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Uneven Emancipation in Jason Reynolds' *Miles Morales:
Spider-Man***

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Since the 2016 selection of Ta-Nehisi Coates to helm Marvel's *Black Panther*, Marvel Comics has made the strategic and long overdue move to recruit innovative Black writers to steer their comics featuring Black characters. Other notable Black writers who have helmed Marvel titles include Nnedi Okorafor, who wrote a nine-run series on *Shuri*, and Roxane Gay, who penned the fantastic, though shortly lived, *World of Wakanda*. Though these titles all have Black protagonists, Coates' *Black Panther* stands out as he is a character originally created by white writers Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. I find this juxtaposition intriguing, particularly in light of recent calls for "#OwnVoices" in youth literature, the call for literature "about diverse characters written by authors from that same diverse group." (Duyvis) What happens when a Black writer takes over a character of color who was the brainchild of a white writer? *Black Panther*, for example, is infinitely more interesting because Coates is in charge. Not only did he move the character beyond the simplistic, as he put it, "badass persona" (Episode 878), the comic was also a great seller, with issue number 1 the seventh best-selling comic of 2016. Yet, *Black Panther* rests in a racialized history of white creators, writers, artists, and (predominantly) white readers. This history demands much of Coates. What limitations must a Black writer overcome when helming a character with a racist backstory? What is necessary to redeem or "liberate" (Thomas 28) a narrative so as to "decolonize [the] imagination" (Elliot) of contemporary readers?

To explore these questions, I examine the interactions of whiteness, structural racism, and the school-to-prison pipeline in *Miles Morales: Spider-Man*, a prose novel by Jason Reynolds. Because I investigate whiteness within the fantastic, specifically a superhero narrative, I situate Reynolds' text within Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' dark

fantastic cycle, a move which helps me link Miles with the nuances of readers' interactions with whiteness. I first examine the literary history of Miles Morales through textual and paratextual evidence that precedes Reynolds' novel including the original comics by co-creators Brian Michael Bendis and Sara Pichelli, fan conversations, and interviews with creators. I then turn to Reynolds' novel where I focus on his distillation of whiteness through the portrayal of Miles' school, Brooklyn Visions Academy. Third, I examine Reynolds' metaphorical layering of US schools, the prison industrial complex, and their connections to US plantation slavery. Through my analysis, I argue that Reynolds' portrayal of whiteness offers an uneven emancipation from the source material, leaving Miles tethered to whiteness.

Reynolds' novel revolves around Miles, a Black Puerto Rican teenager with Spider-Man superpowers, and his trouble with his history teacher, Mr. Chamberlain. Chamberlain suspends Miles from school—an elite charter school called Brooklyn Visions Academy—for taking a long bathroom break. Miles later loses his work-study placement at a local convenience store when property, stolen by Mr. Chamberlain, goes missing on Miles' shift. Through the course of the novel, Miles discovers a centuries-old evil organization composed of multiple Mr. Chamberlains who have infiltrated schools and prisons from Mississippi to Brooklyn. This organization, run by the novel's chief antagonist The Warden, exists in order to move Black boys out of school and into prison for the purpose of reinstating a new Confederate state.

As I approach Reynolds' novel, I employ Thomas' dark fantastic cycle to underscore the weight Reynolds takes on as he carries the burden of Miles' and Spider-Man's gravitas in US popular culture. I bring in Thomas' theory because she offers a way

to analyze speculative texts “across modes” and “to understand [the] discord” (4) between a Black reader’s desire to engage with the fantastic and the insufficient representation of Black and dark voices in the genre. According to Thomas, most white-authored narratives of the fantastic, including narratives that seem to have no people of color, hinge upon the (un)seen presence of the Dark Other—the white, Western projection of Black and brown bodies that inhabit the fantastic. Readers most often encounter the Dark Other in these stories through a four-part cycle: *spectacle*, where the Dark Other manifests itself and is attributed difference; *hesitation*, where the “dream” (26) the reader expects to participate in when engaging with the fantastic is disrupted by awareness of the Dark Other; *violence*, where the Dark Other suffers violence, usually “death” (27), because of their unsettling presence; and *haunting*, where the presence of the Dark Other “lingers” (25), shaping the story by its “present-absence” (27). Most narratives, Thomas argues, stop at the fourth stage of the cycle; yet there is a fifth stage—*emancipation*, where “the Dark Other is liberated from” (28) the cycle. In order for emancipation to occur, and Thomas admits this is “rare” (28), the writer must pursue “an uphill journey” (29) in which the Dark Other in the text and the imagination of the readers must be liberated. Reynolds, in light of Thomas’ theory, has a weighty challenge—to “somehow liberate the Dark Other from her imprisonment and impending doom, not only in the text itself, but also in the imagination of [their] readers” (29). Reynolds, who writes to “dismantle the societal damage” (Diaz) of systemic racism, must emancipate, or untether, Miles from whiteness, but also emancipate the imaginations of his readers.

While I stay true to Thomas' cycle, my study differs from hers in key ways. Primarily, *The Dark Fantastic* focuses on the alternative perspectives of the Dark Other within white narratives. She asks how whiteness imagines the Dark Other and how the Dark Other claims its own place in those texts. At first glance, it may seem like my focus on Reynolds' novel does not fit within these constraints as he is a Black writer imagining a Black character. However, I hope to show that the dark fantastic facilitates rich engagement with *Miles Morales* because of the particular history of Miles within the white imaginary. Second, Thomas makes the intentional move to align her work in the fantastic within the scholar-activism of the "Black Girls' Literacy Collective" (32), a group that exists to "center Black girls in literacy research by speaking to the invisibility of girls in schools [and] the ways in which they are misrepresented and dehumanized in the public media" (33). She points out that the dark fantastic framework is applicable to any and all works of the fantastic, but *The Dark Fantastic* itself focuses on how Black girls and women are represented in the genre, and how Black girls and women read texts of the fantastic. In this paper, I apply Thomas' framework to a Black male protagonist, written by a Black male writer. My intent is not to diminish the important work around Black girls, but to engage with Reynolds' anti-racist bent, an aim I find best pursued through the lens of the dark fantastic cycle. While Thomas does not explicitly call her work anti-racist, her work is explicitly anti-racist. One of the purposes of Thomas' book is "to take up [Daniel Jose] Older's call" (5) for "concrete actions" (qtd. in Thomas 5) that bring greater racial representation to publishing. A key way Thomas takes these steps is by shaping her work through Critical Race Theory, specifically by enacting "critical race counterstory telling" (10) to "shift focus away from White heroic protagonists and

illuminating the imaginary stories of people of color” (11). Born out of a call to action that decenters white perspectives while centering Black and brown narratives, *The Dark Fantastic* provides a powerful framework for anti-racist literary and literacy scholarship.

This leads to a related difference: because I gauge the novel’s anti-racist work, I consider at times the emancipatory effect of Reynolds’ novel on white readers. Again, my intent is not to diminish the work around Black readers. As *Miles Morales* critiques whiteness and I am a white reader, I cannot help but struggle through my own interactions with Reynolds’ words and the interactions of readers like me. I want to reiterate, however, that while I do at times engage with the novel’s influence on white readers, my overall focus in this paper is not the perspectives of white readers but the ways whiteness creeps through a narrative. A primary focus on white readers minimizes and even silences marginalized perspectives, a result antithetical to critical work. To focus on whiteness’s manifestations, however, spotlights the problem of white supremacy and begins the work of stripping the gears of oppression within the field of (speculative) literature studies.

Positionality Statement

An explicit positionality statement is not customary in a work of literary criticism, even in journals with a critical bent. Such a statement is important, however, for me to include because of who I am—a white, straight, cisgender, Christian male, and the work that I do—scholarship on race and representation in literature for youth, and the context in which I do the work—the US academic environment fraught with historical racist, settler colonial baggage. As I strive toward decolonial work, failure to recognize my

identity as that of the colonizer is, I believe, educational malpractice. In relation to this specific work here on Spider-Man, it is educational malpractice for me to argue, as I do, that Reynolds has a particular responsibility in his work as a writer without my acknowledgement that I have a particular responsibility as a white academic writing about a Black writer. I address this responsibility first through the focus of critique. I use an analysis of Reynolds' work to bring insight into how whiteness works, its insidious nature, and the complications in disrupting it. I do not propose solutions or mandates for Reynolds and other Black writers. Second, I prioritize the writing of Black scholars. When I hinge this paper on Thomas' dark fantastic cycle, my intention is not appropriation but to foreground her work, the work of a Black woman currently producing the sharpest work on race and fantasy in a field of scholarship wedged within white supremacy. In addition, I bring in Black scholars from different fields, such as Beverly Tatum, Sybil Durand, Zetta Elliot, and Django Paris. While I do reference white scholars, most notably Dave Low for his expertise in comics and visual literacy, my priority here as a white scholar is to front Black and brown scholars. Throughout this paper, I grapple with whiteness and anti-black racism in texts, such as the Bendis and Pichelli comics, and in society and structures in which the texts rest, such as Bendis as a white writer assuming permission to write about Miles even though he believes changing Spider-Man from white to Black is only a "cosmetic change" (Riesman). My critique as a white scholar can become complicated when leveled against Reynolds, a Black writer. In writing this piece, I tried to forefront the caution I maintained when cognizant of my racial privilege. As I write of uneven emancipation, I want to point out that my goal is to root out whiteness, not criticize Reynolds' talent or vision. Again, I argue the

emancipation in the novel is uneven, not nonexistent. While there are places where the novel can be weak, there are also places where the text soars in craft, scope, and of course emancipatory capability.

Black Branches, White Roots: Miles' Origins

The white writer Brian Michael Bendis and the white illustrator Sara Pichelli¹ created Miles in 2011, drawing inspiration from President Barack Obama and Donald Glover (Francisco). They placed Miles not in the main Marvel universe but in the Marvel Ultimate Universe, a now discontinued line of comics created to modernize some of Marvel's long-standing heroes. The Marvel media empire contains a number of universes (the Prime or main universe, the Cinematic Universe, and the Ultimate Universe among others) that have the same characters but separate storylines. In the Ultimate Universe, Miles replaced white Peter Parker, the original Spider-Man, who died fighting the Green Goblin. This replacement of a white iconic character with a Black person, coupled with the nature of white, patriarchal comics subcultures means Thomas' spectacle (the announcement of Miles' creation), hesitation (the reaction from the white comic book reading world), and violence (the vitriol levied by readers and critics) followed one another quickly. Internet comments left on the *USA Today* article that first announced Miles include racist rants about "politically correct stupidity" (Johnston) and lament the cultural attacks against white people. One commenter asks, "why should white children

¹ Bendis as writer and Pichelli as illustrator are credited with creating Miles. I reference them both in this article as creators but there are also times I mention Bendis alone, particular in reference to his responsibility in centering whiteness in the comic. I do not do this to neglect the work of Pichelli. As head writer, Bendis has carried more responsibility in crafting the plot points of the story arc (the school lottery, the death of Uncle Aaron). He also stayed on with the Miles comic longer than Pichelli as she left within eight months of the first issue. By the time Miles inadvertently killed his Uncle Aaron, Pichelli was working on other projects.

not have a comic book hero they can identify with?” (Johnston) The hesitation of white readers as they grapple with the spectacle of Miles is both comical and absurd. Not only do they have hundreds of other white comic book heroes with whom to choose to identify, they do not even lose white Spider-Man as he exists in both the original Marvel and Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Moving the lens of hesitation from readers to the text reveals a more nuanced, though still problematic, set of dilemmas. The creation of Miles Morales as a Black Spider-Man places him in an awkward space in the Marvel universes. Tethering Miles to an already created white character creates a Black character with the baggage of whiteness. This immures Miles within a set of proscribed limitations. Miles can always be Miles, but he can never be just Spider-Man. He is always the *Black* Spider-Man. Consider the Wikipedia entries for Miles Morales (Wikipedia Contributors). Before we read anything about Miles, the Wikipedia page first offers a note: “*Black Spider-Man*” *redirects here. . . . For the Peter Parker Spider-Man, see Spider-Man.*” The final “*Spider-Man*” here is a blue link, directing the reader to the official Wikipedia page for Marvel’s Spider-Man. In the Marvel Universes and in the public imaginary, Peter Parker is Spider-Man. There is no note indicating “white Spider-Man redirects here.” It is impossible even to claim that Miles is the original Spider-Man in his own universe as he functions as a replacement for the deceased Peter Parker.

This history combined with Bendis’ racial privilege, privilege that allows him to write about Miles without knowing much about Black culture, communities, or desires, creates an intermingling of Thomas’ violence and haunting in the comic. Despite the lofty influences of Glover and President Obama, Bendis casts his character as a white-

approved sketch of Blackness, meaning Miles is a Black boy who is unintimidating and colorblind, embodying tepid notions of diversity. For example, Miles, his Brooklyn-based family, or anybody in the initial character arc never explicitly talk about race or racism, which is surprising considering in 2011, the year the comic was created, the New York City Police Department performed almost three quarters of a million stop and frisks, with the vast majority carried out on Black men and boys (Center for Constitutional Rights). Racism and police violence would be heavy on the minds of Black families, particularly those with young men like the Morales family. During Bendis' initial stories of Miles in *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man*, which ran from Sept. 2011 to Oct. 2013, Trayvon Martin was murdered by George Zimmerman (Feb. 2012) and Zimmerman was subsequently acquitted (July 2013). While Bendis was writing about Miles' enrollment in a charter school, his friendship with Ganke, his struggle with his new superpowers, and his life in Brooklyn, the US was roiling over Stand Your Ground laws and yet another acquittal of a white man who murdered an innocent, unarmed Black man. Yet in Bendis' scene where Miles learns why he cannot visit his Uncle Aaron, a scene where Miles' father confesses his own time in prison, race is never mentioned despite race and police violence underwriting the conversation. This is an unsettling omission in a nation where Black parents, some of them readers of the comic, must overtly teach their children, also readers of the comic, how to interact with police in order to avoid being murdered. Miles is thirteen years old in this scene. Tamir Rice was twelve when he was shot by Cleveland police. In an authentic conversation of this magnitude, race would foreground the issue.

Bendis is a white cultural outsider looking in at Blackness, something he admits when he says creating Miles was a chance to "write people outside of [his] experience"

(Riesman). As such he exhibits an inability to untether his work from a white gaze, resulting in ingenuine, even preposterous moments of racial cluelessness. He forces references into the text and onto Miles that may seem clever to an uninformed white reader but come across as awkward, unrealistic, or even insulting to a reader of color, such as the outlandish naming of Miles' father after the Confederate president Jefferson Davis, something a Black parent would be unlikely to do. More dangerously, Bendis crafts an uncritical portrayal of Black, poor, and urban communities. Dave Low presents a compelling examination of this portrayal in his chapter on Miles' entrance to Brooklyn Visions Academy. Low argues convincingly in his critical multicultural and visual analysis of the twenty panels that constitute the entirety of Miles' entrance into Brooklyn Visions that Bendis and Pichelli construct Miles, his family, his community, and the public school system he and other children like him live with, as "indicative of the 'culture of poverty' framework that has infiltrated popular discourses about urban schooling" (Low 286). At the charter school lottery, Miles' mother exclaims that the charter school is her son's only "chance" (Low points out that "the disturbing implication of this utterance is that had Miles not won a lottery spot, he would not have had a chance, presumably, to succeed in life; that an urban public education is tantamount to utter catastrophe" [289]), and the images dwelling on the downcast faces of children who didn't get in show a white, racist, deficit view of urban life and urban schools. Low stops his analysis here with the downcast children as they are the final panels directly related to charter schools. But the conclusions carry over to Bendis and Pichelli's next page when Miles visits his Uncle Aaron. When Miles tells him he "got into that charter school," his uncle replies "that's damn good news . . . you got your ticket out of this cesspool."

Through the charter school lottery and the ensuing conversation with Miles' uncle, Bendis does violence to Miles and the Black community through the reification of white supremacist notions of Black lives. The specter of Bendis' inscription of Blackness then "haunt[s]" (Thomas 27) the reader every time the text mentions or assumes Miles' place in Brooklyn Visions. The prominence of Brooklyn Visions Academy across all Miles Morales narratives—the Bendis & Pichelli comics (Sept. 2011 – Oct. 2013), the Saladin Ahmed comics (Dec. 2018 – present), Reynolds' novel, the new film *Into the Spider-Verse*—compounds the difficulty Reynolds faces when "emancipating" (29) his text and his readers.

Making the "Good Kind of Trouble": Marvel-Sanctioned Decoloniality

Reynolds' novel marks a refreshing change from Bendis' color-blind writing. He engages with whiteness and racism throughout the novel, even from the first pages. The opening conflict revolves around Miles' school suspension, a punishment meted out upon Miles by Mr. Chamberlain, a teacher who always causes Miles' "spidey sense" (67) to go off as if danger always follows the teacher, a reference to the ever-present danger of racism. The novel does more than interrogate whiteness, however. It engages in the work of critical anti-racist literacy. In one scene with Mr. Chamberlain for example, Reynolds exposes the uneven, race-based discipline in US schools by repeating Miles' experiences with racist microaggressions. In doing so, the novel raises readers' awareness of a racialized world they might have missed in their initial reading of the novel. In the scene, Mr. Chamberlain, eyes closed, quotes "All we ask is to be let alone" (113), then asks the class for the original writer. A white student named Brad tries to crack a joke by blurting

out “everybody in this class.” A few lines later when Chamberlain tells the class the answer is the Confederate President Jefferson Davis, Miles repeats the answer “out loud” (114), a gut reaction to the shock of hearing his father’s name attached to such a historical figure. Mr. Chamberlain, however, rouses from his racist reverie, opens his eyes, and chastises Miles about “forgotten classroom decorum,” reminding him to “raise your hand if you want to speak” (114).

In case the reader misses the uneven enforcement of school rules, Reynolds includes an interrupted response from Miles—“but Brad didn’t . . .” (114)—which highlights the injustice. Readers attuned to racism and inequality would likely catch what is happening here, including the use of “decorum” to highlight how racism can hide behind notions of civility or procedure. However, the average white reader unversed in notions of racial privilege and oppression may read over this interaction with little thought beyond generic classroom unfairness. But Reynolds creates a parallel infraction on the same page, reiterating the unequal application of school discipline. Chamberlain spends a paragraph preaching about why “the people of the South be ‘left alone.’” Again, Brad interjects, “unless you were a slave.” Immediately, a Black classmate Alicia mutters “seriously.” In response, Chamberlain once again ignores Brad’s outburst and instead “shot [Alicia] a glare” (114). This time, Reynolds places Chamberlain’s contradicting racist responses next to each other. Miles speaks out half a page after Brad, Alicia in the next sentence. Here, Reynolds begins the prickly work of anti-racism. A reader who understands the tangible, real world manifestations of racism does not need Chamberlain’s racist discipline practices repeated. A reader who experienced these situations first hand does not need Reynolds to highlight Brad’s immunity nor

Chamberlain's heavy hand with Miles and Alicia. This repetition speaks to white readers when it circles back to emphasize the racism we may have missed on our first reading.

Reynolds positions Miles' school as the main subject of his critical work—the school-to-prison pipeline: the “growing pattern of tracking students out of educational institutions, primarily via ‘zero tolerance’ policies, and tracking them directly and/or indirectly into the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems” (Heitzeg 7). In an interview with *Ultimate Spin*, a podcast dedicated to Miles Morales, Reynolds shows he has a nuanced view of the entire pipeline, indicative of more than an anecdotal understanding of the issues. Twice in the interview he references “research” on the problem, once in relation to children of color receiving harsher punishments and a second on the “direct correlation between expulsion and prison.” He also tells of visiting “men in prison who . . . most of them don't have high school diplomas,” suggesting his knowledge of the pipeline is more than academic (Episode 62). The school-to-prison pipeline was clearly on Reynolds' mind while writing the novel. This vision is seen through the novel, which is “haunt[ed]” (Thomas 27) by the specter of the prison system. From Uncle Aaron's trouble with the law to Miles' visit with his incarcerated cousin to the connotation of the main villain's name (the Warden), the prison industrial complex underscores the tensions of the novel.

A central event in the book is Miles' interrogation by the school Dean, where Reynolds overlays the education and prison systems. Miles is called to the Dean's office, along with his parents, because sausages went missing during his work study shift. During the meeting, the Dean behaves more like an investigating officer in a prisoner interrogation than an educator. He first demands Miles read aloud his application essay

which describes his hope that education will help him avoid his uncle's criminal lifestyle. The Dean assumes Miles' guilt and uses the letter as evidence in an accusatory back and forth, leveling questions such as "is this or is it not the letter you submitted with your application" and "did you or did you not say that you wouldn't fall victim to the toxic patterns of your family?" (102) Miles and his parents, rightfully frustrated over the accusatory tone and the Dean's continual interruptions, finally ask "is there any proof?" The Dean's response of "funny you should ask" suggests he is enjoying the process. At one point, he "almost sounded cheerful" (103). He then pulls a television out of the closet and plays the surveillance tape, narrating the visuals to Miles and his parents "like a lawyer in a courtroom drawing attention to *Exhibit A*" (103). When Miles' mother tells the Dean that the video "doesn't really show much," he again takes on the detective persona, pointing out the "time stamp jumps from six thirteen to six forty-four." Again, he uses this as evidence, pushing for a confession. "It only makes sense," the Dean concludes, "that somehow" Miles stole the missing items during the gap in time. Eventually, Miles, flustered, says "I don't know who" stole the sausages. "That's because you did it" (103) is the Dean/detective/prosecutor's reply. This interrogation foreshadows the prison system, an institution Reynolds is about to reveal.

Beverly Tatum calls cultural racism, or the images and representations a culture creates, "smog"—something that is pervasive, sometimes but not always visible, and poisonous (86). Reynolds incorporates this subtlety effectively throughout Brooklyn Visions Academy. For example, after Miles is stripped of his scholarship, he walks to the library to be alone. There, he runs into the librarian "Trippin' Tripley" (108). She is a sympathetic character: an oddball who dresses like Janis Joplin, out of place in a school

and a library that looks like a Victorian gentleman's club. When Miles asks her to "hide" (109) him, she playfully asks him if he is Frankenstein's monster, Bill Sikes from *Oliver*, or Ralph in *Lord of the Flies*, all book characters on the run. Tripley is trying to make a connection with Miles, yet her references are all from white, canonical works. Here, Reynolds lays out a problem of white progressive liberalism (and white privilege more broadly) in US schools. A white female teacher seeing a student of color in trouble offers white works as a point of connection, unaware their attempt at relatability only reinforces their whiteness. In case the reader might miss the situation, Reynolds even foreshadows it when Miles first walks in, calling the library the place where "Shakespeare and all the rest of the dead white guys Miles had to study in school would've wanted to have their ashes scattered" (108). The narrator emphasizes the racial component in this sentence when he uses "Miles" specifically, rather than the more general "students." Miles, a Black teen, is denied a literature curriculum that centers Black lives. Instead, he is uncritically exposed to hegemonic literature, taught as if it is the only literature worthy of aesthetic contemplation. Drawing on Xie, as quoted in Durand and Jimenez-Garcia, helps us understand this scene, as banal as it may appear to a white reader, as embodying the violence in the dark fantastic cycle. "Children . . . are most violently subjected to colonialist ideas of racial-ethnic Otherness at the most formative years of their lives" (13). A white literature curriculum, one that treats white narratives and texts as "universal" and excludes Black, brown, and Indigenous texts or offers hegemonically safe token texts is, in fact, a form of colonial violence. When Reynolds raises awareness of this violence, he makes an initial step towards untethering Miles from Bendis' world building.

The Villain as Racist Pariah: When Systemic Racism Forgets the System

For most of the novel, the pain the prison system wreaks on US Black communities “lingers just beyond the turn of the page” (Thomas 25). Reynolds foregrounds the prison system, however, in one of the novel’s more clever moments. Miles, using his camouflage superpower which renders him more or less invisible, follows Mr. Chamberlain through a locked door at the school. The pursuit leads down stairs and into a long tunnel, long enough for Chamberlain to walk for “what seemed like twenty minutes” (216). At the end, Miles finds a metal door to a mansion on the prison grounds where his cousin is incarcerated. Reynolds constructed a literal school-to-prison pipeline from an elite charter school to a Brooklyn prison. He layers the metaphor by depicting the “mansion with castle pillars” (216), a plantation home decorated with portraits of Confederate leaders and a “cat-o-nine-tails” (217), on the prison ground. In the trip from school to prison grounds, Reynolds builds a white supremacy nexus, situating the US prison industrial complex within its historical precedent, the plantation, all connected to the school system, its contemporary feeder. The plantation imagery is not accidental. Reynolds is tracing the historical legacy of the contemporary carceral state to its roots in slave labor. Mr. Chamberlain says as much when he reminds his students that slavery is still legal in the US, “as a punishment for crime” (155).² Follow the historical thread Reynolds has wound throughout the novel and the implications are scintillating. The prison is the plantation. Private prison CEOs are enslavers. The police are plantation

² Here, Mr. Chamberlain is referencing the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution which states, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” While the 13th Amendment abolishes slavery, it leaves a loophole which allows enslavement of convicted criminals.

guards and catchers of self-emancipated people. Most acerbic is the critical stance the novel holds against educators. Principals, deans, and other administrators are enslavers, selling or trading Black bodies to the wardens. In the metaphor, teachers who hold their Black students accountable to zero tolerance policies or unconsciously enact disparate racial discipline are those law-abiding citizens who reenslave fugitives because the law requires it.

The novel's nuanced picture of a racialized school-to-prison pipeline can get limited in scope, however, when Reynolds pulls the issue of racism away from systemic forces. First, the novel sets up Miles' Uncle Aaron as a morality tale about the results of nonconformity to "rules" (11) rather than an account of anti-black racism and the school-to-prison pipeline. The conflict between Miles and his Uncle Aaron, a seasoned criminal known as the Prowler, plays out in the Bendis comics (Pichelli had left the comic by this point in the story arc), culminating in Aaron's accidental death at Miles' hand. The fallout carries over into Reynolds' novel, where we find out Miles' father and his brother both got in trouble with the law when they were younger and both spent time in prison; yet Miles' father was able to reform while his uncle continued to operate in the criminal world. The casting of this split is suspicious. His uncle's inability to change course is attributed to a disregard for rules. In the novel, Miles' father says, "you know your uncle was suspended. A lot. . . . He didn't think he ever had to follow rules. And it got him killed" (11). Miles' father connects school suspension with crime, prison, and death. However, the father's connections skip over the system of white supremacy that creates school as a funnel for Black youth into prison. A few lines after his father laments his uncle's end, we see Miles' reaction. "The words pierced Miles, lodged in his neck.

Suspended. Rules. Killed” (11). Whatever Reynold’s intent in building this connection, his character Miles sees that rule breaking, not the system, is the problem. The logical connection the father builds puts the onus on the uncle and his chafing under school rules rather than on a prison industrial complex which levies uneven enforcement of rules, or rules crafted under the auspices of “settler colonial, White supremacist, cis-hetero-patriarchal, ableist, English monolingual, capitalist” (Paris 220) notions of normality.

The novel’s limits regarding the school-to-prison pipeline stands out most clearly with the Chamberlains. Mr. Chamberlain is a Confederacy apologist who lectures in almost farcically open pride about the glories of the Confederacy. He also engages in atrocious behavior towards Miles and the other Black students in class. When Miles unintentionally breaks his school desk, for example, Mr. Chamberlain refuses to replace it. Instead, he forces Miles to sit at a broken desk—first on a wobbly chair, then no chair at all as it crumbles over a few class periods. Miles eventually must attend class on his knees, a moment that shocks his classmates. Instead of solidifying the dangers of respectable white teachers like Ms. Trippley or the dean, the novel portrays its antagonists as racist extremists.

The portrayal of Mr. Chamberlain takes an odd turn when, through a conversation among family friends, we discover Mr. Chamberlain is not a single character but a network of characters spanning multiple states and generations. When Jefferson’s friend from Mississippi heard Miles was suspended by Mr. Chamberlain, he replied, “funny. . . I had a Mr. Chamberlain too” (205)—a school dean of discipline who “was always kicking black kids out” (206) of school. Another friend tells of a classmate who, after staying “up all night looking after his little brothers and sisters because his mom was messed up,”

(207) was suspended by his teacher, another Mr. Chamberlain, for sleeping in class. Miles was suspended for taking a long bathroom break. Each instance is minor and the punishment is overly harsh. Most Black men who interact with a Mr. Chamberlain face trouble with the law. Fronting the experiences of Black youth who suffer under racist school policies and uneven enforcement of rules, as Reynolds does here, are necessary “counter narratives” (Milner & Howard) which can disrupt the white imaginary that constructs school as fair, the law as just and unbiased, and young Black men as gang members or thugs. Reynold’s decision to place their stories in a comic book narrative is intentional, bold, and necessary. While this could be Reynolds’ attempt at metaphoring the systemic nature of racism, the farcical nature of the Chamberlains, a nation-wide network of neo-Confederates singling out Black youth, detracts from rather than illustrates the pervasive nature of racism. If systemic racism is pervasive and invisible, then anti-racist work is hampered by a metaphorical representation depicting a web of characters easily spotted by a group of middle-aged men playing bridge.

This distraction becomes crystalized when the Chamberlains gather for a reporting session at the plantation house. Dozens of Chamberlains address the Warden “in unison like zombies” as they “report” on the Black boys they have pushed out of school to get “snatched” (218). The use of “zombies” implies the Chamberlains have little control over their actions. They are mindless, incapable of individual function. When Miles’ friend Ganke later hears about the gathering, he surmises that “Mr. Chamberlain and all the other Chamberlains are being mind controlled by [the Warden]” (225). It is possible to shelve the Chamberlains among the pantheon of mindless or hive-mind hordes, a well-worn comic trope. They function as an interesting extension to

Marvel antagonists like the Mindless Ones, Parademons, and the Phalanx. A mindless, parroting army of Chamberlains makes for good comic book fare but a poor representation of white supremacy and systemic racism as it presents an intellectual excuse for blatant racists (they weren't in control of their minds or actions) and passive racists who believe racism only exists in the extremes.

While we do not know all the restrictions Marvel placed on Reynolds when crafting his villains, we know Marvel encouraged Reynolds to “push [his incorporation of white supremacy] further” (Episode 62) after he submitted a first draft of his novel, and in an interview with *The School Library Journal*, Reynolds describes his villain as an embodiment of “the -isms” (Diaz). In other words, to build his antagonists Reynolds boiled the essence of racism and white supremacy down to a character sketch, which he then molded into a series of comic book villains. This means that the farcical nature of the Chamberlains is, at least in part, intentional. Reynolds wanted to “take a systemic issue and create a despicable avatar for it so it can physically exist in a narrative” (Diaz). In many ways, the Chamberlains are effective comic book characters. They fit within the superhero paradigm of big characters and bold, over-the-top battles, dialogues, and evil. The Chamberlains as racist metaphor, however, makes sense as a general pastiche—whiteness is bold, “despicable,” and empty. When the tropes undermine a key component of the subject of critique, as the Chamberlains undermine the systemic nature of racism, then the critical force falls a little flat.

Conclusion

Situating the particular history of Miles as well as Reynolds' adaptation into the dark fantastic cycle allows us to look at comic authors, creators, and characters with nuance not always afforded by traditional critical theory. If I read *Miles Morales* before *The Dark Fantastic*, I would consider Reynolds' book Black speculative fiction. The writer is Black, the character is Black, and the narrative arc situates the protagonist in a Black community (Miles at home in Brooklyn) and as a Black person navigating racial dynamics in a white community (Miles in school at Brooklyn Visions Academy). However, situating the novel in the dark fantastic cycle shows it is a Western fantasy text, with the groundwork set by Bendis and Pichelli, that Reynolds works to emancipate. Reynolds, despite the freedom in craft afforded him by Marvel, must still overcome the "haunting" and "violence" (Thomas 26-27) to reshift his readers' imaginations. The richer question is how does Reynolds do this, but the more necessary question is, is such a thing even possible?

While Thomas argues the more worthy pursuit is to step outside of Western fantasy completely and look to the fantastic dreamed by the marginalized, she also advocates for "restorying" (159)—where writers can "make meanings that are not just independent of authorial intent but that can deliberately *contradict* it" (156). Some of the most important work of restorying, according to Thomas, occurs in fandom, which allows a writer to restory Harry Potter and Ron Weasley as lovers, or restory *The Hobbit* from the orc's perspective. A writer of fan fiction has "interpretive agency" (154) in their decolonial work. Reynolds is denied complete agency because of the role Marvel plays in the story's ownership, which complicates his ability to resist Bendis and Pichelli's

narrative scaffolding. This is where the issue becomes thorny. Is a long-standing comic narrative even able to be emancipated? Is Miles tethered to whiteness or irrevocably bound? Reynolds frames his responsibility as a writer in critical, even advocacy, terms. He asks, “how do I break certain chains and cycles that I did not create but need to undo? . . . How do I rework and dismantle the societal damage that weighs heavy on so many people around me?” (Diaz) While Marvel allowed Reynolds room to maneuver in his narrative, he was still confined by a large corporate actor with financial concerns that ultimately trump social justice concerns. While Reynolds cannot restory Miles, he does emancipate aspects of Miles’ story in powerful ways.

How does Reynolds’ text approach Thomas’ emancipation, and how does it appear throughout the text? Grappling with this question illustrates both the beauty of *Miles Morales: Spider-Man* and the depth of Thomas’ theory. Reynolds most obviously emancipates through critique when he shows the vacuous nature of whiteness, but he also emancipates when he addresses some of the racial clumsiness of Bendis. Bendis’ problems extend beyond his writing about Black people. Naming Miles’ Korean friend Ganke, a Japanese name, shows his racial ignorance spreads to Korean folk as well. Considering the historical tension between Korea and Japan stemming from the violence the latter inflicted upon the former during World War II, giving a Korean youngster a Japanese name is peak whiteness. Reynolds realizes this and moves to address it in the book by inserting a classroom activity where the students, including Miles and Ganke, have to research their own name. Reynolds does not explain away the reference—Ganke realizes his name is not Korean but, too nervous to raise the issue with his divorced

parents, never finds out the answer (148-149). While Reynolds provides no explanation, he still highlights the problem, showing his Korean readers that he sees them.

In a similar scene, Reynolds shows unaware readers that Miles' father was given a problematic name. Reynolds raises the issue, dwells on it momentarily, then moves on leaving the reader to grapple with their own responsibility in addressing it. In at least one case, this technique worked. During an interview, the host of the Ultimate Spin podcast raises the issue of names in the book and confesses, "I've been reading this [comic] for years and I'm embarrassed to say, Jason, I never made the connection with the real Jefferson Davis" (Episode 62). Reynolds' layering of anti-racist moments targets readers like the host and, at least in his case, it worked. This anecdote shows how Reynolds crafted a text that lives up to its potential, forcing readers to grapple with the racist tropes they previously did not need to be aware of because of their privilege.

But Reynolds also emancipates by carving spaces of welcome for readers of color. Reynolds layers this welcome across his novel, even in the very first sentence: "Miles set the good dishes on the table." These dishes are "white porcelain," "blue detailing," "good china," set for a dinner that is "Sunday, [and] also a special occasion." (1) When I as a white reader first read this opening, I took in the details and built a mental image of the dining room with Miles walking around the table, laying out blue-worked porcelain. Then I moved on as a reader to consider the conflict—Miles' school suspension. The dining room scene for me sets the stage for a proper, sit-down family meal. The good dishes indicate the meal is a special occasion, so I read on to find out what the special occasion is. This setting, the meal, the dishes, are all a prop which backdrops the suspension. The entire opening paragraph, in my reading paradigm as a

white male, is an interesting way of saying, “today was Miles’ last day of suspension.” But Reynolds says that at public readings, his opening sentence draws smiles from Black attendees. For many Black families, according to Reynolds, “good dishes” elicits an emotional response—the happiness and nostalgia of grandma’s homecooked meals and the laughter shared, or the shade thrown, among family and close friends (Episode 62). From the very first sentence, Reynolds reaches out to his Black readers, wraps them in warmth, and says, “I see you. You are welcome here. These pages are for you.” When I reread the opening paragraph in light of Reynolds’ notes about “good dishes,” I cannot help but remember that in her introduction to *The Dark Fantastic*, Thomas shares her frustration as a young Black girl who wanted to enter worlds of fantasy only to find “the doors [were] barred” (Thomas 2). Reynolds, however, shows his readers that there are no bars in his world. Cultural references like this, references understood by readers of color and Black readers in particular, emancipate by showing readers like the young Thomas that they are always welcome in Reynolds’ fantasy world.

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