

Who's Afraid of the Dark:

Myth, Joy, Trauma, and Healing in Tracy Deonn's *Legendborn*

I'm not real, I'm just like you. You don't exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn't be seeking equal rights. You're not real, if you were you'd have some status among the nations of the world. So, we are both myths. I do not come to you as a reality, I come to you as the myth because that is what black people are: myths.

—Sun Ra

We begin with Sun Ra's lyrics surrounding Blackness and myth because the dismantling of anti-blackness and misogynoir (Bailey & Trudy, 2018) in education requires an excavation of the myths that surround Black girls' lives. Educators often see, read, and hear myths of Black girls—the stories canonizing Black girl failure (Baxley & Boston, 2010; George, 2015; Smith-Evans & George, 2014); the widely held misconception that Black girls are more violent, more sexual, more adult (Epstein et al., 2017); the stereotypes that attempt to define Black girls as monstrous, inhuman, villainous (Thomas, 2019a). Due to the presence of these myths, the metaphors by which many educators read Black girls' lives and imagine their existence are bound by falsehood—inflated perceptions of who Black girls are and what they need from educators in order to succeed. As scholars and educators attempt to disprove myths of Black girlhood, many have foregrounded the need to celebrate joy and happiness over trauma to move the educational focus from tragedy to triumph. Although positive in intention, however, a common result is the creation of a binary mentality, one that separates joy from trauma, pain from happiness, life from death.

But, as this article aims to suggest, often, trauma and joy coexist.

The widespread nature of myths surrounding Black girls' lives requires educators to consider liberatory, imaginative practices that can disrupt the myths that bind. We aim for this article to be part of the interference, a theoretical and empirical means to consider the complexity of Black girls' emotions, one that connects and entwines pain, celebration, and all the emotions in between. To do this, we employ Afrofuturism as a theoretical framework, engaging the expansive, interconnecting, and complex nature of Afrofuturistic thought to comment on the ways in which Black life is also expansive, interconnected, and complex. Building on that framework, we then center a review of literature to highlight the commodification of Black joy and discuss the myriad methods of Black healing that must be centered in conversations about Black life and Black existence. Rather than center the conceptual, we engage in a critical content analysis (Johnson et al., 2016) of Tracey Deonn's *Legendborn* to explore how the author upends the dichotomy between trauma and joy and showcases the numerous emotions that lead Bree, the protagonist of the novel, toward healing in the afterlife of trauma. By centering *Legendborn*, we bring forth a conversation on how one YA novel handles the tension and relationship between joy and trauma. By centering Bree, we offer a disturbance to the trauma/joy dichotomy and suggest that although trauma can be painful for Black girls, acknowledging it can be a step toward reclamation and ancestral/spiritual community. At the end of our analysis, we provide suggestions on how educators

might utilize *Legendborn* and other Afrofuturist works to discuss the nuance, not the myth, of Black girls’ humanity.

Literature Review

The Commodification of Black Joy

In a world where Black pain and Black death are viral commodities used to promote a form of social justice predicated on the visualization of Black suffering, it is no wonder that Black joy has been prominently foregrounded in popular and academic discourse. Black joy is a tool of resistance in a neoliberal economy that thrives on the sorrow of Black people (Lu & Knight

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Steele, 2019). It is a way for Black people to experience celebration and recreation that results in racially affirming opportunities (Tichavakunda, 2021). It is pro-Black, anti-racist, and anti-deficit, and it is a means for Black people to engage in reclamation, imagination, and survival (Mitchell, 2022; Williams, 2022). Black joy showcases the ways in which Black lives

matter beyond Black oppression (Dunbar, 2022).

We commend this attention to Black joy, especially considering the antiblackness that pervades the educational system and the world at large (Baker-Bell et al., 2017; Love, 2019), but we are also cautious of the ways in which Black joy is becoming a commodity, where calls to center joy are presented without the need to also discuss the multitude of emotions that Black youth experience in an antiblack world. As an example, in February of 2020, Meadows-Fernandez (2020) wrote the following: “We hear stories of struggle all the time—in February, let’s uplift stories of celebration. . . . What better way to use Black History Month than as practice for creating a world that demands displays of Black joy and pleasure year-round?” (par. 4). It is not the focus on celebration and pleasure that gives us pause, but we wonder if the complexity of Black life has room to breathe and grow when only two emotional options are provided. We wonder

what happens if Black girls feel fear or sadness in a world that demands displays of their joy. If the only possibilities for Black girls reside on opposite ends of a spectrum labeled joy and trauma, we wonder if there is room for other emotions. We wonder if there is space for Black girls’ surprise, disgust, anger, love, grief, boredom, anxiety, etc. alongside their pain, joy, and celebration.

Considering current calls to focus on joy—and, sometimes, to disregard trauma or pain—we highlight the work of several scholars who challenge an either/or approach. Specifically, this research is foregrounded by the scholarship of Brown and Brown (2021), who argued that researchers and educators “must first begin by acknowledging the antiblackness of traditional schooling and its tethering to matters of Black existence” (p. 156). This work is also undergirded by Tichavakunda (2022), who acknowledged that in order “to take Black joy seriously, one must first acknowledge Black students’ humanity—understanding that Black students are human beings who experience the spectrum of emotions from frustration and sadness to pride and joy” (p. 53). Finally, this work is lifted by public scholars who note that Black people are indeed capable of holding the complexities of grief and joy and the full range of human emotion all at the same time (McCullough, 2020; McKinney, 2020). Particularly, we consider the words of Sarah Raughley (2021), who maintained that “Black writers are challenging centuries-long depictions of Black pain for pain’s sake and Black pain for the white gaze, by writing the reality of pain with the kind of nuance that creates space for catharsis, transformation and even healing” (par. 9). With these scholarly underpinnings, we approach this work by not solely focusing on Black joy, but by highlighting the range of emotions Black girls experience.

Methods of Black Girls’ Healing

Although numerous scholars have conducted research discussing trauma-informed or healing-centered pedagogies (Dutro, 2019; Petrone & Stanton, 2021), several scholars have noted that Black girls’ healing practices are unique. Black girls’ healing manifests through singing, dancing, yelling, storytelling, collective care, freedom dreaming, creating, and protesting (Black Girls’ Literacies Collective, 2018; Davis et al., 2017; Sealey-Ruiz, 2016). For instance, scholars have stated

that “healing starts at the root . . . the family, the people who brought us here” (Benor, 2022, par. 8). This idea of healing as root work, as a spiritual and community-fortifying practice, is reiterated by scholars like Morris (2019) and Duane et al. (2021), who maintain that it is easier for Black girls to heal when communities (i.e., elders, siblings, friends, mentors, cultural communities) and communal commitments (i.e., unity, trust, openness, collaboration love, caring) are involved. Other scholars, like Reynolds (2022) and Chioneso et al., (2020), have shown that Black girls’ healing requires an attention to the whole of their embodied identities and beings—their experiences with joy and their encounters with trauma. Collectively, these scholars show that Black girls’ healing is vast and cannot be classified narrowly or stereotypically.

If we acknowledge that healing is connected to ancestry, to community, and to the collective of Black life and Black girlhood, then there is a possibility that trauma will often connect to Black healing and Black joy. As examples, remembering Black histories, even the violent moments, can lead to a better understanding of the lineage of Black existence, the vibrance of Black life, and the nuanced nature of Black healing practices (Desai, 2020; Dillard, 2012). Yelling and protesting necessitates the creation of links to one’s anger and possibly to reminders of the historical and contemporary brutality Black girls face, but it also means that Black girls have space to tell their stories, to heal by narrating themselves away from stereotype and myth (Cox, 2015). Freedom dreaming and embracing the imaginative can be a joyful practice, but it sometimes requires a connection to the world in which Black girls want to escape (Toliver, 2021a). In essence, while healing practices are not always connected to trauma, sometimes they are intricately intertwined.

Considering the research on Black girls’ healing, we “advocate for a shift in the kind of analytical framework that would posit joy and pain as being uncompromising, irreconcilable opposites,” and call for an “understanding that pain, *if it is* experienced, can be a possible gateway to justice, peace and joy” (Raughley, 2021, par. 23). We propose that Black healing, joy, and trauma can exist simultaneously in one body and that neither is mutually exclusive nor completely absent from the other in the nuance of Black girls’ lives. If we lean into the healing of Black girls, acknowledge their spirits, lives, languages, and

cultures, and consider the intricate complexity of their emotional existences, we can affirm the wholeness of their humanity (Johnson et al., 2017).

Recognizing this complexity of Black girls’ emotional lives is essential, as it is a form of Black, trauma-informed care.

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Theoretical Frame: Afrofuturism

Afrofuturism is a cultural aesthetic in which Black authors create speculative texts that center Black characters in an effort to reclaim and recover the past, counter negative and elevate positive realities that exist in the present, and create new possibilities for the future (Toliver, 2021a). Much of this definition might seem primed to engage solely in the discussion of science fiction and fantasy texts; however, Afrofuturism moves beyond books, film, and music. Explicitly, Afrofuturism considers Afrodiasporic cultural production *and* scholarly thought (English, 2017), so “it functions as both a theoretical discourse on issues such as identity construction [and] a politicized aesthetic movement that seeks to call into question and reorder relations of privilege and power” (McCormack, 2016, p. 11). Said another way, although Afrofuturism encompasses aesthetic products, like performance, multimedia, and visual art, it is also a theoretical enterprise that enables researchers to consider identity, power, and liberation in the past, present, and future through a Black cultural lens.

In utilizing Afrofuturism as theory, we posit that Afrofuturism is a way of grappling with and understanding Black realities across time and space, giving scholars a way to better understand Black freedom dreams (English & Kim, 2013; Gaiter, 2018; Lavender, 2019; Toliver, 2022). It is a theoretical concept that asks educators to consider what classrooms might look like if we engaged in a brazen celebration of Black life, Black intelligence, Black love, and Black power (Barber et al., 2018; Carey, 2020; Holbert et al., 2020). It is a way for teachers engaged in work that aims to transform schools and classrooms into pro-Black spaces to consider how they might challenge students’ ideas

about race, gender, technology, and the future (Grue, 2020). Ultimately, Afrofuturism is “a mechanism for understanding the real-world situations of oppression in the contemporary world in the context of the ever-present past, while charting the future” (Hamilton, 2017, p. 19). It enables educators and researchers to examine all aspects of time, to explore all avenues of Black existence, and to theorize all possibilities of Blackness.

To utilize Afrofuturism as a theoretical lens for this study, we centralized the work of several authors who have explored the connections between Afrofuturism and young adult literature (Elliott, 2010; Thomas, 2019b, 2021; Toliver, 2019, 2021b). We build on these studies to create specific questions that are essential to any textual analysis undergirded by Afrofuturism. The questions are as follows: 1) How might Afrofuturism assist in the redefinition, reclamation, and expansion of Black people’s identities? 2) How does Afrofuturism open space to discuss the tragedies and triumphs of the present and past while also charting new possibilities for the future? 3) In what ways can Afrofuturism challenge binary and/or linear thinking? 4) How does Afrofuturism create portals to new worlds, new ways of thinking, new stories? These questions highlight the need to expand, reconsider, and disrupt dichotomies that bind possibilities for Black people, and they open space for the fullness of Black humanity—past, present, and Afrofuture. Due to the expansiveness of each of these queries, we center the first three questions in our analysis.

Method

In August of 2021, both authors engaged in an informal virtual conversation about *Legendborn*, a YA novel written by Tracey Deonn and published in the fall of 2020. The meeting had no intended direction, but it was a space to collectively share our textual experiences as readers of speculative texts. As a Black communal space, the discussion focused on our favorite moments, lines, and conversations from the book alongside discussions about Blackness, #Black-GirlMagic, and Black familial dynamics. Then, in the spring of 2022, Stephanie and LaMar came together again to discuss the possibility of writing together. We wondered how we might align ourselves in our research, especially considering our positions as teacher

and teacher educator, and we immediately considered our previous conversations around *Legendborn*. As we considered the insights gained from our individual and collective readings of Deonn’s novel, we decided that a focus on this text was essential to our pedagogical and scholarly work. Our collective history surrounding the reading and analysis of *Legendborn* prompted the current study.

Text Description

Legendborn is a YA novel that centers 16-year-old Bree Matthews, a Black girl who recently lost her mother in a tragic car accident. To cope with her grief, she builds an internal wall that blocks her childhood memories and personal emotions. This wall creates two halves of the self—a Before Bree (the Bree filled with love and joy) and an After Bree (the Bree filled with grief). To further escape the pain that comes from living in the home she shared with her mother, she attends the early college program at UNC-Chapel Hill. It’s the perfect getaway until Bree witnesses a demon feeding on the negative energy of the students. Although a mysterious boy tries to erase the event from her mind, Bree remembers. She resolves to learn the mystery behind what happened that magical night, no matter what it takes. On a quest to find the truth about her mother and magic, Bree enters a hidden world that lurks right under humanity’s nose. It is a world where demons are a constant threat and the Legendborn, descendants of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, work to defeat them. With the help of a self-exiled descendant of Arthur, Bree falls further into this world, and she learns a truth for which she was unprepared. She is the true descendant of Arthur—a fact intricately intertwined with the violence of enslavement. Once she discovers this truth, she must decide if she will run from her history or toward her own power.

Data Analysis

To engage in textual analysis, we relied on critical content analysis (CCA), an analytic method that uses critical theories to frame an analysis of text. According to Short and the World of Words community (Johnson et. al, 2016), researchers utilizing CCA should engage in the following steps: 1) decide on a research purpose, questions, and texts; 2) select and read deeply within a critical frame; 3) select and read texts for

analysis; 4) read deeply within a critical theory and select relevant themes; 5) explore sociocultural and historical contexts of the text; 6) read related research studies; 7) consider own positionality related to research purpose; 8) examine power and agency in text; 9) determine and organize data for analysis; 10) engage in close reading of texts; 11) revisit theory and tenets to develop themes or categories. These steps provide a systematic outline of how to approach and analyze the text. Still, we believed that a revision of the steps would be most helpful as we examined the narrative toward our specific purposes.

Particularly, we rearranged the steps to first consider our positionalities in relation to the text and our research purpose. Doing so reformed the way we approached the analysis because we were able to consistently question our assumptions, consider how our positionalities influenced our multiple readings of text, and reflect on our data analysis and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021a; 2021b). We approached our work by “striv[ing] to be fully cognisant of the philosophical sensibility and theoretical assumptions informing [our] use of [critical content analysis]; and these [were] consistently, coherently and transparently enacted throughout the analytic process and reporting of the research” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). Although we followed each of the steps outlined by Johnson and colleagues, beginning with positionality allowed us to acknowledge that our readings can never be separated from who we are as readers.

Positionality

Stephanie identifies as a Black cis-hetero woman researcher from the United States, and her work is typically grounded in womanism (Floyd-Thomas, 2006; Phillips, 2006), Black Feminism (Collins, 2000), and Afrofuturism (Nelson, 2000; Womack, 2013). As a Black woman and former Black girl, she often considers the narratives and metaphors that attempt to constrict Black women and girls from engaging their full humanity in all spaces. This background influenced Stephanie’s reading of the text. Specifically, Afrofuturism helped her to see how Deonn brought together conversations about ancestry, community, magic, past, present, and future. Womanism and Black Feminism guided her in considering how the author represented Black women and girls’ intergenerational grief, but she also thought about how Black

girls engaged in communalism, critical engagement, redemptive self-love, and radical subjectivity.

LaMar is a Black male educator from Brooklyn, New York, whose work is guided by a quote from one of his former profes-

sors: “Bring all of yourself into the work; stay inquisitive and keep love at the heart of all you do.” Informed by this mantra, LaMar’s teaching and being are steeped in personal experience. Specifically, he identifies

as a Black feminist who values and respects the

lived experiences and perspectives of Black women.

His values inform how he reads, questions, interprets, and teaches texts. For instance, in his reading of *Legendborn*, he appreciated how Deonn paid tribute to Black girlhood, magic, and resilience—all of which are necessary models for how Black girls might deal with past trauma while learning new personal discoveries for ways forward.

Our positionalities greatly influenced this study, as we centered our personal, research, and teaching lives throughout our individual and collective readings, as well as our data analysis and interpretation.

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Findings

Considering our theoretical framework, we sought to consider how *Legendborn* assisted the protagonist in redefining and expanding Black girls’ emotional existence, reclaiming Black communal connections, and discussing connections between tragedy and triumph. Our textual analysis led to the three themes that challenge binary thinking surrounding the trauma/joy dichotomy in Black girls’ lives: *Trauma That Leads to Reclamation*; *Trauma That Leads to Ancestral Connection*; and *Trauma That Is Just Painful*. We explore each theme in the following sections.

Trauma That Leads to Reclamation

A major facet of Afrofuturism requires a reclamation and recovering of the past, but those roots can often be painful as the histories of enslavement, the constant fight for Civil Rights, and the violence of police

brutality greatly influence Black historical memory. Still, to reclaim history is to ensure that the past is known and not forgotten. To remember the past is to accept the trauma deeply embedded in the archival

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record—not to get lost in the pain, but to embrace it and understand its impact on the present and future.

Throughout the narrative in *Legendsborn*, Bree learns the importance of accepting and reclaiming history, as it leads her to consider that even if the knowledge is painful, it is necessary to bring about justice in her world. For example, as Bree explores UNC-Chapel Hill, she

notices that there are numerous campus buildings for which she was never intended to enter. She states that growing up in the southern regions of the United States means that “it’s pretty common to find yourself in old places that just . . . weren’t made for you. . . . Some space that was originally built for white people and white people only, and you just have to hold that knowledge while going about your business” (p. 75). She further argues that the people who commissioned the buildings’ construction never thought a Black girl could saunter through the halls. In fact, as she walks through the buildings, she thinks about how white men’s ghosts would remove her if they could. These feelings are a “low buzzing sound of exclusion. A sound that says, *We didn’t build this for you. We built it for us. This is ours, not yours*” (p. 75). Rather than live in the pain that results from existing in a world that was decidedly built for her exclusion, Bree reasserts her right to exist on the campus, traversing the halls of buildings with racism embedded in the brick and mortar, refusing to be cowed by the history of southern aggression toward Black people.

Bree’s knowledge of antiblackness on campus is not relegated to the hidden history lodged in the walls of the campus architecture, as some historical remnants are more overt. As she prepares to meet with Dr. Patricia Hartwood, her therapist, in the arboretum on campus, Bree notices a large, dark granite table with small figurines underneath that seemingly lift the slab.

As she stares at the monument, Patricia states that the table is the Unsung Founders Memorial gifted to UNC-Chapel Hill to honor the enslaved Black people who built the university. She says, “We get this memorial, and it’s something, I suppose. . . . But how can I be at peace when I look down and see that they’re still working? You know?” (p. 161). In response, Bree states that she knows exactly what Patricia is saying: “This type of knowing is an expensive toll to pay. I can’t forget the knowledge just because the price is high. And yet, sometimes we have to tuck the reminders away today in order to grow in power against them tomorrow (pp. 160–161). In this scene, Bree considers not only the physical representation of Black people bearing the weight of the table, but she also becomes cognizant of the weight of racism that Black folks still bear as they hold up a world steeped in antiblackness. Rather than disengage from the meaning held within the bodies of the many figurines, Bree discusses the fact that this pain is knowing, a reclamation of Black history even though the price—the trauma that comes with historical knowledge—is high. She holds tight to the history that the table represents, and she plans to reclaim this history to grow in her power. Bree will use this reminder of the past to combat the systemic racism and violence that exists on the campus and in the world.

Although many instances of reclamation involve experiences with antiblack racism, Bree’s pain is also centered on the loss of her mother. For most of the text, she refuses to discuss her mother’s memory because the pain is too much for her. She soon learns, however, that approaching that pain can lead to personal reclamation. For instance, there comes a point in the novel where Bree must directly address her trauma if she is to move forward in her power. To do so, she must first allow for the memories of her mother to manifest within her, even though she has worked diligently to erase the pain that came with her mother’s death. Although there is pain from the memories, she realizes that it is a slight discomfort, with grief circling the edges of the memory but not infiltrating it. Once she has broken the barrier that has held the trauma at bay, her inner power begins to release: “I unravel the rage until it courses through my veins like fuel in an engine. I let it become a part of me, but not all of me . . . I let it spread through me—until there is no more “Before” and no more “After” (p. 395). It is here

where Bree reclaims the fullness of her humanity—rage, grief, love, and all that comes with those emotions. She does not choose one. She does not have to.

Even though the trauma of racism and the grief over her mother’s death reverberates throughout Bree’s existence, her experiences allow space for her to engage in reclamation—to reassert her right to her full emotions, to recover the hidden history lurking within the walls of the educational space, to take back her anger and use it in whatever ways she sees fit. The trauma, although painful, allows her to experience the fullness of her being—no before, no after, just Bree. She can choose the gamut of emotional possibility, as all of them exist in one body. Thus, *Legendborn* disrupts the binary of Black girls’ trauma/joy by suggesting that acknowledging the traumatic can lead to reclamation, can lead to the celebration of recovering one’s community and oneself.

Trauma That Leads to Ancestral/Communal Connection

As Bree attempts to reclaim various parts of herself throughout the novel, she also begins to re/uncover her ancestral and communal roots. At the beginning of the novel, Deonn goes to great lengths to showcase the disconnect between Bree and her maternal lineage, highlighting the fact that the daughter born in each generation is doomed to lose her mother at an early age. Because of this intergenerational rift, Bree is distanced from her ancestors. She does not even know their names. However, her therapy meetings with Dr. Hartwood and her further inclusion in the *Legendborn* society helps her to learn more about her people, her ancestors, and herself.

Initially, Dr. Hartwood believes that Bree knows much more about her ancestry than she does. Specifically, although the *Legendborn* use a specific type of magic called aether, Hartwood and other Black women like her use a magic they call Rootcraft. Unbeknownst to Bree, her mother was a Rootcrafter, one who could manipulate the energy in growing things. When Patricia tells Bree about her mother’s past, Bree is shocked, confused, and angry. She is upset that someone she just met knows more about her mother than she does. Still, once Bree has a chance to calm down, she declares that “knowing that [her] mother was on Carolina’s campus 25 years ago doing exactly what [she is] doing now—keeping things secret, hiding parts of her-

self from other people—makes [her] feel closer to her and, simultaneously, like [she] never knew her at all” (Deonn, 2020, p. 168). Bree’s grief over her mother’s death led her to therapy, which, in turn, helped her to learn more about who her mother was and the type of life she lived. She was able to build a stronger bond between her mother and herself even though her mother had passed from the earth months before.

Bree’s connection to those beyond the earthly realm did not stop at new knowledge about her mother, for Bree’s familial and communal links are broadened as she begins to learn more about the magic her mother passed down to her. After learning more about her mother’s time at UNC-Chapel Hill, Bree decides to confront the statue of a soldier from the confederacy, a monument that marks the history of antiblackness that pervades the United States. Rather than balking at the sight, she chooses to stand in front of it and assert her power, even though it is an object, not a living thing. She stands in the pain that comes from being in the presence of a racist artifact, but she also connects to her ancestors—the people society has forgotten, the people that she was taught to forget.

I map this terrain’s sins, the invisible and the many, and hold them close. Because even if the pain of those sins takes my breath away, that pain feels like belonging, and ignoring it after all I’ve just witnessed would be a loss. . . . I stand at the statue and claim the bodies whose names the world wants to forget. I claim those bodies whose names *I* was taught to forget. And I claim unsung bloodlines that soak the ground beneath my feet, because I know, I just *know*, that if they could, they would claim me. . . . I turn around to face that statue, press both palms against it, and *push*. I imagine all of the hands that built Carolina and suffered on its grounds pushing through my palms, too, and while the statue doesn’t budge, it feels like I’ve sent a message I feel stronger. Taller. Like I might have the roots to grow what I need. (pp. 240–241)

In this excerpt, Bree reflects on the pain and suffering for which the monument stands. It is a reminder that the world is full of Black death, and yet, even though

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the presence of the statue and the history behind it are painful, Bree chooses to find belonging and connection in the pain. She decides to remember the ancestors who no longer inhabit the Earth, recall the strength of the numerous Black people who were lost, and imagine how their collective strength could help

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her to disrupt and dismantle the racism embedded in the statue. She feels stronger in that moment because her ancestors, her roots, are there to give her strength.

Bree continues to cultivate her power by growing and watering her ancestral roots, and these efforts make a deep impact across the rest of the narrative. Specifically, throughout many therapy

sessions, Bree learns that she is a medium, one who can channel her ancestors and speak to them. By bringing her ancestors into her mind, she makes space to learn about her history even when this history is intertwined with violence and enslavement. As an example, after first contacting her grandmother, Bree then builds a connection to her older ancestors. Through these intergenerational bonds, she learns that slavery severed the connections of her matrilineal line. During the time of enslavement, Bree's ancestor was raped by a descendant of King Arthur, thus breaking the whiteness preserved in the lines. Because the protection of whiteness was paramount, Arthur's descendant attempted to murder Bree's ancestor. Instead of accepting death, however, the ancestor fought back: to protect her life and the lives of her descendants, she vowed that only one daughter would live at the same time. This sacrifice made the lives of future descendants possible, but it also resulted in the loss of a mother for each progeny. This knowledge, although difficult, leads to deeper ancestral connections. Through violence, Bree exists. Through historical connections, Bree can understand her mother, grandmother, and great-great-great grandmother in ways she never could before. Thus, when she must fight, she thinks of her mother, "her fights. Her triumphs. Her pain" (p. 462) because now they are Bree's to bear.

As she states, "Mine to hold. And mine to wield" (p. 462). Bree's mother's life counted, as did the lives of every Black woman torn apart by intergenerational trauma. In this way, *Legendborn* disrupts the trauma/joy binary by suggesting that wounds can be weapons, that history matters for the future, and that ancestors are connected to those in the present. The trauma of knowing can lead to the power of deep-rooted, intergenerational connection.

Trauma That Is Just Painful

Although trauma can lead to reclamation and to ancestral/communal connection, it is also essential to note that sometimes, trauma is just painful, and that, too, is something important to acknowledge. Bree experiences painful moments throughout the course of the text, mostly tied to contemporary and historical experiences of racial violence at the hands of white students and parents. At one point, Bree and her best friend, Alice, get caught at a party and taken back to campus by a police officer. In the car, the officer states that his child applied to the early college program, but he did not get accepted into the school. Rather than believe that Bree and Alice entered the program due to their scholarly potential, he asks them "how'd y'all swing it?" (Deonn, 2020, p. 30). Both girls pause, knowing that he means to classify them as Affirmative Action students, those who could not have possibly been smart enough to be included in such a prestigious program. Although Alice mentions that she was admitted due to a scholarship, Bree says that she was admitted based on merit. The officer laughs at her, and she balls her fists, "tensing with all of the things [she] can't afford to say" (p. 30).

If this experience is not enough, she is forced to meet with the dean of the school, and he immediately begins the conversation with hostility. He accuses her of disrespecting the officer, and when she attempts to explain herself, the dean interrupts her, telling her that she is pardoned for her actions due to the environment being different from those in which she normally resides. She is told who she is, and she is not allowed to speak back to the white men who hold power over her. As Bree argues, "First the racist cop, then the dean believing him without giving me a chance to explain . . ." (p. 37). She experiences the pain of not being able to define herself because the dean and the officer believed in the myth of Black girlhood.

Her experiences of antiblackness were not relegated to just the school and the police, for Bree also had to face racism as she attempted to join the ranks of the Legendborn. To illustrate, Bree is mostly unfamiliar with the history of the Legendborn society when she decides to join. To assist her in her learning, William, one of the Legendborn and a descendent of Sir Gawain, shows her The Wall of Ages, a large slab of rock that marks the thirteen bloodlines of the Round Table. As she looks at history made permanent in stone, Bree sees how the lines of King Arthur's knights are traced from medieval times to the present day. Although this is meant to be a learning experience that centers the history of the Round Table, Bree considers her own history.

To be able to trace one's family back that far is something I have never fathomed. My family only knows back to the generation after Emancipation. Suddenly, it's hard to stand here and take in the magnificence of the Wall and not feel an undeniable sense of ignorance and inadequacy. Then, a rush of frustration because someone probably wanted to record it all, but who could have written down my family's history as far back as this? Who could have been able to, been taught to, been allowed to? Where is our Wall? . . . A Wall that towers over anyone who lays on it? Instead of awe, I feel . . . cheated. (p. 135)

Bree understands that the wall is meant to keep track of the various descendants, but she is also shaken by the fact that she will never be able to grasp at the roots of her own history in the same way. Enslavement severed the ties to her family and community, and she knows that this violent part of US history means she will never know some of her ancestors the way her white Legendborn counterparts do. She feels cheated, hurt that even if her progenitors had wanted to write down their stories, they would never have been able to. This reality is painful and overshadows any awe that she would have felt in seeing such an historical relic.

Although the Wall symbolized the history of racism in society, Bree also had to experience the reality of racism as she joined the Legendborn. For instance, during the welcoming ceremony for new initiates, one of the current members, Victoria, tells the new class of apprentices that the group was its most diverse in the history of the Legendborn. The issue, of course, is that Bree is the only Black person in a sea of white faces. In response, Bree is "a rush of emotions: anger, hot and burning against [her] cheeks. Disgust at the

self-congratulatory expression on [Victoria's] face. Then the deep fatigue [her] father calls 'death by a thousand cuts'" (p. 100). These cuts continue throughout the narrative as she undergoes her Legendborn initiation process. A white women parent of another recruit treats her like she is a servant and is angered when she learns that she is not, in fact, someone there to serve her. Other recruits look at her with disdain, believing that she is only allowed space into the secret society because she is Black and has seduced an important member of the Legendborn nobility. Some initiates even attempt to harm her or force her to act in anger, as they believe she does not deserve to be among them; they want to show the others how unsuited for acceptance she is. In considering how she is treated by her peers, she makes the following point: "For bigots, it doesn't matter how or why I'm truly here; the fact that I'm here at all is wrong enough. . . . But I'm not going to disappear. And I don't want to keep my head down" (p. 184). Thus, even though the stereotypical myths that confine Black women (i.e., Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire) follow her throughout her initiation into the Legendborn, Bree refuses to not exist. She is real, and she will force them to see her, even though it is sometimes painful.

Of course, a life without trauma would be ideal, but Bree knows that Black people in the United States and beyond are living in a world steeped in antiblackness, and she knows that this "antiblackness is endemic to, and is central to how all of us make sense of the social, economic, historical, and cultural dimensions of human life" (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 429). She knows that the rot of antiblackness exists in the structures upon which this world relies, and thus Black people are seen as inhuman, object, thing, monster (Thomas, 2019a). Because of this, she knows that trauma is a part of her life, and yet, she refuses to let that trauma consume her. As Reynolds (2022) suggested, Black girls "are in the afterlife of slavery, constantly feeling and watching death, but [they] don't only have

quote

to die here or live complacently” (p. 25). That is, even if pain and grief are a constant throughout life, they do not need to be consistently centered. Bree knows that trauma is a part of being human, but it does not have to define or confine who she is. *Legendborn* suggests that, sometimes, the trauma/joy binary is limiting, as it prohibits Black girls from experiencing the fullness of their being. Sometimes, joy cannot be demanded, as the violence and trauma of antiblackness is so pervasive. Sometimes, Black girls need someone to just recognize the validity and truth of their pain.

Before Bree/After Bree . . . Just Bree

Throughout the narrative, Bree desired healing, a way to move from pain toward celebration and joy. The forceful movement from joy to pain, however, resulted in an internal schism in which the celebratory parts of herself were walled off so that grief could thrive. Rather than address the pain she felt, she attempted to embrace the inner trauma/joy binary that prevented her from accepting her complete self. However, feigning complacency to hide her grief was a practice in futility, as it compelled Bree to ignore major parts of her humanity. She was Before Bree; she was After Bree; she was never whole. In separating herself, she was only half existing, ephemeral, a ghost of her full, corporeal body. She bought into the myth that Black girls must not discuss their pain, that they must hide their grief. Yet, as the narrative progresses, Bree showed that she does not have to be afraid of the dark, does not have to separate or cut off parts of herself to exist in a world that demands her joy. She embraced the pain, connected to her ancestors, reclaimed her history, and found herself. In accepting the pain, joy, love, anger, grief, and confusion, she was made whole. She was no longer partial, no longer myth, but fully Bree, fully human.

Bree is a medium, a bridge that connects past, present, and future alongside joy, trauma, and healing. Her existence in the text showcases the myriad ways in which Black girls consistently live in a space of tension, where tragedy and triumph, grief and happiness, and trauma and celebration exist simultaneously. Rather than sit in this tension and force the idea that Black girls must consistently split themselves in two, Bree challenges binary thinking that states that Black girls, specifically, or Black people, in general, must

separate themselves, commodify their joy for the mass consumption of those who cannot handle Black pain. As a character, Bree creates a portal to a new world, one in which Black girls can embrace all parts of their emotional existence without fear of stereotype and myth. Her existence is a symbolic representation of what it takes for real Black girls to heal—for them to redefine, reclaim, and expand their identities in a world that wants Black girls’ healing and joy to look, feel, and sound a specific way. Thus, Bree is not only a medium that shows how Black girls exist between two emotional extremes; she is concrete evidence as to how educators must dismantle binary thinking that attempts to limit Black girls’ humanity. Bree is a teacher that can show educators how to attend to Black girls’ needs in school spaces.

Specifically, Bree teaches us about the vastness of Black girlhood and the ways in which joy and pain connect to healing. She teaches us that educators cannot think about joy or trauma as mutually exclusive entities, as polar opposites that have no influence on each other. In learning from Bree, educators must consider how to be more intentional about providing a medium for Black girls to explore the vastness of their identities through writing, reading, play, dance, protest, etc. Considering Bree as a teacher, we offer the following pedagogical suggestions:

- Bree says, “And when your people die, you have to listen to strangers speak your nightmare into existence” (p. 1). Often, strangers narrate Black girls’ lives. Consider making space for Black girls to narrate and share (if they choose) stories that center the fullness of their identities (Muhammad, 2012), the joyous, the traumatic, the everything in between.
- Patricia tells Bree that “most often, [rootcraft] travels from mother to daughter” (p. 165). As mentor texts can act as motherscholars to Black girls (Muhammad, 2015), consider centering texts written by Black women (e.g., Alice Walker, Dhonielle Clayton, Amber McBride, and Toni Morrison) to support Black girls’ writing craft, thus providing Black girls an opportunity to practice writing that affirms the whole of their experiences.
- Bree argues that “when people acknowledge your pain, they want your pain to acknowledge them back. They need to witness it in real time, or else

you're not doing your part" (p. 13). Black, trauma-informed practices suggest the need for Black girls' pain to be acknowledged in classroom spaces, but it is important to know that the narration of their pain is for Black girls' healing, not for your consumption.

- Bree tells her friend the following: "I don't want to get lost in the past. I want to embrace it and understand" (p. 394). When thinking about the celebration of joy in the classroom, consider that learning about the past and about pain and trauma can have healing effects for Black girls because it helps them gain deeper ancestral and communal connections.

Although not exhaustive, these considerations can help educators to discuss the nuance, not the myth, of Black girls' lives in educational spaces.

Of course, we also recognize that *Legendborn* is not the only text that can be examined to redefine, reclaim, and expand notions of Blackness, discuss the tragedies and triumphs of the present and past while also charting new possibilities for the future, or challenge binary thinking about Black girlhood and Black girls' emotional needs. Other texts, like *The Gilded Ones* by Namina Forna, *Blood Like Magic* by Liselle Sambury, *Raybearer* by Jordan Ifueko, and *Wings of Ebony* by J. Elle are also primed for readers to engage in similar study. Still, we center *Legendborn* because Black literature "is food for a deep, lifetime study, not something to be squeezed into a quarter or semester as a concession to student demands, nor a literature to be approached one-dimensionally" (Reed, 1970, xxvi). Bree's story deserves deep study because it explicitly asks educators to challenge the trauma/joy binary that often leads Black girls to hide parts of themselves. It asks educators to consider what is at stake if we ignore the complexity of Black girls' humanity.

Conclusion

Baker-Bell et al. (2017) argued that educators are complicit in acts of racial violence "when we ignore the pain and overlook the wounds that Black and Brown youth bear as they sit in our classrooms, trying to listen to us lecture while the viral footage of Black and Brown death is replaying in their minds" (p. 123). That is, when we forget the nuance of Black girls' humanity, demanding their joy in an antiblack world, we are complicit in negating Black girls' healing. We

are complicit when we forget that the fullness of Black girls' humanity must be embraced in educational spaces. To disrupt this complicity, educators cannot be afraid of the dark, cannot be afraid to make space for pain and grief as well as celebration and joy. We must witness and not run from Black girls' trauma just because Black joy is undergoing a neoliberal renaissance that relegates pain as undesirable. We must learn to consider the reality, not the myths, surrounding Black girls' lives.

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