

"I Desperately Need Visions of Black People Thriving": Emancipating the Fantastic With Black Women's Words

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Emancipating the fantastic from dominant narratives requires educators to center Black authors and characters, highlight stories beyond Black pain, and show a commitment to broadening Black girls' mirrors and telescopes.

Samuel R. Delaney, a queer Black male author of science fiction (SF), argued that

the imagistic paraphernalia of science fiction functioned as social signs—signs people learned to read very quickly. They signaled technology. And technology was like a placard on the door saying, "Boys Club! Girls, keep out. Blacks and Hispanics and the poor in general, go away!" (Dery, 1994, p. 188)

That is, SF signaled a hostile environment for Black and Brown readers, a clear advertisement that sci-fi dreams were meant for white male imaginations. This sentiment has been documented by scholars who recognize that SF, including dystopian, alien invasion, space opera, and time travel, is primarily marketed as a genre for white, middle-class, heterosexual boys and men (Barr, 2008; Gatson & Reid, 2011).

However, even though the genre has historically ignored Black women and girls, they are never completely omitted from the story, as they assume roles as the creature, the alien, or the monster that haunts the narrative (Thomas, 2019). That is, in the white imagination, Black female characters are frequently shown as abnormalities, beings that must be met with violence to ensure the survival or progression of innocent white protagonists. Thus, fantastic representations of Black women and girls are often distorted, and there are limited visions of them flourishing in the white imagination, for mental and/or physical violence often occurs to ensure that the Black female aberrations are expunged.

Because Black women and girls have limited access to futuristic worlds, "trapped by the 'fictions' created by

those outside of our cultures and communities" (Elliott, 2010, para. 11), it is critical for educators to use SF that showcases Black female characters who are thriving. As Thomas (2018) noted, "liberating the *rest* of the fantastic from its fear and loathing of darkness and Dark Others [or entities that cause hesitation and fear] is essential" (p. 8). Thus, it is the job of all educators to assist in the emancipation of the fantastic, providing stories that challenge any future where Black girls are forgotten or eliminated.

The primary objective of this article, then, is to further conversations about the need for diverse books and genres in schools by focusing on the SF reading histories of Black women and highlighting the features that draw them to the genre. This purpose is significant because the features Black women search for can provide information that could "liberate the Dark Other from her imprisonment and impending doom, not only in the text itself, but *also in the imaginations of their readers*" (Thomas, 2018, p. 8). The reading histories of Black women can provide data that showcase the need for new mythologies, ones that center Black girls prospering in the future.

The following research question guided this analysis: What features draw Black women to the reading of SF? To respond to this question, I present data gathered

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from an exploratory survey study on Black women's SF reading histories that was distributed via social media in the summer of 2018. I then highlight findings from a thematic analysis of two open-response survey questions related to the features Black women search for as they select SF texts, and I use these data to discuss the importance of using diverse SF in secondary classrooms to emancipate the fantastic.

Emancipating the Dark Fantastic

Thomas (2019) analyzed the cycle that traps Black girls in a cage of speculative violence. The Dark Fantastic Cycle has five components: spectacle, hesitation, violence, haunting, and emancipation. Spectacle is the aspect of visual difference, where the Dark Other disrupts the imaginary world by merely existing in it. The interruption causes readers to hesitate, wondering what to do with this alien creature. To repair the conflict created by the Dark Other's presence, textual violence occurs, which often results in the physical or mental death of the character. However, "*Darkness is the source that powers the fantastic*" (p. 29), so the Dark Other is never truly dead. Instead, the monster haunts the narrative, beginning the cycle anew, as the haunted body becomes a spectacle that once again causes hesitation and violence. Thus, the Dark Other is imprisoned by this cycle until they are emancipated through narratives that subvert their traditional positioning.

Thomas (2018) suggested that liberating the Dark Other from the cycle requires the creation of an emancipatory fantastic, a break in traditional paradigms to create new mythologies. This movement has already begun, as a liberated fantastic is embodied in the novels of Octavia Butler and Toni Morrison, the literary collections of Sheree Renee Thomas and Adrienne Maree Brown, and the children's fiction of Virginia Hamilton and Alaya Dawn Johnson (Thomas, 2019). Because an emancipated fantastic requires the imaginative genius of Black women, it is essential to "place Black women's subjectivity in the center of analysis and examine the interdependence of the everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge shared by African-American women as a group" (Collins, 2000, p. 269). In other words, an emancipated fantastic requires that Black women's thoughts about the fantastic be pushed to the forefront.

Method

The Black Women Reading Science Fiction survey (see Figure 1) was distributed online via Twitter and Facebook beginning May 16, 2018 and ending June 6,

2018. The survey was an exploratory project to gather information about Black women's reading histories to bring attention to the nuanced reading preferences of Black women and girls. So, I included questions on Black women's reading experiences in middle and high school, features necessary for Black women to select SF texts, and Black women's subgenre preferences.

Data Collection

The survey had 26 questions separated into four sections: demographic information, SF history, current reading preferences and practices, and selecting SF. These sections were essential for understanding the length of time Black women have engaged with the genre, why Black women continue to read a genre that has historically excluded them, and what characteristics are required for them to read a SF book. Of the questions, seven were open, allowing participants to write their answer, and 19 were closed, restricting answers to predetermined responses. The closed responses included both multiple-choice questions that allowed participants to select one option and multiple-choice questions that invited participants to select all applicable answers. Eleven of the closed responses included an "other" category to allow participants to write their answers. The number of questions respondents answered varied, as I included no requirement to complete the survey, and participants could stop the survey at any time. Still, although participation varied throughout the survey, question responses did not drop below 86%.

Participants

I created broad inclusion criteria to ensure that a large number of Black women could participate in the survey. Inclusion criteria for this study were Black women who were 18 or older who read at least one SF book per year. I shared the survey on my Facebook and Twitter pages, and various social media users shared my posts, people I know and people with whom I have no relationship. Survey respondents were anonymous unless they opted to be contacted for a follow-up interview. Interview data are not included in this article, but it is important to note that of the Black women who elected to provide their names, there were several women I have never met, online or otherwise.

I embedded a criterion sampling protocol (Creswell & Poth, 2018) into the survey to ensure that all participants included in the data corpus met the inclusion criteria. The first question asked if the participant identified as a Black woman. If they selected "yes," they

Figure 1
Black Women Reading Science Fiction Survey Excerpt

Demographic Info

Do you identify as a Black woman? Yes/No

What is your age?

- Under 18
- 18–24
- 25–38
- 39–53
- 54–72
- Over 72

Currently, how many science fiction books do you read per year?

- Less than 1 per year
- 1–5 per year
- 6–10 per year
- 11–20 per year
- More than 20 per year

Where do you live?

- New England (CT, ME, MA, NH, RI, VT)
- Mid-Atlantic (NJ, NY, PA)
- South Atlantic (DE, FL, GA, MD, NC, SC, VA, DC, WV)
- South Central (AL, KY, MS, TN, AR, LA, OK, TX)
- Midwest (IL, IN, MI, OH, WI, IA, KS, MN, MO, NE, ND, SD)
- Mountain West (AZ, CO, ID, MT, NV, NM, UT, WY)
- Pacific West (AK, CA, HI, OR, WA)
- Other

Science Fiction History

How long have you been reading science fiction? *Note: Reading can include print and digital text (internet-based, e-reader, etc.).

- Less than 1 year
- 1–5 years
- 6–10 years
- 11–20 years
- More than 20 years

Did you read science fiction as part of a middle or high school assignment? (yes/no). If yes, which of these science fiction books were assigned in middle or high school? (Check All)

- *Frankenstein*
- *The Giver*
- *The Handmaid's Tale*
- *Fahrenheit 451*
- *A Wrinkle in Time*
- *1984*
- *Brave New World*
- *The Martian Chronicles*
- Other

During middle or high school, did you read science fiction on your own? (yes/no/I don't remember). If yes, which books do you remember reading?

Current Reading Preferences/Practices

Does your identity as a Black woman influence how you select science fiction books? (Yes/No) If yes, how so?

moved to the second question. If they selected “no,” the survey ended. The second question asked the participant about their age. If the participant selected “under 18 years old,” the survey concluded. The last criterion question asked how many books the participant read each year. If they selected “less than 1 book per year,” the survey terminated. In total, 366 people began the survey, but once I eliminated the responses of participants who did not meet the criterion benchmarks, 308 responses were left to be included in the survey results.

Demographic information (see Table 1) shows that the majority of respondents were between 25 and 59 and from the Southern United States. Although I designed the survey for a U.S. context, respondents lived in countries beyond the United States, including South

Africa, the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, and Korea. Initially, I believed the predominance of South Atlantic users was connected to social media algorithms because I live in the South Atlantic part of the United States. However, I shared the survey in Facebook groups such as *My Superheroes Are Black!* and *The State of Black Science Fiction*, whose users live around the world. Additionally, the tweet was liked 225 times and shared 506 times by people across the country. For these reasons, it is unclear why more Black women from the South responded to this survey.

In answering questions about their reading histories, the majority of participants indicated a SF reading history of more than 20 years, whereas several others read SF for at least five years (see Table 2). The length

Table 1
Demographic Information

Demographic	<i>n</i>	Percentage
<i>Geographic location</i>		
New England	14	4.55
Mid-Atlantic	43	13.96
South Atlantic	92	29.87
South Central	40	12.99
Midwest	39	12.66
Mountain West	11	3.57
Pacific West	34	11.04
Canada	13	4.22
South Africa	3	0.97
Europe	8	2.59
Caribbean	4	1.29
Middle East	3	0.97
Korea	2	0.64
<i>Age band</i>		
18–24	29	9.42
25–39	152	49.35
40–59	119	38.64
60–74	8	2.60
Over 74	0	0

Table 2
Participant Science Fiction (SF) Reading History

Survey question and answer choices	<i>n</i>	Percentage
<i>Years reading SF</i>		
Less than 1 year	2	0.65
1–5 years	20	6.49
5–10 years	35	11.36
11–20 years	66	21.43
More than 20 years	185	60.06
<i>Read books in middle/high school (assigned by teacher)</i>		
Yes	135	45.92
No	99	33.67
I don't remember	60	20.41
<i>Read books in middle/high school (on your own)</i>		
Yes	235	80.76
No	33	11.34
I don't remember	23	7.90
<i>Number of SF books read</i>		
Less than 1 per year	0	0
1–5 per year	190	68.10
6–10 per year	59	21.15
11–20 per year	19	6.81
More than 20 per year	11	3.94

of Black women's SF reading history indicates that for many participants, SF reading began well before adulthood, with many participants reading SF in secondary school. In fact, over 75% of the women identified reading SF on their own during middle and high school even though less than half of the respondents read SF narratives in school during that time. The books assigned in middle and high school (see Table 3) included ELA staples such as *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, and *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle. In the "other" category, participants listed less commonly taught books, such as *Childhood's End* by Arthur C. Clarke, *Noughts and Crosses* by Malorie Blackman, and *The Island of Dr. Moreau* by H.G. Wells.

The books participants read on their own during middle and high school were similar. Respondents consistently listed authors such as Madeleine L'Engle, Anne McCaffrey, and Ray Bradbury and books such as *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, *Divergent* by Veronica Roth, and *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card. Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delaney were the only Black authors participants mentioned, and they were named less than 30 times. Thus, the SF books assigned to the participants in school and the books they read on their own were largely written by white male authors and featured white characters, highlighting the predominance of whiteness in their SF reading histories

Table 3
Books Assigned in Middle/High School

Book assigned	<i>n</i>	Percentage
<i>Fahrenheit 451</i> by Ray Bradbury	61	23.92
<i>Frankenstein</i> by Mary Shelley	56	21.96
<i>The Giver</i> by Lois Lowry	45	17.64
<i>A Wrinkle in Time</i> by Madeleine L'Engle	41	16.07
<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood	13	5.09
<i>1984</i> by George Orwell	9	3.52
<i>Brave New World</i> by Aldous Huxley	7	2.74
<i>The Martian Chronicles</i> by Ray Bradbury	3	1.17
Other	20	7.84

and showcasing the need to emancipate the fantastic from white-centered imaginations.

Data Analysis

I engaged in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to better understand the open survey questions. Within the ATLAS.ti program, I read and reread the data and coded for patterns and themes to generate larger categories in which my codes could be combined. As I read, I employed a line-by-line analysis of the open survey responses. In all, 63 codes were created in the analysis of the open-ended questions. These codes included the following: alternate realities, Black authors, Black characters, unspecified diversity, looking for mirrors, avoiding SF whiteness, avoidance of stereotypes, social justice issues, and escape. With my research questions in mind, I examined the code book to identify which codes could "be combined, refined and separated, or discarded" (p. 91). Once analyzed, I collapsed the remaining codes into themes. For example, I combined Black authors, Black characters, and avoiding whiteness into the theme searching for minoritized characters and authors. Then, I reviewed the themes I constructed against the corpus of open survey responses, reading and rereading to confirm my initial findings.

Findings

Including data from the entire survey is beyond the scope of this article, so to answer the research question, I focus on two open response questions about the features that draw Black women to SF. These questions asked respondents to describe why they were attracted to a specific SF subgenre (e.g., Afrofuturism, dystopian, SF/fantasy, SF/horror, SF/mystery, superhero) and if their identities as Black women affected their SF reading selections. Across both questions, there were 458 responses to analyze, with 182 participants explaining how their identities as Black women affected their SF reading selections and 276 describing what attracts them to SF subgenres.

Searching for Minoritized Characters and Authors

Although Black women and other minoritized communities are predominantly excluded from SF, the Black women from this survey consistently mentioned the need for Black, Brown, queer, and female representation in characters and authorship. Particularly, one respondent wrote, "I rarely read books by white men....

Unpopular opinion but white dudes aren't very good writers. They don't really see past their own experiences, which they believe to be universal." Similarly, another participant argued,

A lot of fantasy and sci fi geared towards adults is written by the same, stodgy white men and it gets real tiring real fast to deal with all the misogyny and grossness and erasure that comes with their POV.

Although it is difficult to do so, these readers try to avoid books written by white men because they know those stories fail to represent a universal experience even though the experiences of white men are situated as the default in SF. These comments suggest that Black women are more invested in stories that show diverse experiences, rather than uninteresting, repetitive narratives consistently written by the same white male authors.

Another participant described in depth why white-centered narratives do not align with the interests of Black women:

White male protagonists are often poorly written and characterized. Their perspectives are so taken for granted in literature that writers don't scrutinize them as well....You rarely see them really grapple with their impact on the people and [the] environment around them. When women of color are protagonists, it feels more fresh, there are more thoughtful takes on where they fit in with their world instead of just assuming that their gumption will slide them right through every door that needs to be open. Of course, not every book with a WOC will be better written, but the story will almost always feel more real to me because that's my reality.

She suggested that white male protagonists do not interrogate their whiteness and privilege in the context of the future, gliding through stories without analyzing their position within the worlds they occupy and often colonize. In contrast, the participant notes that women of color protagonists critically examine their positions in the world, analyzing how their movements impact themselves and the worlds around them.

Although some participants try to avoid white male authors and stories, the presence or exclusion of white men does not dominate Black women's reading preferences. Black women also want to uplift the imaginations of those who are Othered in society. Specifically, one respondent wrote that she wants to "build other sistahs up, and so prefer to support authors from marginalized backgrounds (especially multiple minorities) and have a special fondness for supporting other Black women (especially queer Black women) creatives." Similarly, another woman wrote,

I think it is more important to purchase science fiction books/movies that have a large presence of black people. I feel like in the past, Black people were excluded from the science fiction narrative. Especially if the story was a futuristic one. I always feel like it is an act of solidarity to support black women.

These women showcase how Black women engage in acts of solidarity to sustain queer, femme, Black, and Brown characters and authors. In this way, searching for minoritized characters and authors is a political choice to uplift stories written by, for, and about those historically excluded from SF. It is a radical act of anti-racist work to support the creation of an emancipatory fantastic. Ultimately, Black women are looking for stories that provide innovative, thought-provoking, and critically situated narratives that represent the diversity of the future and depict realms outside of the white imaginary.

Searching for Escapist Narratives

Another prominent feature that draws Black women to SF texts is escapism. Black women and girls often experience violence as they journey throughout their lives, so some women want narratives that allow them to get away from their realities and avoid the oppression they face every day (Brown et al., 2015). One respondent summarized this ideal in the following way:

Many science fiction books I've read [that are] regarded as classics deny/erase my existence or seem so basic as someone who has lived as a black woman. White people writing fictional dystopias that are my lived realities with no real understanding of how oppression works is tiring to wade through. I crave escapism from a society that hates me, I want recognition and connection on some deeper level in the fiction I read.

In this statement, the woman notes that classic SF stories often include Black experiences without actually including Black people. Thus, these narratives erase her lived realities while also profiting off of them. Instead of these stories, she desires narratives that recognize her being but also allow her to escape from her reality.

The idea that an oppression-filled world creates a need to escape was also discussed by other survey participants. One woman noted,

The reality of being a Black (queer) woman in America/the world means that on some level, your exposure to misogyny is unfortunately common. It's not a hard and fast rule, but when I'm seeking out reading material, I want it to not (overtly if at all) replicate any parts of that lived experience.

In this response, the participant noted that misogynoir, or anti-Black racist misogyny directed toward Black women (Bailey & Trudy, 2018), is rampant in the United States and in the world at large. Because the exposure to oppression occurs so frequently in Black women's lives, this respondent wants to read stories that do not duplicate the daily violence she experiences.

Another participant stated that she looks for new worlds and concepts that stretch her imagination, but "considering some of the pressures and discrimination I face as a woman of colour, I find the imagined worlds a breath of fresh air." Similarly, another respondent said she likes reading SF and fantasy books by Black women because she did not have the opportunity to read such texts as a child, but she also feels as though "many narratives about the black experience are about struggle, and we deserve to dream of something beyond that." Her response echoed that of another participant, who indicated that she "desperately need[s] visions of Black people thriving." Each of these statements showcases the women's current search for imagined worlds that are different from the one we currently inhabit, a world in which Black women are not forced to experience violence, a world where we can thrive.

These women argued that SF featuring the current realities of Black women are important, but it is also important to share stories of joy, freedom, and life alongside those that show the struggle that often accompanies Black existence. Durand and Jiménez-García (2018) noted that SF can "offer unique opportunities to imagine alternatives to current social arrangements" (p. 19). Thus, these representations are vital in a world that consistently shows us that Black lives do not matter (Love, 2019) and that Black people do not deserve space in the future. Ultimately, their responses suggest that Black women need escapism from the violent realities of their everyday lives and the violent fictions of the Dark Fantastic Cycle.

Searching for Mirrors and Telescopes

Bishop's (1990) metaphor explains that books can provide mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors to readers. Scholars have noted, however, that SF has failed to provide windows and mirrors to Black female readers of SF (Thomas, 2019; Toliver, 2018). Black women have often been relegated to the margins, viewing the future through eyes unlike their own and experiencing futures that exclude them. However, Black women want to see themselves represented in the SF stories they read to see experiences that resemble their own. They are also looking to see existence beyond the past and present.

Numerous women indicated a need for mirrors in SF. One woman said, "I like to read books by African American women because they will feature people who look like me and will have story lines that feature our struggle and experiences." Another participant stated, "I love finding authors who can write from my perspective or otherwise acknowledge our existence and value in imaginary future or fantasy worlds." An additional woman indicated, "I want to read the dreams of others that I'm included in. I want to read the perspective of people who might have seen the world like I do."

These responses suggest that Black women are looking for stories that mirror some aspect of their experience, both positive and negative. Through many years of SF reading experience, they see "how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part" (Bishop, 1990, p. ix), and they wish for stories that include futures that are not "distorted, negative, or laughable" (p. ix). Black women wish for stories where their future existence is acknowledged. In this way, they align with Bishop's (1990) discussion of the benefit of mirrors in that they desire imaginative stories of self-affirmation that reflect their lives as part of the larger human experience in the future.

In addition to finding mirrors, Black women are also trying to find their telescopes as they explore identities beyond the past and present and claim space in a future that has told them to keep out. Specifically, one woman wrote, "Artists like N.K. Jemison, Nalo Hopkins, Nnedi Okorafor and Octavia Butler have given me the courage to be myself and claim space in genres that can be hostile to black women." Similarly, another woman stated that "black people exist in the future and that's not always relayed in mainstream science fiction." These remarks show how Black people are often only acknowledged in dark futures or as minor characters in a white protagonist's story. However, they reject those stories because they know that Black women *will* exist in the future. They know their futures are valid and that they are allowed to take up space in places and genres that attempt to push them out.

The need for Black female futures was also echoed in another statement by a participant who said she is interested in Black women's SF but "not interested in futures that don't presume black women's survival. If we've made it through this far, we'll make it through the zombie apocalypse or a nuclear winter, or a future where human scale physics are less predictable." Another woman stated,

For most of my early reading life it was as if Black ppl didn't exist in the future. Cyberpunk/dystopian novels were the only ones that even had a nod to Black ppl...now I read our versions of the future and know we'll be there.

These women presume Black survival as the default (Love, 2019), uplifting visions of Black endurance well into the future. They reject any future that excludes Black life; they reject stories that force Dark bodies into the Dark Fantastic Cycle.

From characters to authorship, Black women want books that mirror their experience so reading can become a way to assert the value of their existence. They are also looking for telescopes, curved mirrors that gather and focus light from darkness and magnify the picture of the formally indistinguishable. For readers, a telescope is a means to view distant objects, such as the future or fantastic, and make them appear nearer. It is a way to look beyond reality, to gather light from the darkness and magnify visions of future liberation. Black women are looking through the curved mirrors of SF to see far into the future in hopes of seeing a world in which they are free. These telescopes provide a means to see the previously enigmatic future and know that Black people will be there, and they will be well.

Breaking the Dark Fantastic Cycle

Black women are searching for SF stories that feature Black characters and authors, provide escapist narratives, and offer mirrors and telescopes. They are looking for visions of Black women and girls flourishing in the fantastic, existing beyond the confines of the white imagination. The search takes a toll, however, as they experience mental fatigue from the Dark Fantastic Cycle, as well as whiteness fatigue from a genre saturated with white characters and authors. To counter the exhaustion, Black women energize themselves with stories of Black women and girls thriving in the future even though those stories are few and far between.

Contemporary authors, such as Rena Barron, L.L. McKinney, and Bethany C. Morrow, have written stories that emancipate the fantastic, creating speculative worlds that depict Black women and girls as heroes, magic wielders, chosen ones, and princesses. Still, even though these Black female authors and many others are creating new mythologies about Black futures, SF featuring Black people still exists within a niche market (Ireland, 2016; White, 2016), and the doors of SF publishing have only narrowly opened to allow more stories that represent the characters and situations that Black women and girls desperately want to see (Toliver, 2018). Thus, even though the number of SF texts written by and about Dark Others have increased in the last several years, the numbers are still slight in comparison with books that center protagonists who are white, heterosexual, and male. So, the search continues.

The length of time this search has occupied is critical because the participants' current reading preferences are impacted by what was available to them in their youth. The limited number of Black authors participants read on their own in middle and high school suggests a lack of access at home or in libraries, but it is also important to highlight the books assigned in schools. Multiple respondents acknowledged that SF classics, including those predominantly read in secondary classrooms, deny and/or erase their existence, but they were still asked to read those books in class. Thus, their access to diverse SF was also limited by teachers who either refused to include Black SF or did not know enough about the genre to broaden the SF mirrors and telescopes available in their classrooms.

Of course, young adult and middle-grades SF has featured few Black authors (Smith, 2000). In fact, Elliott (2011), in curating a list of speculative fiction books (including SF, fantasy, and horror) from 1978 to the present, found only 125 books featuring Black youth. That is, in the past 42 years, an average of about three speculative books featuring Black adolescents have been published for young readers. Just like SF written for adults, youth SF limits Black girls' access to escapist narratives, mirrors, and telescopes. Because many participants started reading SF in their youth, I contend that liberating the fantastic for Black women starts by liberating the fantastic for Black girls.

As Thomas (2019) noted, emancipating the Black fantastic requires all of us "to acknowledge the ways that [we] have been complicit in reproducing the known world for every generation in the stories that we tell our children, teens, and young adults" (p. 169). Thus, it is essential for educators to recognize how we have confined Black girls to the Dark Fantastic Cycle. The books assigned during their secondary schooling years are the same stories, the same mythologies, that have been told for generations. In this way, we have been complicit in uplifting visions of futures in which Black girls are excluded. We have been complicit in holding up the placard that tells Black women and girls to keep out. We have been complicit in the reification of the Dark Fantastic Cycle.

By examining the knowledge shared by Black women in this survey, however, we can work to challenge the cycle we have historically upheld. We can teach from SF narratives that do not always center the white imagination, promoting SF stories of Black, Brown, and queer authors. We can utilize stories that provide Black girls with an escape from the harsh realities associated with being Black and female in the current societal system. We can search for SF narratives that provide Black girls

with mirrors and telescopes, showing them that they can and will thrive in the future. We can learn from the SF reading histories of adult Black women to break the cycle for the next generation of readers.

Conclusion

Black women and girls need Black protagonists and authors even though they are often relegated to the margins of SF and fantasy. They crave stories that represent their lived realities even though the SF genre is advertised as an arena for white men. Black women and girls desire visions of themselves in the future even though they are often subjected to futuristic violence in the mainstream imaginary. They want to challenge the genre that consistently positions them as the monster, Other, or alien and create new future visions for themselves.

Black women and other people of color are writing SF stories, combating the fictions created by those outside of their cultures and communities, but more stories are needed. Some scholars are working to challenge traditional mythologies that omit Black women and girls from the future, but more work must be done to liberate the fantastic from the clutches of dominance. Emancipating the fantastic from the fear and loathing of Darkness requires that all educational stakeholders work together to imagine new futures, ones in which Black women and girls are thriving. Together, we can remove the placard from the door of SF, welcoming all people to a brighter, flourishing future.

TAKE ACTION!

1. *Build your SF literature stack:* Ask students for recommendations of Black SF texts (print, digital, film, etc.) that you can bring into the classroom. Find websites, blogs, and review sites that will help ensure that your classroom bookshelf represents visions of Black girls in the future (see resources in the More to Explore sidebar).
2. *Substitute classic SF:* Although SF is sometimes taught in middle and high school, most books center white men. Instead of centering these stories, replace classics such as *Fahrenheit 451* with a novel like *Orleans* by Sherri L. Smith.
3. *Analyze representations of the future:* Ask students what they notice about SF books and films that are heavily marketed. Ask them who is missing from the future. Ask them who benefits from a future where Black people are erased.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

- "A Crash Course in the History of Black Science Fiction," a list of Black SF curated by author Nisi Shawl: <http://nisishawl.com/CCHBSF.html>
- DiverseFutures.net's list of speculative fiction books featuring Black characters: <https://www.diversefutures.net/blackgirlsinspec.html>
- *FIYAH Literary Magazine*, a speculative fiction magazine that features stories by and about Black people and includes SF book reviews: <https://www.fiyahlitmag.com/>
- "African American Speculative Fiction for Kids," a list curated by author Zetta Elliott: <http://www.zettaelliott.com/african-american-speculative-fiction-for-kids/>