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## **The Trouble with Magic: Conjuring the Past in New York City Parks**

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **The Trouble with Magic: Conjuring the Past in New York City Parks**

*Zetta Elliott (bio)*

The “trouble” with magic, as it is represented in much of children’s literature, is that it appears to exist in realms to which only certain children belong. If postmodern fantasy is characterized by “uncertainty, indeterminacy, and ambiguity” (Nikolajeva 154), then contemporary African American speculative fiction may be understood as using those particular features to respond to alienation, displacement, and distortion within American society *and* the field(s) of science fiction and fantasy. As Nancy Tolson observes, “Multicultural adolescent books found in most classrooms are historical fiction, realistic fiction, or nonfiction—reserving the luxury of fantasy for young white characters” (44). African Canadian speculative fiction author Nalo Hopkinson suspects that the publishing industry “was and is eroticizing black people as victims, as though that is our value to the world” (101–2). Walter Mosley concurs, yet adds that, “if black writers wanted to branch out past the realism of racism and race, they were curtailed by their own desire to document the crimes of America. A further deterrent was the white literary establishment’s desire for blacks to write about being black in a white world, a limitation imposed upon a limitation” (406).

My own commitment to writing speculative fiction for young readers emerged directly from my childhood consumption of British fantasy novels by E. Nesbit and C. S. Lewis. My invisibility within those much-loved texts demanded that I “develop the capacity *to dream myself into existence*,” as I have expressed it elsewhere (“Decolonizing”), and as an adult I hoped to spare twenty-first-century Black children the complicated task of “decolonizing” their imaginations. Yet despite rapidly changing demographics in the USA and Canada, there is still an appalling lack of fantasy fiction for children of colour, leading one to question whether the genre can respond to and/or reflect the realities of marginalized children when the publishing industry seems to produce/practise/perpetuate exclusion.

In this essay, I will examine the representation of **[End Page 17]** New York City parks as magical sites of discovery and recovery in speculative

fiction for young readers. After considering the development of urban parks, I will elaborate on my project of “Afro-urban magic” and conclude by revisiting the books of Ruth Chew, which I first read as a child. According to Terence Young, the nineteenth-century rationale for urban parks was that they would promote “public health and prosperity” on the one hand and “social coherence and democratic equality” on the other (537), and although city park designers were initially concerned with serving men, they gradually incorporated the perceived needs of women, adolescents, and children. Young contends that urban park design, with its vision of “a universal sense of nature,” eventually gave way to a modernizing process of “spatial segmentation and specialization” (537). Consequently, park designers rejected the need for “generic spaces linked by a composed repetition of earth, water, and the same plant species throughout,” opting instead for greater variation in order to accentuate specific locations within the park, which were designed to serve specific groups (537).

Speculative fiction for young readers has gone through a similar process of modernization, shifting—although far too slowly—from “universal” and “generic” narratives with repetitive features (witches, wizards, werewolves, and so on, derived from European folklore and fairy tales) to a sort of “specialization” that emphasizes the particular magical practices and histories of racially and ethnically diverse urban populations. It is insufficient, however, merely to insert characters of colour “into a traditional fantasy world of fairies, sprites, and Anglos” (Woo 253). A truly hybrid approach is required, the kind that Celestine Woo argues for in her consideration of the work of Laurence Yep: “In order for a story to be empowering to the Asian American child, it must grapple with the dual pulls of both Asian and American cultures, not imply the preferability of either” (253).

In her twenty-nine novels, Ruth Chew uses green spaces like the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and Prospect Park to engage young readers in the exciting exploits of predominantly white, middle-class children. As a child growing up in suburban Toronto, I read...



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