their social status and isolates them from other people of similar economic means. It also works to keep

social class familial in nature, without requiring direct blood-based inheritance. For example, people who marry into a high bourgeoisie family could still be considered upper middle class as can children adopted into those households. Scholar Jennifer Smith Maguire explains that a common distinction between these groups is that nouveau riche individuals are always trying to prove that they belong though overdoing elite characteristics, while high bourgeoisie individuals mark themselves seem better through discretion and subtlety (31). This notion of trying too hard to fit in is vital to understanding class disruption.

The idea of nouveau riche threatens the established order and creates discomfort through their challenge of who has access to wealth and power. Being white, cisgendered, and straight all increase the odds of moving up the ladder of social class and financial status. Smith Maguire explains that "In this cultural imagining, nouveau riches are not only individually out of control but are a part of a process run amok that threatens to overwhelm and wipe out the established upper-middle-class group" (36). If we consider the way that contemporary politicians describe People of Color as a threat to the white majority, we can see how race and class work in tandem to inspire fear amongst the group with the most power. In order to push back against this perceived onslaught of new money families attempting to claim elite status, the high bourgeoisie criticize their new money counterparts as unintelligent and vulgar (Smith Maguire 34–35). Kreis also explains, "The nouveau riche were not familiar with prevailing norms and tastes, and, wittingly or unwittingly, frequently offend those unspoken rules," which further solidifies their status as outsiders (383). What often marks the nouveau riche as outsiders in the wealthy and elite community is their lack of knowledge of social norms and practices, and their subsequent violations of those unwritten rules. The high bourgeoisie also use their ancestry ties (both through blood and marriage) as an argument for their higher status. This tie to ancestry can be

seen to privilege Leopard people with obvious family ties, but more importantly, the lack of access to knowledge about social norms and practices plays a large role in the way free agents are treated as second-class citizens. In the Leopard society in the United States of America, this class status is further complicated by the system of racial hierarchy and white supremacy that determine power.

The main source of discrimination towards free agents, who I am equating to the nouveau riche, comes from the book "Fast Facts for Free Agents" (FFfFA). This is a book Sunny receives during her education as a Leopard person and is written by a woman who holds extremely prejudiced beliefs about free agents. Subsequently, it is also the only book that explicitly talks about people without obvious familial ties to magic. In this book, free agents are described as needy, unintelligent, and ignorant (Okorafor 99). Those attributes fit right into the social climber trope, as well as the lack of understanding of unwritten rules that scholars Smith Maguire and Kreis discuss. FFfFA states, "It's doubtful that you have the intelligence to figure out," your unique abilities (Okorafor 99). The enslavement of People of Color was justified by white supremacists through these same faulty assumptions that suggested that race played a role in determining intelligence and self-reliance (Wilder, Biddiss). In this way, free agents can be thought of as dealing with the intersecting oppressions of race and class. FFfFA also describes free agents as being the result of "mixed up and confused spiritual genetics" (Okorafor 96). The book explains this inbetween space where free agents fit, which resembles the inbetween space of the nouveau riche who are not truly elite, but also not poor. "You are fortunate because being a free agent puts you (though uncomfortably) with the rest of us Leopard folk, and comfortably with Lambs. Your ignorance will smooth out the edges of your dealings with the world you used to be a part of" (Okorafor 118). In this way, Sunny (at least before we discover her

grandmother's magic) doesn't truly fit anywhere, although she can comfortably exist in Lamb society. Despite her supposed comfort in the Lamb world, her identity still exists in the inbetween space. This liminal existence is also something that many people of multiracial identities have described as being a problematic feature of white supremacy.

Not understanding the rules of the pure spirit Leopard or bourgeoisie community are displayed multiple times in the novel. The first time that Sunny truly begins to understand both her lesser status in the Leopard community and the depth of her ignorance about her magic is during a discussion with one of their mentors, Anatov. He states,

> Most Leopard people are like your friends here, born to two sorcerer parents—strong ancestor connections. They are the most powerful usually. Those born to one parent can't do much of anything unless they have an especially expensive juju knife or something like that or if they have an especially adept mother. It travels strongest from woman to child, since she's the one who has the closest spiritual bond with the developing fetus (Okorafor 52-53).

Based on this explanation, a couple could use a donated embryo of no biological relation, and still transmit their Leopard abilities to the child based on the mother to fetus spiritual connection. In this scene Sunny is made aware of her outsider status, and the likelihood of her being less powerful and magical than her friends who come from pure spirit lines. The assumption that free agents will have less potent abilities also suggests that Sunny isn't a member of the same social class. Another instance where Sunny gains awareness of her lower status is when learning about chittim (money used in Leopard Knocks). FFfFA explains, "There is only one way to earn chittim: by gaining knowledge and wisdom. The smarter you become, the better you process knowledge into wisdom the more chittim will fall and thus the richer you will be. As a free

agent, don't expect to get rich" (Okorafor 38). This immediate assumption that Sunny will be less smart, and therefore less successful in Leopard Knocks' financial world demonstrates a clear class bias against free agents. In this way, her racial identity and class identity as a free agent intersect to keep her from earning the chittim that would enable her to support herself in the Leopard world, especially since neither of her parents have Leopard currency to help her with. Finally, when Sunny is first discovering her identity, her friends Orlu and Chichi help her to find her spirit face. Spirit faces are a private image that is worn during the first seven days of life by people of 'pure' Leopard lineage (Okorafor 65). While these faces demonstrate power, they are also the equivalent of being seen naked, which Sunny is horrified to discover after showing her spirit face to her friends (Okorafor 66–67). Her lack of knowledge about the unspoken rules of the Leopard community mark her as other, and in my analysis, as nouveau riche.

Given Sunny's lack of spiritual ancestry, assumed unintelligence and ignorance, and her lack of knowledge about the Leopard community practices, I argue that free agents should be read through hierarchical class systems as nouveau riche, while folx of 'pure' Leopard inheritance should be read as high bourgeoises. Her lack of access can be attributed to the combination of her class status, racial identity in the Leopard world, which internationally has a white supremacist system of power, and her gender. Throughout the text, Sunny, who for the bulk of the novel is believed to be a free agent, shatters expectations and challenges the privileges of spiritual inheritance. Although it is revealed later that she has a connection through her grandmother, she still resists the 'pure' inheritance that is described as having two sorcerer parents. Her connection is more removed and less stable as few people seem to have been aware of her grandmother's membership. Because of her less linear path to Leopard society, and the many ways that the community and the "Fast Facts for Free Agents" text discriminate against

her, Sunny and free agent identity can be read through systems of class hierarchy. While this privilege of inheritance still exists in *Akata Witch*, the lack of a blood tie and possibility of other forms of relationality create opportunities for more inclusive membership. Although she is often treated as a second-class citizen, Sunny still possesses magical juju ability, and her skills are fostered through the mentorship system that exists as the educational institution for Leopard people. In fact, the FFfFA states, "you will have to find a dedicated and patient pure spirit who is willing to help someone as needy and ignorant as you," which despite being insulting, introduces the mentorship model within the Leopard community that is a vital part of helping free agents and ancestral Leopards alike develop their abilities (Okorafor 99).

Mentorship in the Leopard Community

Once a person is discovered to have mystical Leopard ability, they go through an educational process to join the community. This inclusion of mentorship roles opens the doors for Leopards without familial connection to receive training, although many are mentored by relatives. Since it is possible to be mentored by someone who is unrelated, although challenging, there are ways for free agents, those without pure spirit lines, to grow in magic and power. The process of Leopard education includes an initiation, mentorship, and testing to reach different levels of Leopard magical ability. Scholar Bevin Roue states, "In the novel, Sunny joins three other children—Nigerians Orlu and Chichi, and African American Sasha (from Chicago's south side) —to undertake rigorous training in the magic arts under the direction of mentors called scholars" (84). The type of mentor that a young Leopard person has depends on their skill and engagement with members of the community. Anatov explains to the group, "Most are only able to get a father, mother, grandmother or family member," to mentor them (Okorafor 148). To

have the best chance of successful juju learning, it is preferable to have a scholar as one's mentor (Okorafor 148). These mentors don't just provide magical knowledge and support, but also develop close relationships with their mentees. Scholar of English Education, Sandra Lindow, explains, "Because their goals are worthy, Okrorafor's protagonists earn the help of unusual mentors, door keepers who provide emotional support and essential, often secret information" (52). Providing care and emotional support is just as vital to new members of the Leopard community, especially free agents, because of the steep learning curve about the way the society functions and the rules that they abide by.

During the first phase of their training called Ekpiri, the Leopard people focus on their initiation and don't have individual mentors (Okorafor 79). At this stage, they all work with Anatov, who functions as an instructor for the group of friends. Once a Leopard person has completed the first level, they then move to Mbawkwa. Chichi explains, "'That's when you really start learning the heavy stuff. You have to pass all these tough tests to get in'" (Okorafor 80). The third level is called Ndibu, which is rare to achieve and the equivalent of a Ph.D. in juju (Okorafor 80). The final level, Oku Akama, is a mystery as only four people in Leopard Knocks have completed this task including: Anatov, Kehinde, Taiwo, and Sugar Cream (Okorafor 81). The graduates of Oku Akama are considered scholars and are the most desired mentors. The friends each have a different mentor who will help them to pass their second level tests. Anatov agrees to mentor Chichi, Kehinde will mentor Sasha, Taiwo will work with Orlu, and Sugar Cream will be mentoring Sunny. These relationships are made based on personal investment and engagement with members of the community. While Sunny is forced to struggle more than her peers based on her lack of pure spirit tie to the community, there is still the opportunity for a

multiply marginalized person to move up in the Leopard community through their growth in knowledge and power.

There are risks to the mentorship model though. Sunny is informed by Sugar Cream during a lesson that her grandmother, Sunny's only connection to the Leopard community, was mentor to the Black Hat killer, who subsequently killed his mentor (Sunny's grandmother) to steal her power (Okorafor 190). This realization serves as a warning to scholars to be careful about who they place their trust and knowledge with. Because the mentorship model opens up the community to those without direct ancestry, it both functions as a more inclusive magical inheritance model, but also presents dangers to these insular communities of magic and power. I argue that the benefit of having a community of mentorship and knowledge sharing is that it creates space for diverse members to join and engage with the Leopard community. Although there are still additional barriers in the path of those without race, class, or gender privilege, there is a possibility of inclusion and growth of power.

Disability and Akata Witch

Although my primary focus is the inheritance of magic in YAM texts, I feel that the intersectional identities, especially disability, are vital to the way magic is portrayed in *Akata Witch*. The representations of disability in this novel challenges notions of 'lacking' ability, by instead making disabilities a source of power and a desirable attribute. In addition to being able to practice juju, Leopard people often have individual abilities that are related to imperfections, or in many cases, to disabilities. FFfFA explains, "Often they are things that Lambs make fun of, imperfections. They can be physical, psychological, behavioral" (Okorafor 99). The imperfections that this group of young Leopards have actually enable them to have special

abilities. For example, both Sasha and Chichi have the abilities of excess energy and photographic memories (Okorafor 114). Anatov describes the pathologizing that would be inflicted on them by Lambs (non-magical persons),

> Most people would dismiss Chichi and Sasha as disrespectful, uncouth children who can't even get through a year of school. They'd insist they were destined to be criminals and streetwalkers. Doctors would prescribe Ritalin for their ADD and then throw their hands up, perplexed when it didn't work (Okorafor 114).

If left to the Lambs, their gifts would be deemed illness and disability. Orlu was diagnosed as dyslexic by his teachers at school, but his parents were elated instead of upset because they knew that his "serious disability" would mean that he has an extraordinary talent in the Leopard community (Okorafor 115). His parents were right. Orlu can undo other people's jujus without knowing what he did because of his ability to see and read things differently (Okorafor 115).

Sunny's disability or imperfection in the Lamb world is her albinism, but in the Leopard community it means she has "here and there" ability to enter the spirit world as well as the physical world (Okorafor 116). While her albinism has special powers in the Leopard world, it is important to note that Sunny still stands out in the Leopard world with this condition as it is not common, even amongst Leopards. Sunny's albinism would likely be the most stigmatized of the disabilities in the Lamb world that are discussed in the text and given the very real violence and persecution of people with albinism, it bears further consideration. "Albinism is a rare, non-contagious, genetic condition that limits the body's ability to process melanin, reducing or eliminating pigmentation in the skin, eyes and hair" (Bianco np). In over 20 countries in Africa, one of which is Nigeria, people with albinism (especially children) are hunted down because witch doctors view the body parts of folx with albinism valuable for magical purposes (Bianco,

Dixon). “Albino body parts such as teeth, bones, genitals, and thumbs have been used in rituals by traditional healers and witch doctors, who say they promote health, riches and success; these body parts, consumed as ‘medicine’ or carried around for good luck are dried up, ground, and packaged for illegal trade” (Bianco np). Much of this discrimination comes from the belief that albinos aren’t human and that their value is bound up in their body parts (Dixon np). There is also the superstition that albinos are supernatural ghosts, which aligns with the way that Sunny can go into the spirit world due to her albinism (Bianco np). The discrimination against people with albinism is part of why Okorafor decided to create Sunny (Gibbons np). Okorafor has stated that Sunny is based on a young woman named Sandra Marume who is albino and possesses much of the spunk and strength, attributes she has imbued in Sandra’s fictionalized avatar, Sunny. Because of the discrimination against people with albinism in Nigeria, Okorafor is confronting the violence by making her protagonist a strong female child with the disability, one which in the real world, could easily get her killed. Sunny’s connection to magic, or juju is also significant, since in contemporary Nigeria, her albinism wouldn’t give her power for herself, but ascribe that power to the consumption of her flesh. Okorafor is turning this violent practice on its head by having her powerfully magic child with albinism use her magical abilities to protect those around her, and to take down those who are violently enacting harm in her community. While these teen’s differences would mark them as ill in the Lamb community, amongst other magic users, these differences are sources of power.

Representations of disability are important to developing our collective consciousness surrounding accessibility, as well as to challenging the understanding that disability is a ‘lack’ of ability, or something that is inherently detrimental. The way that disability and imperfections are framed as sources for power pushes against the medical model of disability that aims to ‘fix’ or

'cure' what are seen as problems (Kafer, Kanter). "The medical model, also known as the deficit model, views people with disabilities as 'sick' and in need of intervention" (Kanter 8). As Anatov explains, in the Lamb world, their disabilities or imperfections would be treated as medical conditions requiring solutions. By instead marking them as powerful for these 'ailments', the Leopard community subverts common understandings of disability as problems and defects that make one's life more difficult or of less value. Although people of pure spirit still experience privilege, Sunny's impressive ability, built into what would be perceived as a disability in the Lamb world, gives her power that many ancestral Leopards would feel honored to possess.

Challenges and Opportunities of Spiritual Transference and Mentorship

Akata Witch by Nnedi Okorafor engages in important work surrounding both magical privilege and mentorship. Because of the disparate groups of pure spirit Leopard persons, and free agents, there are tensions throughout the text surrounding power and privilege. While there are colonial and racial hierarchies in the Leopard world, especially given its international prevalence, much of the discrimination towards free agents fits into notions of class, specifically the nouveau riche versus bourgeoise tension. At multiple points in *Akata Witch*, readers are told that the ability of Leopard people travels through the spirit. The ability does often stay within families due to the spiritual bond between mother and developing fetus, but it is described as not being based on blood or biology. While the traits Leopard membership often has familial ties, the removal of blood opens the door for other forms of inheritance, particularly spiritual inheritance. The spiritual transfer of magic still presents opportunities for privileged inheritance, however. When looking at the difference between free agents and ancestral Leopards, the tension between

the nouveau riche and bourgeoisie works well as an analytical comparison. Free agents are perceived as less intelligent, less cultured, and generally ignorant of the customs of the Leopard community. They lack the family ties that provide access to unwritten rules and normative behaviors. While still having access to magic, much like the nouveau riche still had vast financial resources, free agents are looked down upon for disrupting the canonical system of class hierarchy.

Despite still having a magical hierarchy, the mentorship of Leopard people presents opportunities for free agents to be part of the Leopard community and eventually become more accepted. Unlike blood-based models, there is a possibility of magic and community for folx who are born to non-Leopard parents. Sunny and her friends all engage in magical learning with their teacher, Anatov, and are designated mentors to help them continue their juju education to eventually level up in the system of Leopard power and magic. Providing places of learning for both the upper and lower levels of Leopard society means that there is a possibility to move up the ladder of classes in the community based on skill and knowledge acquisition. Unlike *The Black Witch*, magic is possible for those without magical blood, and it also is used by a variety of explicitly raced communities. Sunny, despite facing some barriers, is able to access considerable power, and her disability of albinism, while marginalizing in the Lamb world, functions as an additional power for her in the Leopard community. Sunny is treated as less worthy by some in her community, but her mentor, Sugar Cream, and her community of friends act as a network of care and support for her on her journey. The less restrictive inheritance patterns also present risks to the community based on their inclusive organization. There is room for bad actors to harm the Leopard community through accessing mentorship and learning and weaponizing it. While spiritual transference and mentorship create more space for outsiders to access magic, *The*

Lost Coast by Amy Rose Capetta provides a community mentorship model that is open to any with a desire and inclination for magical talent.

The Lost Coast

The Lost Coast by Amy Rose Capetta follows a queer teen named Danny, who for rather mysterious reasons, has recently moved to Tempest California with her mother. Upon moving to Tempest, Danny meets the Grays, a group of queer witches who it turns out have been looking for her to help them find one of their friends whose soul and personality has vanished. The group includes Hawthorn, Rush, Leila, June, and Imogen, all of whom are important representations of queer characters, and some who also identify as BIPOC. Imogen, the missing link to their group, is also the most powerful, but instead of working magic with the Grays, has mindlessly been walking through her high school routine with only the Grays concerned about what might be happening.

Danny, the recent transplant, gets drawn into this magical community through a spell the Grays cast hoping that they could find someone to return Imogen to them. "'The spell is for someone who wants to come,' Hawthorn said. They knew the rules of using magic. No harm was the first. Stealing a queer girl from a happy life might not have been a cut or a bruise, but it was definitely harm" (Capetta 19). Because Danny was fleeing her own nest of drama, the spell cast by the Grays caused her to wind up across the country and among the redwoods that are the defining characteristic of the lost coast. Danny and the Grays spend the majority of the novel investigating the disappearance of their friend and developing deep bonds of kinship and collective networks of care. I contend that this text not only challenges the myth of biological essentialism as a magical framework, but that it also creates opportunities for alternative kinship

practices and does important representational work for the LGBTQIA+ community through its unapologetically queer prose.

Magical Learning and Shared Community

Unlike most YAM texts, *The Lost Coast* by Capetta doesn't feature a biological transference of magical power. The Grays share magic with generosity and love as the guiding principles for their practices. In fact, out of the six witches, only one has a biological or familial connection: Hawthorn. Ora, Hawthorn's mother is described as a witch with a full coven at her back (Capetta 123). "Ora's rebellion had started with a spellbook purchased at fifteen and lasted the rest of her life. It became Hawthorn's life too" (Capetta 192). Although Ora passed her training onto her daughter, Ora herself began to practice magic on her own terms during her young adult years. Ora also works with members of the Grays and shares her magical knowledge outside of familial circles. Rush explains that Ora was the one to teach her about the possibilities of chanting and music as forms of magical practice (Capetta 235). Her willingness to share her practice is quite different from the closely guarded magical knowledge of *The Black Witch* or even *Akata Witch*. It is through Hawthorn, that the Grays began their experimentation with magic (Capetta 131).

During one of Danny's first interactions with the Grays, she is asked about what powers or abilities she possesses. Danny replies, "'I have the ability to make most people in a small town uncomfortable. I'm good at surprising my parents…in a bad way. I disappear sometimes," "Also, I kiss a lot of people. Mostly girls'" (Capetta 24). While these might not be thought of as conventional magical abilities, Danny immediately identifies that which sets her apart from the other people at her high school. She identifies magic as something outside of the norm, as an

othered practice. After this initial query, Hawthorn and the rest of the Grays decide to bring Danny into the fold and explain magic more fully to her. When trying to discover her magical abilities, Hawthorn suggests to Danny,

> 'Normally, I would say that you should start with whatever sort of working calls to you, try a bunch of different types until you build your own. I guess I should get this out of the way. There's a reason we're called the Grays and not the Wicca club of Tempest High School.
>
> It's not like we make everything up ourselves. But the craft is a braid of traditions, and a lot of those are tied to the places they came from. The way I see it, you can't swap out one for the other and expect it not to matter. Every place has its own rules, and Tempest is highly specific' (Capetta 39).

Danny isn't asked to prove her ability or authenticity in order to join the Grays, they instead take the time to explain to her how magic works and the potential pitfalls. They share with her the specificity of space and place and support her on her journey to develop her abilities. The Grays take Danny into the woods to work a sky clad (naked) spell to discover her powers and find out that she is a dowser (Capetta 82). "'Dowsers have searching magic. They find what's hidden, precious, out of reach. A lot of the time that means water. Some look for oil or gemstones. Forgotten graves" (Capetta 82). By helping Danny to identify her own power, the Grays ignore questions of authenticity, and instead strive for inclusion and connection with their newest witchy member.

The lack of gatekeeping around magic can be most demonstrated by the lack of hierarchy and competition for power. Unlike the hierarchy of Leopard people in *Akata Witch*, magic is

shared and thought to be community property in *The Lost Coast*. That said, each witch has identifiable abilities. Lelia has nature work, June has athame (knife magic), Hawthorn has scrying, Rush has song, Danny has dowsing, and Imogen can do a bit of everything (Capetta 64–65). When discussing the members magical talents, Hawthorne states, "'Overlap is allowed,'" and "'This isn't a sports team; we're not taking positions'" (Capetta 65). By refusing to fight over roles and abilities, the Grays resist the types of hierarchies that are apparent in most YAM texts. This point is further illustrated when Rush and Danny are discussing power.

> 'You're powerful.'
>
> 'Not like Imogen,' I say without thinking.
>
> 'Why does it have to be a competition?' Rush asks. 'Maybe we need everyone's power, not a fight over who has the most' (Capetta 236).

This collective possession of power suggests that they view magic as shared and communal. In fact, one of the tenets of magic according to the Grays is that you aren't supposed to do magic on your own (Capetta 200). It is considered dangerous to attempt magic without a supportive community involved. Secrets, and private magical practice are discouraged because magic is inherently community focused in this framework. June explains that "'Magic is like love. You see how other people do it, you have the stories and instructions they leave behind, but then you have to figure out how you do it'" (Capetta 73). Each coven, or community builds their magical practices around their relationships to each other.

Finally, this text also engages in the important work of destigmatizing magic and creating a foundation of positivity around the craft. Unlike many YAM texts, and society at large portray white magic as 'good' and black magic as 'bad,' *The Lost Coast* challenges that binary. This is particularly important because Of Color magics have often been stigmatized using the white

magic versus black magic trope. For example, hoodoo practices, a form of African magic and spirituality, was a tool of slave rebellions and was marked as dark and evil (Chireau, np). This type of stigmatizing is dismantled by Hawthorn, a self-proclaimed Black witch. "'White magic, black magic,' Hawthorn said, her hands flying. 'That's the kind of stuff people make up to sort us into piles.' What witches could do wasn't good or bad. It just was" (Capetta 193). There is a strong emphasis on balance, and the focus on the natural in this text supports the importance of both the light and the dark, day and night, positive and negative. This mirrors the way that juju is described as needing balance in *Akata Witch*. There is also a system of checks and balances for witches, to help discourage harmful magics. Hawthorn explains to the group, "'Anything you do comes back to you threefold'" (Capetta 104). The threefold recoil is a common feature of magic in fantasy literature that essentially means good magic, or positive magical energy will bring more goodness with it, while bad or evil magic does the reverse. There are consequences for the type of magic that a witch releases into the world. By having this system of checks and balances, there is retribution for those who use magic to cause damage.

Through a system of peer mentorship and open practice, The Grays defy conventional YAM narratives. Their focus on collectivity, and the generosity with which they share magical knowledge demolishes magical hierarchies and systems of privilege. Hawthorn, the only character with a magical parent, is not the most powerful in the group. She isn't perceived as being an authority of the craft, merely as a peer who has support to offer the others in her coven. The Oha coven that is featured in *Akata Witch* is also a supportive space, but the Leopard community at large holds to hierarchical practices based on the pureness of the spirit line which is different from the magical community of *The Lost Coast*. Capetta choses to explicitly challenge the idea of competition for power in the text. There isn't a rivalry amongst group

members, or a desire to outdo each other. This is a supportive network of care. The Grays function as more than a coven, they are an example of alternative kin or chosen family.

Queer Kinship Practices

The relationships of the Grays are complex and evolving throughout *The Lost Coast*. While the group identifies themselves as a coven or a group of practicing witches, they are far more than that to each other. Some have romantic relationships, both in and outside of the group, while others engage in only platonic relationships. Regardless of their familial connections or romantic statuses, their connection to each other is a priority. Lelia states, "'Witches before bitches,'" which despite being crass, serves to underscore their importance to each other (Capetta 160).

Prioritizing other relationalities and forms of kinship is discussed by scholars Kim TallBear, Elizabeth Brake, Elizabeth Freeman, Hil Malatino, and many other queer scholars. Brake has produced much of the scholarship surrounding amatonormativity, or the assumption that a long-term romantic partnership is a universal goal and a universal good. She suggests that friendships, and other love relationships can be just as, if not more valuable. "The significant friendships that amatonormativity wrongly devalues serve many functions of traditional families—material support, emotional security, and frequent companionship" (Brake 92). Instead of focusing on romantic partnerships, friends and other sorts of emotional support networks can provide the same sorts of benefits emotionally and financially that marriages, or long-term romantic partnerships have been thought to demonstrate. Increasingly, there seem to be more people resisting the compulsion of marriage and romantic partnership and instead creating other networks of care (Brake 92). Brake also explains, "The lack of amorous love, or the presence of

multiple overlapping love relationships, does not make such caretaking, affection, and intimacy less valuable" (Brake 95). If anything, creating broad networks of support and intimacy enables less pressure to be put on any one relationship, and allows people to distribute care more evenly amongst the cared for. This expansive notion of care networks that is a hallmark of the queer community is supported by Malatino. He states, "We tried to begin not with the family, but instead from the intricately interconnected spaces and places where trans and queer care labor occurs: the street, the club, the bar, the clinic, the community center, the classroom, the non-profit," and I would argue in the case of *The Lost Coast*, the forest, and the coven (Malantino 42).

Scholars TallBear and Freeman argue for broadening our definition of kin to include people who we are not biologically related to. Freeman states, "Kinship is a social and not biological fact, a matter of culture rather than nature" (299). With this framework, kin are the people we choose to socialize with and practice care towards. Freeman also points out the importance of renewing our relationalities as a kinship practice, which suggests that kinship requires consistent effort and engagement in order to maintain the relationality (308). TallBear focuses on the importance of alternative intimacies and kin stating, "Recognizing possibilities of other kinds of intimacies—not focused on biological reproduction and making population, but caretaking precious kin that come to us in diverse ways—is an important step to unsettling settler sex and family" (154). To TallBear's standpoint as an Indigenous scholar of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Nation, kin can come from different locations, relationalities, and time periods in our lives. There is no requirement of a legal or binding relationship, just a desire to care. TallBear also works to decolonize sexuality and family which have largely been determined by settler practices including, "advocating policies that support a more expansive definition of

family, and not rewarding normative family structures with social and financial benefits" (152). Including notions like chosen family, alternative kinship, and support networks in the definition of family allows marriage, reproduction, and genetics to be destabilized as the only valid form of relationality. The Grays model what this type of open relationality and kinship can look like.

All of the Grays function as a broad network of support and intimacy for each other. Although there are romantic relationships, primarily between Rush and Danny, and Rush and Imogen, these relationships never undermine or devalue the collective love that they have for each other. Following TallBear's explanation of multiple forms of intimacy, the Grays have different relationships with each other, but all are founded on intimacy both with their hearts, as well as with their bodies in ways that challenge romantic and sexual hierarchies. There is a high level of intimacy involved when Danny practices a sky clad (naked) spell with them, and the trust involved to feel safe and supported while being physically vulnerable (Capetta 82). Capetta writes, "The Grays took each other to school dances, brought each other corsages, held each other tight on dance floors while people laughed. They ignored the whispers about orgies. They were in love with each other, and that was good" (173). Their love for each other isn't painted as deviant, but instead as a model for support and care. They constantly renew their care and relationalities through mutual support for each other, both magically and emotionally which as Freeman argues, is an essential part of kinship practice. Despite the way it unsettles many in Tempest, their care for each other breaks down the boundaries that society would otherwise erect. In this text, it is their familial relationships that are often portrayed as strange or concerning. Danny thinks, "I've never thought about Imogen's family before. In my head, the Grays are her family" (104). In the case of the Grays, their chosen family supersedes their biological one in the level of trust and intimacy. According to Malatino, "When the home and

femininity are decentered, care shifts" (43). While there are several members of the Grays who identify with the term feminine, there are members who don't and none of them are legally or biologically related. The care in this text is decentered from the home space, and instead takes root deep in the forests where the Grays feel most connected and at peace. Biological family ties are less significant to the Grays than their intimate connection as friends and magical practitioners.

This can be clearly seen when ultimately, the person who betrayed Imogen was her biological sister, Haven (Capetta 306). Her chosen family, including the newest member, Danny, went in search of her lost soul and returned her to herself. Her biological sister is the one who betrayed Imogen, highlighting the fact that blood does not dictate care, compassion, or honesty. Haven, jealous of the bond between the Grays and of their magical connection, sought to scare and shatter them. While it is understandable that she would want access to magic, her lack of inclusion in the coven is based on her combative relationship with Imogen, as is common amongst siblings, not a failure of the magical system to allow for learning or interest. This type of vindictive behavior demonstrates the value placed on alternative forms of kinship in *The Lost Coast*.

At the end of the novel, Danny is fully accepted by Imogen as well as the rest of the Grays. "'That's what Grays do,' Imogen informs me. She's telling me that I'm one of them. They're all inviting me in" (Capetta 338–339). Danny also identifies them as her weirdos, claiming them as her kin and her support system (Capetta 338). She goes even further than just identifying them as her family, she also completes the ultimate demonstration of collectivity and support by inviting a witch from the past (Emma), who had become bonded with Imogen during her time trapped in the liminal space, into her body. Danny states, "I couldn't leave Emma there.

She's like us. I wanted a chance to be happy, and she deserves that too" (Capetta 336). Danny doesn't just share her support with the Grays, in an effort to practice care towards Imogen and Emma, she shares her body and mind. There is no aspect of themselves or their powers that are separate from each other. The Grays are as intertwined as the roots of the trees that they spend their time in.

Ultimately, what makes someone a member of the Grays isn't an initiation or trial by combat. What is needed is love for each other. By demonstrating her love for the Grays, Danny is accepted into their network of kinship, both as a lover to Rush, and as a friend to the others. While her powers are significant, they are not her primary means of becoming a part of this circle of friends. By modeling new types of relationality and kinship, *The Lost Coast* challenges the hierarchy of relationships and serves to model what compassionate care networks can look like. By subverting the practice of prioritizing biological connections, the magical hierarchy is displaced.

Representation of LGBTQIA+ Characters

While *The Lost Coast* does important work to challenge the biological essentialism that is frequently employed in YAM texts, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the important representational work it is also engaging in, both through complex representations of LGBTQIA+ characters, as well as featuring a racially diverse coven of witches. The fact that these witches have different racial and ethnic backgrounds, sexualities, and gender identities directly challenges blood-based models of transference because biological connection is not necessary. As a queer author, Amy Rose Capetta explains in an interview, "There is something so significant there, not only seeing yourself in the pages of a book but also seeing yourself out

there in the world" (Berardi np). By writing books that feature LGBTQIA+ characters, but that don't center on coming out or othering, this book is both a fantasy, as well as a complex and positive representation of queer characters and their adventures.

The Lost Coast takes time to normalize self-identification and the fluidity with which our identities evolve. The members of the Grays take the time to introduce themselves and share their pronouns. Lelia identifies as non-binary as well as gray asexual (Capetta 60–61). When Danny asks what her pronouns are, Lelia responds, "'She is fine, at least for now'" (Capetta 61). Lelia's open identification on the asexuality spectrum pushes against compulsory sexuality. Compulsory sexuality is the belief that everyone is sexual and has sexual desires, and the practice of rewarding sexual behavior, while labeling non-sexuality as deviant (Gupta 132). By proudly and explicitly identifying herself as asexual, Lelia pushes against the normalization of sexual desire. She also challenges the often one note depictions of asexuality, by explaining that she likes kissing, just nothing more (Capetta 173). Scholar of asexuality, Ela Przybylo, explains, "Asexuality is a crucial component of relationality and a possible ground for erotic and queer articulations of being with others and being with oneself" (77). Przybylo's understanding of asexuality, not just as an identity, although that is vital as well, but also as a way of relating and forming intimacy could open up new language for the ways that the Grays interact as a group. Asexual erotics "are about challenging the conflation of sexual desire with the erotic and thus opening up different paradigms for thinking about relating" (Przybylo 21). Lelia's openness and normalization of asexuality both as an identity, but also as a mode of relating, challenges popular understandings or what it means to perform intimacy and companionship.

June is the next to share her words with Danny. "'I'm a girl,' June says. 'Of the girly variety. And I like girl-types'" (Capetta 61). June is also described as being of Pacific Island

heritage. Hawthorn says, "'yeah, so…here are my words: I'm a bisexual Black witch with a pretty strong lean toward masculine folks'" (Capetta 62). These two friends also demonstrate the nuance of sexuality by providing depictions that aren't static or rigid but have a certain level of shades of gray. They also, despite not being in a romantic relationship, are unafraid to show physical affection, and frequently kiss each other in thanks (Capetta 173). Hawthorn also later explains that her father is her mom's dearest male friend who happens to be gay, bringing even more diverse family models into discussion (Capetta 114). Through not featuring an all-white coven, Capetta shares the message that magic is for everyone, not just for those with racial privilege. Rush choses to simply identify herself as fat, queer, and white (Capetta 62). Danny is then asked, "'So what word fits in a way that makes you happy at this very moment?" (Capetta 62).

> I grab for that word—and not just because Rush said it. It feels right to me. Less limiting in who I am, who I'm with. No solid lines around the definition. A way of saying different that doesn't have an apology folded in. 'Yeah. Queer.' (Capetta 63)

The way that the Grays discuss gender and sexuality as something that is supposed to bring joy and maintain fluidity feels fundamentally different from the often one note portrayals of queer characters. In Capetta's novel, sexual and gender identity is just one aspect of each witch's character, not their solely defining feature. The practice of sharing one's words and identities is normalized in this collection of friends. Danny even remarks, "The whole thing seems so ordinary and everyday to them," suggesting that this practice of self-identifying and joyous sharing is new to her but treated as an everyday occurrence amongst the Grays. Joyous

representations of queerness are vital to creating and LGBTQIA+ canon that doesn't just focus on trauma and the challenges of having a marginalized identity.

The Lost Coast also works towards a sex positivity as part of its complex representational work through normalizing queer sex. The couple that we are primarily exposed to is Rush and Danny. Their coupling also decenters the fatphobia that is often present in young adult texts. Rush is confident and happy with her curves, and they are never treated as anything less than beautiful. When Rush and Danny have sex towards the end of the book, it is treated as a loving and intimate experience. Danny thinks, "When I push my hand between her legs, they fall open like a book that's been waiting to be read. She covers my hand with hers, gives me a guided tour of what she wants" (Capetta 282). There isn't any worry about stigma or anxiety about their bodies. Danny describes Rush's touching of her saying, "Her fingers spread over my hips, and I tip forward slightly, anticipating the warmth but still not ready for how good it feels, sounds rushing out of my mouth before I can stop them. I don't need to see Rush smile now. I can feel it" (Capetta 283). The way that their sexual activity is depicted focuses on mutual pleasure and respect for each other's desires. Their sexual behavior is also teasingly validated by their friends, much in the way that heterosexual couples are teased with love by their friends. "'Ohh, sex magic!' June says, clapping. 'I've always wanted to try that.' 'Is it really so obvious?' Danny asks. 'You might as well put a neon sign over your vagina,' Lelia says" (Capetta 286). With this sex positive and carefully constructed encounter, Capetta pushes against the coming out stories that are full of angst and disappointment, and instead paints a beautiful picture of queer love.

Between the normalization of self-identifying and fluidity and the representation of queer sex, *The Lost Coast* creates stories about queer characters, which aren't exclusively about the struggles of claiming a queer identity. While this novel certainly highlights queerness, even in

the non-linear and meandering structure, the main focus is on magic, friendship, and connection to the natural world. Through her work of destabilizing biological connection, both to magic, and to loved ones, Capetta's novel creates a world open to all sorts of magic, all sorts of people, and all sorts of love.

Magical Community

Akata Witch and *The Lost Coast* both challenge blood-based patterns of magical inheritance. Sunny, the protagonist in Okorafor's novel, models the importance of support structures that aren't based on blood relation. Although she is connected to the spirit line through her grandmother, her mentors and friends play the most important roles in her magical learning and her support in the Leopard community. Her magic isn't rooted in blood, and therefore resists the limitations of biological essentialism. While still raced and classed, Leopard ability has the potential to skip generations and even appear randomly in the population. Okorafor's portrayal of spiritual transference demonstrates that there are possibilities for community outsiders to gain acceptance and skill in magic.

In addition to modeling spiritual and mentorship models of magical inheritance, *Akata Witch* also provides important representation for People of Color in the world of fantasy which is extremely whitewashed. All of the characters are Nigerian or African American, and the world that Okorafor has created draws on the mythology of Nigeria, specifically masquerades and juju (Gibbons np). Even the drawings of symbols that appear in the book, called Nsibidi, are an actual Indigenous form of writing from West Africa (Gibbons np). By insisting that blackness can be, and is indeed fantastical, Okorafor opens the door to diverse magical storytelling.

The Grays in Capetta's novel only have one member who has a familial connection to magic, and her skill is fostered through mentorship by her mother, not through some biological design. The rest of the Grays came to magic on their own, learning from their friends and from the natural world. Their magical circles center on principles of collectivity and care. There is an explicit push against any system of magical hierarchy in *The Lost Coast*, a rarity amongst YAM texts. In this novel, magic isn't raced or class, it is viewed as a community good, something to be shared with generosity. By encouraging the sharing of magic, Capetta challenges the myths both of biological essentialism, but also the idea that some are more deserving of magic than others. Magical ability isn't viewed as something you need to be authentic or valuable enough to possess, it is for all who come with an open mind and an open heart.

The Lost Coast also does important work with the representation of LGBTQIA+ folx, and highlighting that magic isn't just for white women. Capetta normalizes the ability of people to possess fluid identities that don't have to stay rigid over time but are dictated by joy instead. The Grays level of communication about their gender and sexual identities, and awareness of how they intersect with their race and a multitude of other factors shatters the glass ceiling of what is possible for YAM texts. Asexuality in the text emphasizes the ways of relating that are intimate, but not based on sexual desire. Even characters who experience explicit sexual desire also model emotional intimacy with other members of the coven. Witches are also not portrayed as white and female. While there are both white members of the group and female members, there are people who are part of the BIPOC community, as well as non-binary and queer characters. This refusal to create an exclusive white feminine coven challenges the white witchy trope that has long dominated the YAM world.

Through resisting blood-based transference models and their varied, intersectional representations, both *Akata Witch* and *The Lost Coast* open up magic to a world of new and diverse characters. They can come from any race, ethnicity, class, gender, or family structure. Magic isn't treated as something exclusively held in trust for the privilege of society. It is accessible primarily through community membership, and not one dictated exclusively through biology. Community and mentorship are treated as sources of magical education, a practice that opens up the fantastical to marginalized communities. Sunny, a disabled and Black girl is able to access powers and magical learning through her mentor and peer group in the Leopard community. Danny, who identifies as queer and lacks any magical connection through family, is also able to access power and magical learning through her chosen family: the Grays. The relationships between community members in both texts are not organized through blood, but through care and support networks. These are the kinds of novels that can make any child believe in their own magic.

CHAPTER IV: KEEPING THE BALANCE: CHALLENGING INHERITED AUTHENTICITY AND AVOIDING APPROPRIATION

This chapter has three primary objectives: to illustrate an open apprenticeship model of magical transfer, to model the challenges of decolonizing magic while avoiding appropriation, and to connect the fictional systems of magical inheritance to real world magickal communities. I argue that while non-biological models of magical transfer present new opportunities for alternative models of kinship and relationality, there is a risk of cultural and magical appropriation that mirrors the real-world appropriation of Of Color magicks by white folx. While the bulk of this thesis focuses on fictional magics, many of the problems related to inheritance are also experienced in modern magickal communities. In fact, what first piqued my interest in the concept of inheritance was a visit to an occult bookstore. I spoke to the owner who mentioned that there had recently been some problematic hierarchies developing in the local magickal communities and covens and that practitioners who referred to themselves as family tradition or hereditary witches had been suggesting that they had a more innate right to practice the craft than folx who came to magick on their own, often without any familial connection to the craft. This conversation pointing to disagreement in the community motivated me to consider the ways that inheritance of magic functioned in fantasy novels, and to critically examine these practices.

In this chapter, I blend the fictional with reality, beginning with an examination of Daniel José Older's novel, *Shadowshaper* (2015). Older is a Cuban and Jewish author of several young adult books, as well as an activist for decentering whiteness in the young adult fantasy genre. His novels, including *Shadowshaper*, challenge the medieval fantasy model of the genre and work to diversify the young adult (YA) canon. *Shadowshaper* follows the story of an Afro-Boricuan

teenage girl named Sierra Santiago. She originally has no knowledge of her supernatural ability (shadowshaping) or that the supernatural is present at all in her community. Shadowshaping in the novel is an ability to infuse art with spirits who can then move and do their creators bidding. Sierra first becomes interested in shadowshaping after a series of people go missing and she sees a photograph of a man named Dr. Jonathan Wick surrounded by her grandfather and his friends during a visit with her grandfather, Lázaro (Older 30). Láz, as he is often called, suffered from a stroke, and has had difficulty communicating, but still peaks Sierra's interest by sharing this photo with her (Older 30). Sierra and her fellow mural artist and friend Robbie, set off on a mission to find Lucera, a powerful female spirit and shadowshaper, and save the shadowshaper community from a white academic who is attempting to appropriate their spiritual and magical practices. When analyzing this text, I will consider the decolonial work that Older engages with through his world building and creation of this Of Color magical community, and the way this system of inheritance pushes against the biologically inherited models of magic. I will also expose the cultural appropriation that Dr. Wick, as a white academic, participates in, as well as the way that this appropriation serves as a warning about the risks of open systems of magic. After completing an analysis of *Shadowshaper*, I will incorporate real world examples of magickal and cultural appropriation and how they are mirrored in this fictional text. I will consider the all too common practice of white folx appropriating Of Color magickal practices, as well as the way Of Color magickal practices are commercialized and then distributed to white communities. Because magickal appropriation is a big area of debate in modern magickal communities, I will take time to consider the implications of fictional representations and how those can endorse or resist appropriative behavior. Through this analysis of both fictional magic and real-world communities, I will argue that while open magical communities push against

hierarchical notions of inheritance, it is vital to clearly identify where the line between openness and appropriation sits, and to create clear boundaries, especially around Of Color magickal practices that limit opportunities for commercialization and white appropriation.

Why Magickal Appropriation?

While there are many ways to explore the concept of cultural appropriation, I chose to focus on witches and magick because of both a surge in popularity of the modern-day craft, as well as the large number of young adult magical (YAM) texts that feature conceptions of inheritance and privilege. Of Color magickal communities have been a big part of the boom in magickal practice. From the television and streaming programs such as *Siempre Bruja (Always a Witch)* (2019–2020) and *Brujos* (2017–present), to Instagram accounts such as the Hood Witch (@thehoodwitch), a magickal practitioner who has over 400,000 followers, and the Brujas of Brooklyn (@brujasofbrooklyn), twin Afro-Indigenous Latinx professors and practitioners, brujas (witches) have been central to the growing popular cultural interest in wellness, healing, and storytelling. The large body of literature about both the modern magickal community and YAM texts provides fertile ground for an analysis between both real-world trends and fictional world building.

Being a fan of fantasy novels, and YA in particular, I noticed a consistent trend of articulating magical inheritance, primarily through blood-based models of transference, but with some texts, such as *Shadowshaper* crafting alternative methods for folx to develop magical abilities. *Shadowshaper* provides the best depiction of cultural appropriation that I have found. It's set up with a white elite person seeking access to Of Color magics, demonstrating the type of cultural appropriation that is often mirrored in real world magical communities. This fictional

novel also provides moments of decolonial praxis that push against both forces of colonization in the text as well as appropriation. The ability to see connections between the magical appropriation in fictional and real-world settings, as well as the opportunity to explore new models of inheritance make witchiness and magic an ideal setting for this interrogation.

Challenges to Whiteness and the Fantasy Canon

As mentioned, Older's *Shadowshaper* falls within the fantasy and speculative fiction genres. As literature scholar Helen Young explains, examinations of colonialism and its ongoing history and continued practice are often exempt from fantasy texts (114). Fantasy, in particular, has been largely rooted in European folklore and mythos, as well as in whiteness and cisgender maleness (Cecire 2019, Thomas 2019, Young 2016). Literature scholar Maria Sachiko Cecire explains that "the heroes of these texts are overwhelmingly white Anglo-Saxon-styled boys, or girls who assist or pretend to be such boys" (175). Focusing on white cis-gender male heroes in fantasy texts reinforces the idea that only people who fall into those identity categories are allowed to explore, adventure, and be courageous. Children's literature scholar Ebony Elizabeth Thomas states that one of the research centers for children's and young adult literature, the University of Wisconsin Cooperative Children's Book Center, "shows a troubling trend of books that feature diverse characters not being written by authors from that background, leading to questions about who has the right to tell diverse stories'" (5). When characters of marginalized communities are written by an author who is speaking about a community that they aren't a part of, is that creator sidelining the voices of marginalized communities? In order to challenge the whiteness, maleness, and cisgenderedness that dominate the fantasy genre, it is vital to engage

with creators of marginalized communities in order to redefine the canon in ways that allow for different stories to be told.

In addition to the overwhelming whiteness of fantasy, witches are often presented as white women with black hats and brooms who cast spells and brew potions. When it comes to YAM texts, representations of who can have magical abilities are starting to shift. Young explains that "although Fantasy's habits of whiteness tend to reinscribe colonialist ideologies, perspectives, and narratives, those habits can be broken by telling different stories in different ways" (120). By focusing on urban spirituality in Of Color communities, *Shadowshaper* does just that.

Older, the author of *Shadowshaper* has railed against the racism of the YA fantasy canon. In Apex Magazine, Older suggests that "instead of cringing when we look at the manmade fault lines that divide us, let's hold them to the light, honestly confront how they have privileged us and held us back, how we relate to them, how we buck being defined by them but are sometimes anyway" (np). Older acknowledges the importance of first identifying and critiquing the racism and lack of diversity in the canon, before we can work to fix the problem. While the experience of examining privilege and oppression can be uncomfortable, it is a necessary discomfort. Only through investigation into these systemic inequalities can publishers, authors, and readers work to challenge the white supremacy of the publishing industry, and work towards a canon that reflects society's multiplicity of identities

Decolonial World Building

Before moving forward with a discussion of *Shadowshaper*, I want to consider the importance and conflicting uses of the methodological, theoretical, practical, and

representational framework of decolonization. Indigenous and Latinx (which can include Indigenous as well) scholarly traditions have often theorized this term differently, although there are commonalities that exist in both interpretations. Although I will be primarily using the framework that has been developed through Latinx feminist scholarship because Older's YAM is a Latinx text, it is important to understand how these theoretical interpretations function together. In "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argues that "decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically" (7). In this sense, decolonization fundamentally needs to be tied to the return of land to the Indigenous Nations it was stolen from. Without this crucial element, decolonization risks being understood purely as a metaphor that can then be easily appropriated for use by settlers.

While land is certainly central to the practice of decolonization in Latinx scholarly traditions, Iris Ruiz and Raúl Sánchez explain that colonization is "also the taking of culture and the defining of knowledge (of which language is a crucial part)" (xiii). If colonization involves not just the taking of land, but also the taking of culture and ways of knowing, then decolonization can involve reclaiming cultural practices and knowledges in addition to the goal of reclamation of land. Additionally, scholars Arturo Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. García, in *Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands*, define decolonization as "an affirmative process of reversing, releasing, and altering an established coloniality of power" (5). This definition opens up many actions as potentially decolonial in nature, including artistic resistance and reclamation of space. Argentine feminist thinker, María Lugones expands the definition of decolonization to include global coalition work, explaining that the term decolonial,

"mark[s] or form[s] sites and methods of resistance to the colonization that dehumanized most of the people in the world" (43). This definition positions colonization as not just theft of land, culture, or resources, but also as identifying groups of people, predominantly People Of Color, as less than human. The resistance that Lugones describes is visible both in *Shadowshaper* and the modern magickal community. This broadly inclusive framing stretches decolonization far beyond settler colonial contexts of the Americas.

Using Latinx framings, decolonization can occur in relation to physical land, but also in relation to the reclamation of knowledge making, language and cultural practices, spirituality, and artistic representation. I will focus on the decolonial practices involved in the reclamation of art and space, language, knowledge. By focusing on this reclamation in textual spaces, I will argue that *Shadowshaper* engages in decolonial praxis.

Decolonial Strategies in Shadowshaper

Daniel José Older's *Shadowshaper* engages in a variety of decolonizing practices. The first decolonial strategy Older employs is naming. Re- and un-naming is vital to decolonial work, in large part, because of the colonial practice of name-stripping, or removing either a person's or place's cultural name as an effort to erase history, refashion fact, and dehumanize a group of people (Holligan). In *Shadowshaper*, the name of the high school that the main characters attend is Octavia Butler High School (12). Naming a physical structure in his book after Octavia Butler—a well-known Black feminist speculative fiction, science fiction, and fantasy author who navigated the trenches of white supremacy—sets the tone for the novel with regards to the decolonizing work that will continue to develop.

The next area of decolonization in *Shadowshaper* has to do with reclaiming physical space through mural painting. Sierra and Robbie, the two main characters, are both mural artists, who often place their culturally specific art in gentrified areas. For example, one of the first murals we are introduced to is that of Papa Acevedo, a friend of Sierra's grandfather who was also a shadowshaper (Older 3). This mural was created as a memorial by one of his pupils (Older 63). Later we are provided with even more mural images including skeleton brides, Caribbean landscapes, and Latinx mermaids (Older 91). Scholar Meredith Sinclair explains that "despite its fantastical elements, *Shadowshaper* is set in the real world of Bedford-Stuyvesant Brooklyn, a neighborhood experiencing gentrification" (93). Gentrification is something that is occurring nationwide, with communities Of Color, diasporic, and poor being pushed out of neighborhoods they have inhabited, and white and wealthy people taking up these spaces and subsequently reshaping the neighborhood cultures. Queer activist and author Sarah Schulman explains gentrification as replacing "mix with homogeneity, it enforces itself through the repression of diverse expression" (28). Removing the vibrant blend of culture from urban spaces and replacing them with monotone whiteness, not only changes the makeup of a location but also resists culturally diverse expression and creation. By placing their artwork in colonized white spaces, Sierra and Robbie participate in decolonial reclamation that includes both art and space through their placement of these murals.

Older's novel also does important work with translingualism and hybridization of language. Many of the characters incorporate both Spanish and English languaging, sometimes even in the same sentence. One of Sierra's family friends, Manny, says, "I'll be right there. Ya. Ya vengo, ahora mismo. Dentro de . . . quince minutos. Okay," when rushing to an urgent journalism assignment (Older 4). This hybridized use of language has been practiced by Latinx

scholars like Gloria Anzaldúa and represents a refusal to conform to English language supremacy as well as Spanish language purity. Sierra uses the Spanish names for the roles of members of her family, including Abuelo and Mami. Many of the characters use similar languaging practices that cross language borders fluidly, and yet are totally understandable within those family and friend communities. Utilizing these language practices and creating space for multilingual characters and audiences challenges white supremacy in literature, but also specifically within fantasy texts.

Finally, *Shadowshaper* also asks deliberate questions about who is entitled to magical knowledge, and who the gatekeepers of knowledge are. Sierra takes a trip to the library at Columbia University and enters a white and privileged place to attempt to learn about her history, and the rumors surrounding the mysterious Dr. Wick (44). Academia has been an intensely white supremacist space founded on legacies of enslavement and settler colonialism. According to historian Craig Steven Wilder, many universities have direct ties to enslavement and settler colonialism through their land acquisition and financial contributors from enslavers, including Yale, William and Mary, Rutgers, Harvard, and importantly for my analysis—Columbia (17, 67, 114). White supremacy still exists on campuses today. According to a Pew Research study from 2017, "76 percent of postsecondary faculty members in the U.S. were white" (Davis and Fry). This disparity explains why Sierra feels like there isn't space in the academy for people who look like her until she meets Nydia, a Boruican academic who shares many concerns with her about access to knowledge (50). Through Nydia, Sierra realizes that not only are there texts and research on her community in the library, but that there is one white male researcher in particular, Dr. Wick, who has taken an intense interest in her Puerto Rican culture and magical knowledge (50). Nydia then asks, what I would argue is the most decolonizing

question in this book, "'I'm just saying: Who gets to study and who gets studied and why? Who makes the decisions, you know?'" (Older 51). This quote is a direct and assertive pushback against colonization and appropriation, and specifically that of knowledge. Nydia is questioning who occupies the space of the academic and researcher, and who occupies the space of the object of study. Nydia also expresses a desire to decolonize knowledge through accessibility. She mentions her goal of opening "'my own library up here in Harlem, but like a people's library, not just for academics. And it'll be full of people's stories, not just jargony scholar talk'" (Older 50). Nydia's desire to make knowledge more accessible to her community can also be read as her decolonizing of knowledge. Further into the text, one of Sierra's friends, Tee, flips the script and says, "'If this Wick cat do all this research about Sierra's grandpa and all his Puerto Rican spirits, I don't see why I can't write a book about his people. Imma call it Hipster vs. Yuppie: A Culturalpolgical Study'" (Older 161). Tee's suggestion pushes against the normalization of white supremacist research practices by switching the roles of subject and researcher. These challenges to the colonization and gatekeeping of the knowledge and histories of Of Color, and specifically Latinx, communities work as a decolonial force throughout the text. In the next section, I will consider the ways that Older's novel challenges blood-based inheritance models, featuring instead an apprenticeship-based transfer of magical power.

Apprenticeship Model and Risks of Appropriation

Shadowshaper, much like two of the previous texts I looked at in this thesis (*Akata Witch* and *The Lost Coast*), refuses the blood-based magical inheritance model. Older's novel uses a mentorship model that involves being taught to use the magical ability as well as completing an initiation ritual. The first person to share that he was initiated into the shadowshaper community

is Sierra's brother, Juan (Older 113). Juan explains that he was initiated by their Abuelo, Láz (Older 113). Another of Láz's initiates was Dr. Wick. While I have been arguing that creating an open practice and challenging biological essentialism is a positive shift in understandings of inheritance, Dr. Wick demonstrates the risk that is a part of an open initiation and mentorship magical model. This transfer of magic through apprenticeship and initiation, even if containing some risks, challenges the idea that there must be a blood or cultural connection in order to share magical powers. Anyone who is accepted by the shadowshaper community has the ability to learn and join these magical practitioners. In fact, being born into a family of shadowshapers isn't what enables Sierra to access magic, it is instead her grandmother's initiation when she was a child that allows her to access shadowshaping.

One of the challenges for Sierra is that although she can learn from Robbie, an apprentice of Papa Acevedo, he has doubts about what she will be able to do without being formally initiated. When Sierra asks Robbie to make her a shadowshaper, he responds, "'I mean, I can do a lot of stuff. But initiating someone as a shadowshaper, that's like … that's on the heavy-duty elder tip'" (Older 131). Upon his statement that he doesn't have the power to initiate her, he examines her for magic, and to his surprise, she already appears to have been brought into the shadowshaper circle, but the question is by whom (Older 131)? Towards the end of the novel, Sierra discovers that it was her abuela who initiated her as a child (Older 218). Her abuela explains that prior to her death, she had held the mythical role of Lucera, a powerful female shadowshaper who is tied directly to the magical ability and has historically been an initiated member of their family, leaving Sierra in this position of power (Older 216–220). While there is a lineage associated with the ability to shadowshape and with the possession of the identity of Lucera, Older makes it explicit that this ability is transferred through initiation, at which point a

member can be trained in the art of shadowshaping. Robbie functions as the primary mentor in this text, training Sierra to use her powers and demonstrating this apprenticeship model. It is worth considering the additional challenges that Sierra faces as someone who was not only initiated without her permission, but also without the guidance from a community member. Through her own persistence, and the help from her friend Robbie, she does learn to control her ability, but there are ethical concerns around this type of non-consensual initiation. Using mentorship and initiation opens this source of magic to more members of the community but doesn't come without its risks. That is where appropriation comes into play.

Dr. Wick's Cultural Theft

In order to analyze Dr. Wick's behavior for cultural and magical appropriation, I want to first create a framework for how appropriation functions in *Shadowshaper*. One of keys to analyzing appropriation is identifying and marking a community as the 'other' (hooks, Matthes). Cultural appropriation is explained by scholar of philosophy Erich Hatala Matthes as:

occurrences as varied as (1) the representation of cultural practices or experiences by cultural "outsiders" (sometimes called "voice appropriation"); (2) the use of artistic styles distinctive of cultural groups by nonmembers; and (3) the procurement or continued possession of cultural objects by nonmembers or culturally distant institutions. (343).

This robust definition includes a variety of methods of appropriation, but I will primarily be utilizing type (1) and type (3) when examining both *Shadowshaper* and modern magickal practices. Matthe's type (1), or representation of cultural, or in this case magical, practices will enable me to critique Dr. Wick's representation of himself as the most powerful shadowshaper, effectively placing himself at the top of the shadowshaping hierarchy of power. Matthe's type (3)

will help me focus on the possession of shadowshaping abilities, as well as the anthropological records of urban spiritual practices that Dr. Wick collected and then gave to a white supremacist institution—Columbia University. One of the challenges with exploring Dr. Wick's behavior has to do with where cultural appropriation hedges closer to cultural appreciation. This topic has been hotly debated and feminist scholar, bell hooks, explained that identifying where the line between the two lies is constantly being evaluated (39). While a white person might find sincere meaning from items of Indigenous origins, there is still the shadow of cultural theft to contend with. Depending on the positionality of each person, one could find an action to be appreciative while it appears as appropriative to others. With a framework for the cultural and magical appropriation in *Shadowshaper* outlined, I will now analyze Dr. Wick's behavior in the book.

Our knowledge of Dr. Wick begins when Sierra is introduced to Nydia, the director of the anthropology archives at Columbia University (Older 49). Nydia identifies herself as a fellow Boricuan and offers to help Sierra dig up research on the infamous Dr. Wick (Older 50). Nydia states, Dr. Wick "'was a big anthro dude, specifically the spiritual systems of different cultures yeah? But people said he got too involved, didn't know how to draw a line between himself and his' —she crooked two fingers in the air and rolled her eyes— 'subjects'" (Older 50). This critique of Dr. Wick's study of a community to which he doesn't belong is one that many academics are currently grappling with. In order to ethically tell the stories of other communities, Scholar Linda Alcoff articulates the importance of listening first, considering and explicitly stating positionality, maintaining accountability, and taking into account the actual effect of one's speech (24–26). Dr. Wick does not utilize any of these considerations and instead speaks for the community of shadowshapers, as well as claiming ownership of the recorded history of that community for himself and for Columbia University. Because of Dr. Wick's representation

of a minority community using his voice and assumptions, these research materials fall into Matthes's type (1) of appropriation, but as they are also physical documents in possession of a white supremacist institution, it also functions as type (3). At the end of this section readers learn that Wick vanished after researching ancestral magical practice and hasn't been seen since (Older 51).

Dr. Wick engages in cultural and magical appropriation through his possession of actual shadowshaping powers. Scholar Meredith Sinclair, states that shadowshaping ability is, "a proxy for cultural heritage threatened by gentrification and cultural appropriation" (92). Wick describes his powers in his field journals which read:

> The spirits, for reasons still unclear to me, shun my every attempt to channel them into my unfortunate sketches. I can send them into others' work, even enliven some inanimate objects, and once that's done the results are brilliant. But they will not come to my own work.
>
> There is a power vacuum now with Lucera gone. But here I am, a stranger as skillful as any of the old-timers, more so considering how recently I was initiated, and ever faithful to Lázaro … (Older 117)

Through his description of his shadowshaping ability, he identifies himself as an outsider to the community, a vital component when analyzing his behavior for appropriation. Dr. Wick is again representing a community he shouldn't be speaking for (type (1) appropriation) and claiming possession of magical ability (type (3) appropriation). He also goes further than just possessing the power to suggest that even though there are abilities he hasn't mastered through his apprenticeship to Láz, that he is in fact more powerful and skillful, seeking to supplant the

leadership and make himself a leader of a magical community not his own. While Dr. Wick recognizes that there are deficiencies in his abilities, he doesn't know why, and it doesn't stop him from feeling entitled to leadership and power.

I would argue that Dr. Wick's field notes suggest that he is engaged in colonization as well as appropriation. Wick's field notes documenting his experiences with the shadowshaping community state, "Lázaro must speak! Tonight I will convince him," exactly three days before Lázaro had the stroke that damaged his ability to speak (Older 118). This theft of knowledge as well as his physical brutality towards the shadowshapers suggests violent colonialism. Dr. Wick isn't just appropriating culture, he is attempting to wrest it through physical violence from the rightful owners of this ability and culture. He is not just stealing power but is killing shadow shapers in his desire for conquest and to remove competition. As readers move through the text, Wick is also revealed to have been behind the missing people in the shadow shaping community. He had been killing them. I argue that this combination of theft and violence suggests that Dr. Wick is a colonizer, as well as a researcher who is participating in cultural and magical appropriation.

In the final battle over the shadowshaper's culture and abilities, Sierra goes toe to toe with Dr. Wick after he reappears following his murder spree, her new powers as Lucera strong and capable. Wick tries to claim that he is saving the shadowshapers stating, "'You don't understand any of this Sierra. This is not your world'" (Older 287). His attempt to claim her heritage and community feels like a colonialist power grab and she responds with defiance stating, "'It is my world!,' 'And you tried to take it from me. Tried to tear my own heritage away'" (Older 287). Upon realizing his defeat Dr. Wick tries to justify his colonial and appropriative actions stating, "'It was an act of l-love. To spread the knowledge. Knowledge of

the tradition'" (Older 290). This explanation fits in with what bell hooks describes as the argument for cultural appreciation that often is used as a defense for appropriate behavior (39), but in Dr. Wick's case, he has clearly crossed the line and has been appropriating the shadowshaping power.

When considering Dr. Wick's behavior, it is clear that he is both appropriating the culture of the shadowshapers, as well as colonizing their community through his power grab and murder spree. He exercises his appropriation through both speaking for rather than with a minority community of which he is not a member, and through physical possession of both the shadowshaper historical and anthropological records, as well as with his possession of shadowshaping magic. His appropriative behavior as a white man, stealing magical practices from Of Color communities is unfortunately mirrored in the modern-day magickal community.

Real World Magickal Inheritance and Appropriation

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, what first spurred my research was hearing about the hierarchies of magickal inheritance. The notion that having a family history of magick makes someone more authentic has been researched by scholar of anthropology, Martin Ramstedt. In his article "Who is a Witch? Contesting Notions of Authenticity Among Contemporary Dutch Witches," Ramstedt explains that those who claim hereditary witchcraft feel that solo practitioners or those who haven't apprenticed with senior witches are less authentic or frivolous in their magick (193). The witches who Ramstedt spoke with, "claim to be genealogically linked to the witches and wise women of the pre-modern rural of Europe"" (194). While these claims might be legitimate, there is not an easy way to prove one's authenticity. Through my research of this subject, it is clear that even if one does have familial ties, that

inheritance is no guarantee of a stronger or more valid spiritual and magickal connection. It is impossible to truly understand someone else's lived experiences.

The belief in one's authenticity or right of inheritance can lead to folx without certain criteria accused of the practice of appropriation. Matthes addresses this issue stating, "policing the boundaries of cultural groups can construct common understandings of "real" or "authentic" group members that serve to disenfranchise those who do not meet all the relevant criteria" (355–356). In the case of modern magickal communities, this means that even if one does identify with a specific cultural magickal practice, a lack of documented genealogy could cause a practitioner's identity to be called into question. The policing of group membership for magickal communities can lead to disenfranchising people's identities as well as shutting out potentially valuable community members. Gatekeeping surrounding biological and familial claims of magickal inheritance are the reason I argue for more inclusive models that rely on mutual respect, generosity with knowledge and experience, and kinship and care practices for one's community.

While I argue that there is value and benefit to inclusive models, cultural appropriation does cause real harm, especially to marginalized communities including communities comprised of People Of Color. When looking at examples of modern magickal appropriation, specifically from Of Color magickal communities, it is important to understand the difference between open and closed practices. Open magickal practices are meant to be shared and are considered non-appropriable. Closed practices often center on Of Color magicks and typically are only supposed to be used by folx from within those ethnic and racial communities, although a family history of magick is not required. This has a been a shift in the magickal community, in much the same way that our understanding of appropriation and institutional racism have continued to evolve.

The occult store that inspired this thesis had signs up about practices that should be considered closed to discourage white witches from appropriative behavior. As a white woman myself, it is vital that if I choose to engage with magickal practice, that I do so ethically, and without disrespecting the cultures and practices of other communities.

One of the easiest ways to identify magickal appropriation is to determine if the practice is commercialized. If magickal knowledge or items are being shared for profit rather than passion, it is probably an example of cultural appropriation. We can see some of this commercialization through wellness culture—think crystal healing, essential oils, incense etc. Vanessa Angélica Villarreal, a writer for Bitch Magazine wrote that "Witchcraft and New Age spirituality have long been a site of cultural theft, commodified and sold devoid of cultural context" (np). These trends are not slowing down and continue to cross into problematic territory. One well reported example of this monetization is Sephora's "Witch Kit" product that was set to release in October of 2018, in no small coincidence, right near Halloween. These kits were supposed to contain witchy items and self-care products and were marketed towards teens. Sephora took a lot of criticism for their kits due to, "the appropriation and cherry picking of witchy 'ritual' objects from separate religious traditions" (Villarreal np). These objects included rose quartz, white sage, tarot, and perfume potions (Villarreal np). Mixing these items from completely separate traditions, such as with the inclusion of white sage, which is a part of Indigenous smudging ceremonies and already facing overharvesting issues, caused the company to face pressure to take the kits off the market (Villarreal np). The problem of commodifying white sage by non-Indigenous businesses has been gaining visibility nationwide (Pember np). By possessing culturally significant and endangered products, Sephora not only monetized spiritual practices, but they also contributed to the overharvesting of resources, marketing a kit based on

Of Color magickal practices to a primarily white group of consumers as Johnnie Jae, of the Otoe-Missouria and Choctaw tribes of Oklahoma explained (Strapagiel np). The appropriation from Of Color magickal communities is especially problematic given the persecution of witches, and especially witches of color. To take what has been demonized and then use it for profit is troubling given the colonial framework.

Witches of color were demonized through much of colonial history. Scholar Norell Martínez explains that the witch hunts that happened in Europe and the Americas served both patriarchal purposes, as a form of control of feminine power, and also functioned to eradicate non-Christian belief systems (35). For example, there was a location in Puerto Rico called "El Charco de las Brujas" (The Puddle of the Witches), a location where people accused of witchcraft were burned for their crimes (Romberg 214). This demonization toward Of Color spiritual and magickal practices, makes appropriation by white folx all the more problematic. Villarreal explains the problem of popularizing Of Color practices stating, "Indigenous, Asian, and Black Spiritualities, long subjugated as witchcraft, became associated with the 'eclectic' practice of white witches". Using Of Color magicks to liven up the practice for white witches is problematic. bell hooks argues that "within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes a spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (21). By using these Of Color practices to 'spice' up the lives of white witches, these practices are not just being appropriated, but also colonized. I argue that this conveys the meaning that magick is deemed dangerous and wrong when in the hands of folx of Color, and only becomes safe and non-threatening when appropriated by white folx. When the practices of voodoo for example are viewed as 'black' magick, and likely to be used for malicious purposes in the hands of women of color, but then become fun tourist adventures in New Orleans when white women take control,

this positions power and culture as acceptable only when under the direct control of white supremacy.

The appropriation of magicks from Of Color communities in the real world follows a similar script to that of *Shadowshaper*. Culturally specific magickal practices are being taken from Of Color communities by white elites, and repurposed for personal gain, uprooted from their cultural contexts. In modern magickal communities, that power is related to money, such as with Sephora trying to profit from their culturally appropriative Witch Kits. In *Shadowshaper* the benefit of money is less directly obvious, but Dr. Wick claims the magical ability and leadership of the magical community for his power grab in order to advance his career and assert his status. Magic and witchery in both the fictional world and the real world are thus spaces ripe for appropriation, and only through communication between people with institutional privilege and those without, can the risks of appropriation be exposed, and closed practices protected from oppressive forces.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

On my first visit to an occult bookstore, I was introduced to reclamation work, or the practice of reinvigorating Of Color magicks, through the shop's postings of which practices were open, and which were closed. My exposure to the way that the magickal community is working to challenge appropriation and to engage in reclamation work sparked an interest for me in the work of both fictional magical worlds, and those that are real world magickal communities. During this initial phase of my research, I witnessed many similar patterns of inheritance and privilege between the real and the fantastic. Ultimately, this was the impetus that launched my research.

My primary intention with this thesis has been to interrogate blood-based magical inheritance through young adult magical literature. Blood has long been used as a tool of determining not just genetics, but racial and ethnic identity. While there is power in claiming and embracing one's intersectional identity, in the case of People of Color, blood-based racialization has often been assigned to communities by white colonial systems to uphold whiteness and its concomitant systems of white supremacy and settler colonialism. Assigning racialized labels has been used to discriminate against Of Color communities, and to establish white supremacy worldwide. Denying the agency of People of Color to claim their own multiplicitous identities has been a historical and contemporary practice exercised through the power of colonialism and imperialism. Both the "one drop rule," a Jim Crow era tool of discriminating against folx with any amount of Black blood or ancestry, and "blood quantum" practices, a colonial system of fractionalizing the blood of Indigenous communities in order to make many ineligible for government assistance and financial benefits, work to destabilize and delegitimize the lives of Of Color communities through understandings of blood as interwoven with identity (Kauanui,

Khanna, TallBear). By considering the privileges of blood and inheritance in the context of fictional Young Adult representation, I have sought to challenge the white supremacy of the fantasy genre and endeavored to consider how alternative modes of accessing magic can open up new kinds of relationality that deconstruct hierarchies of power.

In my first chapter I worked with two texts: *The Black Witch* by Laurie Forest and *The Last Fallen Star* by Graci Kim. Both of these texts utilize the blood-based model of magical inheritance. *The Black Witch* privileges folx with wand magic through a system of white supremacy that both racializes and classes magic to create hierarchies and systems of oppression. *The Black Witch* also utilizes the European fantasy motif that only allows certain stories, white stories, to be told. The explicit racialization and animalization of characters without "pure" bloodlines functions as a discriminatory system where only those with certain blood lines are able to access power and privilege. This text also uses the white savior myth to align white readers with its main character on her journey to wokeness. Although *The Last Fallen Star* does important representational work through utilizing Asian American mythology and featuring a Korean American community, it still uses blood-based magical inheritance models. In this text, blood is considered in fractions in order to be initiated into the gifted community, a practice that works as a system of colonial imposed blood quantum, challenging the authenticity of community members. Through analysis of the operation of racialization in these texts, I have endeavored to highlight the limits they place on the fantastic, and more specifically on YAM texts and the readers of those stories.

In chapter two I considered *Akata Witch* by Nnedi Okorafor, and *The Lost Coast* by Amy Rose Capetta, both of which remove blood from the magical transfer system. Each of these texts do important work to challenge the European fantasy model, as well as shaking up the way that

magic is accessed. *Akata Witch* uses a spiritual model, as well as a mentoring system, both of which still enact some racial and class-based hierarchy, but which also open the door for folx with non-magical parents to gain access to magic, albeit with the assumption that they will be less powerful than those from a pure spirit line. Okorafor's novel also explores African mythology and magics which is important to sharing diverse fantastical stories. *The Lost Coast* features a group of queer witches, which is important from a representation standpoint, as well as being an indication of the openness of the magical system. The magical transfer in this text is the most inclusive I have seen, where people all come to magic through their own interest and exploration with a focus on sharing magic with one's community and explicit deconstruction of the magical hierarchies. Only one character in this novel has any familial connection to magic, and this pushes back directly on the blood-based model. Through spiritual and community models of magical transfer, I have demonstrated how diverse stories can be told, and how the hierarchical systems of magical power are lessened by more open approaches to magical access a practice that increases diverse representation.

Finally, in chapter three, I extended my analysis to consider the ways that open systems of magical transfer can do important work with deconstructing hierarchies but can also create opportunities for cultural appropriation to be enacted. I examined *Shadowshaper* by Daniel Older as a fictional example of how open magical communities can be dangerous when bad actors are introduced to the community. I have also used real world appropriation of Of Color magicks to connect the fictional to real practices and to demonstrate the overlapping systems of racial, ability, gender, and sexuality oppression that exist in both contexts.

While the fantastical may seem removed from our everyday lives, values and practices are culturally specific and inform our consumption and creation of texts. Through examining

these different models of magical inheritance, I have sought to problematize the patterns of privilege that exist in blood-based models of magical transfer, while also considering the possibilities that exist outside of that motif for sharing magic. While the fantastic has traditionally functioned as a primarily white space (Thomas, Young), by removing the eugenicist and white supremacist systems of magic, we can envision world creation that explores and celebrates Of Color magics, mythos, and representation as cornerstones of the genre. By dismantling magical hierarchies, questions of magical authenticity and legitimacy can be removed, and individual agency can be exercised in the claiming of magical power and potential. This is important to creating a fantasy canon that represents and envisions fantastical futures for all people.

In the classroom, finding and creating texts that explore and validate Of Color magical systems work to lessen the imagination gap (Thomas). Representation is important in literature, and popular culture. We all want to see characters that we can connect to on the level of identity, personality, and lived experiences. Through the work of Of Color authors and world creators, a fantasy canon that represents the world, not just those of us who experience white privilege, is possible. Okorafor, Older, and Kim have all done vital work towards representing Of Color communities and Of Color magics. I know that I fell in love with the magical stories of my childhood, specifically the ones where I felt a connection, a similarity, a kinship with the characters. This is an experience that all young people should be able to have when reading literature.

Disentangling the fantastic and YAM texts from white supremacy creates visibility for the reclamation work that is happening in real world Of Color magickal communities. Of Color magickal communities are working to reclaim the witch, the bruja, the leopard person, from the

clutches of colonial systems of power. By creating spaces to celebrate Of Color magickal traditions, and to call out appropriative practices, the witch is being reinvigorated. This reclamation work can be seen through Indigenous communities openly practicing their spirituality, bruja healers sharing their skills with vulnerable communities, and African Diasporic magicks being shared in Black communities. By creating spaces for Of Color magicks to flourish, the vibrant diversity of the witch can be reinstated.

The witch is a figure of transgression, power, and danger. They are a rebel and an activist. Their image is a threat to systems of oppression, to racism, sexism, homophobia, and capitalism. By considering the witch and the privilege of blood-based magical inheritance, both world creators, and magickal practitioners can work to destabilize systems of power that only work with those with societal capital. By creating new modes of magical transfer, kinship, and relationality, the witch can continue her work as a rebellious figure, one with an intersectional feminist agenda.

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