



Fanfiction as Performative Criticism: *Harry Potter* Racebending

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ABSTRACT

Fanfiction anatomizes a text and in this textual nakedness fanfiction writers recognize gaps in their chosen source texts and seek to supplement these deficiencies through literary disruption. This essay focuses on the kind of fanfiction that critically disrupts through artistic cultural production—a practice that I am labeling performative criticism. I look at Racebending fanfiction that intervenes in the gaps of the *Harry Potter* series—specifically the gaps related to race. Using fanfiction produced by *Harry Potter* fans, I will show that by reading and writing fanfiction these writers are blurring demarcation between creative writing and literary criticism.

ESSAY

I suspect that Jo Rowling probably imagines James [Potter] and Harry [Potter] as white too, I don't mind that, that's her business ...In absence of a specified race I choose to imagine the one that makes the story most compelling to me. My James is black because that creates the most personally compelling racial background for my Harry. It is informed by interpretation of the canon interactions between the Potters and the Evans/Durselys , [...] It is informed by my experience as the black mixed-race child ... [and] by my personal desire for a black mixed-race hero story. It's not arbitrary and it doesn't come from nowhere [...] All my interpretations are based squarely in canon. But if they weren't, that would be damn well acceptable. Squeeze representation out of anywhere you can feel it and fabricate the rest. Own your fiction.

(Tumblr user Vondellswain)

“If media content didn’t fascinate us, there would be no desire to engage with it; but if it didn’t frustrate us on some level, there would be no drive to rewrite or remake it.”

(Henry Jenkins Textual Poachers 258)

Fanfiction¹ is a medium that offers its writers the chance to experiment with form of both creative writing and literary criticism, pushing the limits of what each form is and what it can do. The result is an interpretive act that is simultaneously creative and critical.² Fanfiction, in its ability to provoke fresh and often oppositional interpretations and readings of a text, erodes demarcation between the author and reader, between literary fan and the literary academy and most importantly, between creative writer and the literary critic. Author J.C. Hallman gives voice to this fusion of the creative and critical in the introduction of *The Story About the Story: Great Writers Explore Great Literature*, aptly titled “Toward a Fusion,” where he claims, “the good critic has an awareness that criticism means, in part, telling a good story about the story you are criticizing” (10). Reflecting on Hallman’s desire for a fusion of creative writing and criticism, I argue that fanfiction occupies a “fertile ground” between creative writing and literary criticism (Hallman 10). While still enjoying the text, fanfiction writers approach it with an attitude of skepticism and rebellion—recognizing the problems of a text in what it depicts and what it omits—and they see the potential changes to a character or plotline as a solution to these omissions. In their effort to refashion it in a way most pleasing to them, the writers respond not only to the original source text, but also to “what lies around and behind it” (Kostar).

Fanfiction “lays bare” the text and in this textual nakedness fanfiction writers recognize the “imagination gap[s]” in their chosen source texts and seek to supplement these deficiencies through literary disruption (Jamison “When Fifty” 321; Thomas 5). It is looked down upon as a creative practice due to its lack of tastemakers or gatekeepers—and by extension its lack of a consistent standard of quality. It is excluded as a critical practice because it pushes back against the idea of critical objectivity that is considered essential to “real criticism.” And yet, fanfic authors’ skillful dissection of a media object and commitment to said object signifies expertise when it comes to popular culture. Jason Mittell explicates the critical practices of fandom in his notion of ‘drillable texts’ and ‘forensic fans’:

Perhaps we need a different metaphor to describe viewer engagement with narrative complexity. We might think of such programs as drillable rather than spreadable. They encourage a

1 Fanfiction is writing that takes the characters, settings, plot lines, and so on from a chosen source text and uses them to create new works. These new works can range from short poems to short stories and novels.

2 I must state, for this is where many critics of the medium raise their objections, that I am not arguing the superiority of fanfiction over “traditional” writing forms. Nor am I arguing that the performative criticism of fanfiction is an absolute replacement for these writing forms. I am, however, arguing that it is a form in its own right that should be considered as a compliment to these preexisting forms.

mode of forensic fandom that invites viewers to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling. (“Forensic Fandom”)

Henry Jenkins similarly discusses this critical engagement in his work with Sam Ford and Joshua Green where they elaborate on Mittell’s definition to further explain why these fans are experts:

[W]hile promotional material for the show or fan-created texts about the show might spread in wider circles among casual fans, conversation about, extensions of, and artifacts from “deep within” these drillable texts might circulate within the engaged fan base, as fans compare notes and trade interpretations [...] Forensic fans can watch these shows repeatedly, unpacking new meanings with each viewing and revisiting old episodes once new truths are revealed in order to gain new understandings [...] [and] piece together every minute detail.

(*Spreadable Media* 136).

Fanfiction writers are not passive consumers of popular culture but instead are fans who want *more* from and who talk back to the media they consume. They are critical of the world and the manner in which it is reflected in the media they love. These writers perform their criticism of their chosen texts in the creative writing they produce. And instead of trying to establish a hard line between criticism and creative writing, we should recognize the continuum that fanfiction establishes between literature and criticism. Fanfiction, in its ability to provide fans with a way to express their concerns over representation in popular culture, is a medium that “articulate[s] the fans’ frustration with their everyday life as well as their fascination with representations that pose alternatives” (Jenkins 289). Fanfiction is a platform which allows its participants to creatively express and rework identity, and the medium fosters a community that provides its readers and writers with a sense of validation for their interpretations of the source text. This community exists under the premise that everyone, even readers and editors, are potential creators and that it is a space in which they can contribute to a community in which they belong.

Racebending is just one avenue that fanfiction writers pursue in their efforts to place their “identity at the center of [their] reading or interpretive practice,” what Rebecca Wanzo labels “identity hermeneutics” (Wanzo 1.6). Fanfiction provides a platform for these writers to challenge and interrogate the assumptions and implications underlying a text. As Ebony E. Thomas notes, these writers are not only using their writing to counter narrative erasure, they are also “*reading* themselves into existence” by privileging the stories and voices of characters of color (Thomas 162). And while it is likely that Rowling envisioned her characters to be white, as Tumblr user Crowry proclaims, fanfiction allows us to read against authorial intent: “I’m not going to be like, oh no, sorry, oops I was wrong!!! Who f—king cares if the source material wants all the main characters to be white. You’re free to read characters however you like. (No, really, you are.)” As Vondellswain puts it in my epigraph: “Squeeze

representation out of anywhere you can feel it and fabricate the rest. Own your fiction.”

Initially, “racebending” fanfiction was used to critically describe what we now label “whitewashing.” The term originated within a grassroots movement that emerged in response to the 2010 film *The Last Air Bender*, a live-action film of the animated Nickelodeon series by fans that “were appalled by the casting discrimination that occurred during the production” (“About Us”). The initial mission was to respond to homogenous casting in media like that of *The Last Air Bender* and these efforts eventually spawned the site Racebending.com. A play off the term “bending” from the original series, Lori Lopez explains repurposing this term “bending” for their activism allows “the activists [to] mark their fandom and attachment to the world of the franchise, even as they use the same term to articulate their frustration with an industry where roles are systematically taken from Asian Americans and given to white actors” (433). As anything is wont to do on the internet, the use of the term evolved and eventually began to mean fans recasting white characters as people of color and/or inserting people of color into predominantly white franchises, particularly on popular fan hubs such as Tumblr and Deviantart. I use this definition throughout my analysis. Racebending enables nonwhite fans to not only interrupt the “hegemonic popular texts” they are referencing but also to challenge “fan works that reify privileged racial and cultural representations” (Pande 70). The medium disrupts what Stanley Fish identifies as an “Arnoldian”³ fear of subjectivity: in the absence of critical objectivity, “interpreters will be free to impose their idiosyncratic meanings on texts” (10).

This essay focuses on the kind of fanfiction that critically features these idiosyncrasies and subjective interpretations of chosen source texts. This is a practice that I am labeling *performative criticism*. Performative criticism describes a variety of writing techniques used to simultaneously engage creatively and critically with the source text through artistic cultural production. The term performative criticism is adapted from Dr. Gerry Brenner’s work on reader-response and theatre in *Performative Criticism: Experiments in Reader Response*. In it, Brenner faults traditional literary critics for their:

expectation that literary criticism should be written with the depersonalized objectivity of a scientific report, much as if the voice behind the language of a critical essay ought ideally to reflect only a ratiocinative mind, cleansed of personality, divested of any personal stake in the issues at hand, professorially circumspect, uninfected by suppressed presuppositions ... In other words, they write from outside a text, as observers ... That next step, I would argue, is to compose criticism *from the inside* (Brenner 2).

While Brenner spoke of performative criticism to mean criticism that is “capable of being

3 Matthew Arnold was a British Victorian poet and cultural critic that argued for critical objectivity in criticism. He argued that the literary critic should write of the text “as in itself it really is,” that is, to write of the literary object without imposing one’s own subjective views onto the text. This was an idea that would eventually form the basis of New Criticism.

variously performed, orally, by a single but good reader,” fanfiction is a genre that has a similar potential for analysis (2). Fanfiction writers are practicing a creative variation of reader-response criticism that pushes the boundaries of criticism by “applying inventive rhetorical strategies to interpret individual literary works from the inside (Brenner 2). The freedom afforded by the lack of gatekeepers allows fanfiction writers to write *from the inside* and employ an interpretive reading practice that involves reading against the grain and refashioning the source texts in a way that is appropriate for them. These fanfiction writers take their critical understanding of the source text and use it to rework and reinvent societal norms. This is not necessarily true of all fanfiction, of course, but a substantial study of even a portion of a generative fandom’s fanfiction will reveal numerous interventions and reworkings. For this essay, I am focusing on the fanfiction that addresses and intervenes in the gaps of the *Harry Potter* series—specifically, gaps related to race.

With the debut of the stage play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (2016) and its subsequent publication as a novel, the debate around race in the series was reignited as a result of Noma Dumezweni, a black woman, being cast as Hermione Granger.

The debate over Hermione’s race has sparked much debate within the *Harry Potter* community—one side expressed enthusiasm about the casting choice, while the other expressed contempt. For example, Twitter user @iSmashFizzle was happy with the casting decision: “THEY CAST A BLACK HERMIONE???? *BURSTS INTO BLACK GIRL MAGIC TEARS*.” On the other hand, some fans, such as Twitter user @1006michelle, did not agree and wrote: “i’m offended by



Figure 1.1 Emma Watson (left) and Noma Dumezweni (right)

the casting of #CURSEDCHILD hermione is a white character. we may not make poc characters white so white should not be poc” Then, there is the fan that notes the absurdity of debating Hermione’s race: “I love how Hermione being black is somehow more implausible to some people than a universe where the entire postal system depends on owls” (@QueerDiscOx). And another who got to the pith of the argument, pointing out the lack of diversity in the series: “Listen I love HP but let’s not pretend Jo secretly wrote this magical diverse world” (@alyssakeiko). I make note of these audience responses in order to showcase that race is an issue that pervades the *Harry Potter* fandom. It is in this awareness and challenge to the erasure in the text that I locate my subsequent analysis. These fanfiction writers, often self-identifying as writers of color, are interrupting “a landscape that favors a more normative (read: White) fan identity” by reinscribing race (Stanfill 307). As Rukmini Pande and Swati Moitra astutely note, the default whiteness of popular culture fosters a colorblind hermeneutic of the media being consumed and fandom is not exempt from this, even as a space that prides itself on the “subversive pleasure of queering a heteronormative space” (4.4).

Despite the colorblind positioning that many fandoms claim to take—of which *Harry Potter* is a prime example—fans of color exist and the specificities of their efforts to see themselves represented in media and fandom at large should be examined critically. Racebending in fanfiction can be overlooked because of its lack of visual cues (unlike fanart)⁴. It is for this reason that I am writing of stories that go beyond simply changing their skin color, and instead interrogate how such a change effects the character’s very existence within the now altered universe of *Harry Potter*. These negotiations of race in the *Harry Potter* universe frame my analysis. In order to illustrate this model, I analyze the short story “Black” by fanfiction writer Potterworm.⁵ I will trace the ways Potterworm works through unexplored issues of race, as we traditionally define it, in *Harry Potter*. “Black,” suggests a compelling critique of race (or lack thereof) in the *Harry Potter* series. Potterworm takes advantage of the freedom fanfiction writing allows to systematically deconstruct the fictional world of Rowling’s series and reshape it by using racebent characters to construct a minority voice and perspective. Potterworm is practicing “identity hermeneutics” through an intentional construction of an “Africanist presence” that Toni Morrison underscores in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. By doing so, Potterworm is able challenge Eurocentric assumptions about character, assumptions that leave the default whiteness of a character unremarked upon unless they are explicitly racialized.

This is not a critique of Rowling herself, nor does this essay seek to dismiss or discount the things that Rowling does successfully in *Harry Potter*. It is, however, a critique of the pitfalls of her work and an examination of how fanfiction writers respond to the homogenous characterizations in both the

4 Fanart is any visual art that is created by members of a fandom. Its subject matter is derived from an aspect (usually, a character) of the source material.

5 Many fanfiction writers post under a pseudonym. Thus, the author of “Black” will be referred to by his/her/their penname.

series and the movies. “Black” was published in December of 2015 in “honor of the casting of a black woman as Hermione in ‘Harry Potter and the Cursed Child’” (“Black”). By drawing parallels between fanfiction stories like “Black” and the series itself, *Harry Potter*’s engagement with race makes it a fertile site for conversations of racial erasure and racism. The fanfiction story under examination illustrates an intentional reworking of the *Harry Potter* canon⁶ that challenges this assumption of default whiteness and construction of whiteness by racebending certain canon characters. The story constitutes a negotiation with erasures of race—decentering the text to move focus from the (presumed) white narrator and protagonist, Harry Potter, to secondary characters who are further marginalized when their races are changed. By “[pulling] characters and narrative issues from the margins [...] [and focusing] on details that are excessive or peripheral to the primary plots, but gain significance within the fans’ own conceptions of the series,” Potterworm seeks to mitigate this marginalization of people of color in the series, as Henry Jenkins suggests generally in *Textual Poachers* (155). Furthermore, using racebent characters as a vehicle through which they can engage directly with race and identity, Potterworm is able to explore issues unique to marginalized groups while also critiquing the series. The focus in “Black” is on the role of race in the magical world, and the subsequent “double consciousness” (DuBois) and othering that accompanies it, all of which makes this story an exemplary model to understand how fanfiction functions as a critical and creative intervention into *Harry Potter*.

“I’m just fighting a new battle here. I’m black in the muggle world, and I’m black and a muggleborn here”⁷

Although certain characters like Hermione and Harry are never explicitly coded as white (some readers may argue the contrary) there is an assumption of white as the default in publishing. The subsequent casting of Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson, and Rupert Grint to play Harry, Hermione, and Ron, respectively only confirmed this assumption. Of course, there were exceptions to what was an otherwise all-white cast, such as those explicitly described using racial identifiers like Dean Thomas, Cho Chang and Angelina Johnson. Dean Thomas is described as a “black boy even taller than Ron” (Rowling, *Sorcerer’s Stone* 122). Angelina Johnson receives a similar description, an attractive “tall black girl who played Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team” (*Goblet of Fire* 287). Both Cho Chang and the Patil twins are described as pretty but their physical appearances are not described beyond this. My analysis is concerned with the reactions of fanfiction writers who have reimagined the characters in ways that challenge the homogeneity implicit in the novels and explicit in the films. Their work asks us to consider the impact of reconstructing Rowling’s

⁶ “Canon” refers to the plot, characters, settings, and so on that were established in the source text by its author. The term canon can be used as an adjective—e.g., “It is canon in Harry Potter that Harry has green eyes.” It can also be used as a noun—e.g., “The Harry Potter canon includes the seven books written by J.K. Rowling.” When used as a noun, canon may or may not be preceded by ‘the.’

⁷ From chapter 7 of “Black” by Potterworm.

ambiguity to include a nuanced and fleshed out narrative that negotiates race.

Harry Potter may be read as a series that takes place in a society removed from the racial conflict of our world. However, some fanfiction writers maintain that because the muggleborn wizards and witches leave the muggle world (non-magical), where racism on the basis of skin color exists, it is inevitable that this conflict will permeate the wizarding world. Furthermore, despite the fantasy and fictionality of *Harry Potter*, the novels are a product of *our* world and are thus implicated in our world's social systems. Rowling's use of the word 'black' to describe Dean as opposed to 'dark skin' is very telling. As Mikhail Lyubansky explains in his analysis of the series, the use of 'dark skin' is "objectively neutral" and accurate and identifiers of 'white' and 'black' only signify racial categories in the world of the reader ("A Black Boy"). By using words like 'black,' even in the context of establishing a world without racism based on skin color, Rowling is validating this system (Lyubansky). Through their writing, Potterworm forces the reader to reconsider colorblind positionings and assumptions about the "superfluity of racial/ethnic identities of characters of color," especially since other systems of oppression *are acknowledged* as operating in the *Harry Potter* series *despite magic* (Pande and Moitra 4.13). "Black" which forms my case study addresses this gap in the series and explores the perspectives and voices of people who inhabit this space between skin color and blood prejudice.

"Black" follows Hermione Granger and her encounters with racism as she ages both in both the muggle and magical world. It is written in a series of connected vignettes. In "Black," Potterworm combines larger histories of race, intersectionality (including the intersection of blood and race prejudice), and liberal perpetuation of racism along with the magic found in canon. They turn these elements into a complex and compelling narrative of Hermione's attempts to establish her sense of self while acclimating to the wizarding world—a world where she is not only viewed as inferior because of her blood but also because of her skin color. Potterworm's story offers insight into the double consciousness Hermione experiences that comes with discovering she is a witch. This insight is important because, as Jessica Seymour suggests in her analysis of racebending and fanart, this "places the onus of race not on the physical description of the character, but on the reactions of other characters and the institutions which may contain some institutionalized racism at their core" (338). Furthermore, taking racebending beyond simply changing the character's skin color affords readers the opportunity to "engage directly with a character's experience" and the ways in which racebending may or may not affect the experience the character had in canon (Seymour 338).

Racebending allows Potterworm to directly insert perspectives of marginalized people where they explore and vocalize the experience and concerns of people of color. Consider, for example, the way that Potterworm writes Hermione's discovery of her blackness. Potterworm takes the canonical backstory of Hermione—her intelligence and 'know-it-all' attitude isolated her from her peers—and uses this to set the backdrop for her first encounter with racism. Hermione considered Bobby her

first (and only) friend, and unfortunately, one day he abruptly refuses to play with her anymore:

“Get away from me,” he yells, and then he screams a word that Hermione hasn’t read and doesn’t know. But she’s a smart girl – she’s never gotten less than a perfect report card – and she can read his body language. She knows he just said a mean word, and she knows friends don’t yell mean words at friends ...

(Years later, Hermione’s parents will tell her that Bobby’s father was an abusive drunk, and he hated black people, and he told Bobby not to be friends with her. Bobby was just a scared little boy ... Now, though, it doesn’t matter. Now he’s just a little boy, and Hermione is just a little girl, and they are not friends anymore). (“Black” chap. 1)

So much of *Harry Potter*, particularly the first book, focuses on Harry’s discovery that he is a wizard and the awe and fascination that comes with such a discovery. Potterworm takes this theme of self-discovery and decenters the lens from Harry to Hermione (who obviously encountered a similar discovery in canon). By establishing another identity category for Hermione to assume, Potterworm provokes questions and considerations of the gravity of Hermione’s discovery that she is a witch and how it will impact her already twofold disadvantaged status as a person of color in the muggle world and then, a muggleborn witch of color in the wizarding world.

Those who are familiar with the *Harry Potter* series may be surprised by this assertion about race, considering that the entire novel—and its discussion of pureblood wizards versus half-blood and muggleborn wizards—can be read as an allegory for racial relations in our world. However, while serving as an allegory for real-world race relations, race is not explicitly acknowledged in the novel apart from discussions of blood supremacy/oppression. Through the story, Potterworm is unbraiding the contradiction between the series’ purported antiracism and colorblindness and the actual text; and through this unpacking, Potterworm’s story is bridging what Maria Velazquez highlights as a gap between the series’ colorblind utopianism and the realities of *Harry Potter* fans (101).

In his discussion of the racial dynamics of *Harry Potter*, Lyubansky accurately assesses that “one of the privileges of Whiteness is to deny the impact of race on people’s lives and this privilege is readily apparent in the Harry Potter series [...]To see racism, critics of colorblindness argue, it is first necessary to see race” (“Harry Potter and the Word” 236). Potterworm pushes back against this set of beliefs (a belief implicit in the text) and responds to it in the story by specifically confronting the social and political realities people of color face that should not be disregarded. Take, for example, Hermione’s thoughts in the fourth vignette—about her friend Ron’s ignorance of the prejudice she faces for being black:

And in her year so far at Hogwarts, Hermione has been forever grateful for the way that Harry and Ron have *never once* mentioned the color of her skin, and they've never once implied that her lack of magical parents makes her inferior. But still – sometimes she wonders if their lack of commenting means they really just don't know. (How could they *possibly* not know? She'll wonder forever). (chap. 4)

Ron and Harry's silence, intentional or not, suggests that they either genuinely do not know about the prejudice she faces, as Hermione questions, or have chosen not to speak about it in hopes of avoiding the difficult topic of racism. Potterworm uses the discovery of one's blackness/brownness (a theme found in many popular texts produced by minority writers) to suggest that even in the fictional world of *Harry Potter*, race and her experiences with the construct inform who Hermione becomes. The claim that the wizarding world is a colorblind utopia is not possible because race it is so entrenched in society that a muggleborn individual like Hermione cannot help but carry this baggage into the wizarding world. To racebend, for Potterworm, does not stop at changing Hermione's skin color. Instead, Potterworm engages with the social reality Hermione faces through her interaction with other characters and her ways of navigating du jour and de facto racism.

Although racebending Hermione underscores the racial themes at work in the series, it is Rowling's treatment of these topics that leave some fanfiction writers unsatisfied. It is clear that Rowling intended to comment on race, using her plotline of blood status as a vehicle through which she could examine historical and contemporary race relations. The house elves are the clearest example of the series explicitly acknowledging institutional racism. It is Rowling's one-dimensional handling of this topic that leaves the series open to criticism. Hermione's desire to free the house elves is regarded with mockery and she is often met with platitudes or is silenced. In canon, as an assumed white character, Hermione cannot ignore her muggle background that regards slavery as wrong and this explains her severe yet understandable response to the treatment of house-elves. She is aware that many of the privileges afforded to her at Hogwarts are the result of the unpaid labor of house elves: "‘Slave labor,’ said Hermione, breathing hard through her nose. ‘That’s what made this dinner. Slave labor’" (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 202). This recognition leads her to develop an advocacy group for the house elves: The Society for the Promotion of Elvish Welfare (S.P.E.W.).

Potterworm's story is a work-in-progress (that is not yet complete) and the topic of house-elves has not been addressed yet. However, by racebending Hermione, her relationships and personal stakes in fighting to dismantle the house elf system become more weighted. In canon, Hermione is often mocked and/or silenced for her outrage at the enslavement of house elves. When Hermione is written as black, her investment is directly enmeshed in her racial-identity. Her double consciousness becomes more nuanced: she has found a community among her wizarding friends, but she is and will always be irrevocably tied to the communities she comes from, a non-wizarding

community *and* a nonwhite community. In canon, Hermione demonstrates an awareness of the intersectionality and prejudices based on these intersections that pervade her new world. And yet, the series does not grapple with the topic beyond a superficial level.

The series commitment to colorblindness is an idealist position that reaffirms the very system that it seeks to erase. The notion that racial harmony can be achieved by not speaking or acknowledging race only perpetuates racism. To jettison race completely maintains the racial hierarchy because pretending it does not exist “without changing the material conditions that makes race a socially real category” allows the systematic racism that is so entrenched in society to perpetuate (qtd in Stanfill 309). As Sarah Gaston and Robin Reid argued, to ignore race in a fandom constructs an image of a “‘generic’ or ‘normalized’ fan...[that] is assumed to be the default” (qtd in Woo 245). More often than not, these silences surrounding race lead to the assumption of white as default, which “point[s] to unexamined slippage between ‘nonracial’ and ‘white’” (Stanfill 309). Such slippages allow the “racialized mirrors, windows, and doors” of beloved texts like *Harry Potter* to remain unopened (Thomas 7). To not name race explicitly in *Harry Potter* structures the series as white (Stanfill 309).

“Black” and fanfiction that uses racebending forces the reader to not only think about race but also to think about it in ways that may create discomfort for the reader. Ron and his family are purebloods, but the Weasleys are known and shunned by the other pureblood families because of their rejection of blood supremacy and their association with ‘mudbloods,’⁸ earning them the title ‘blood traitors’: “My whole family are blood traitors!” Ron exclaims. “That’s as bad as Muggle-borns to Death Eaters!” (Rowling, *Half-Blood* 287). In Potterworm’s story, in spite of Ron’s personal experience with class prejudice, Hermione still must explain to Ron what being black *and* being muggleborn means:

As they walk back to the common room, after a silence, Ron asks, “Is it always like that?”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asks, even though she knows.

Harry looks at Ron and her. “I don’t think there’s as many racists in the wizarding world as there are in the muggle world,” Harry explains.

Hermione looks at Ron, really looks at him. “I think you don’t notice that I’m black, because you’re a good person, Ron Weasley. But yes, it’s always been like this. Maybe there aren’t as many racists, but I’m just fighting a new battle here. I’m black in the muggle world, and I’m black and a muggleborn here.” She wants to end with some poignant statement about how she won’t give up, but Hermione is twelve years old, and sometimes she wants to (chap. 7).

8 Mudblood is an extremely pejorative term used to describe witches and wizards that come from nonmagical families.

Ron's behavior is an example of what Patricia Williams describes as "closeting race," which makes it easier for white people to ignore how racism "continue[s] [...]to scar contemporary social arrangements with the transcendent urgency of [white people's] hand-me-down grief" (13). Race-bending Hermione allows Potterworm to explore and comment on the "hand-me-down grief" of both being black and being muggleborn that Hermione must make explicit (Williams 13).

For instance, consider the fifth vignette, "Dean Thomas," in "Black." Lyubansky explains that the colorblind ideology robs people of color of the aspects of culture associated with race that inform identity for many people of color. Dean Thomas is one of the few characters whose race is explicitly defined. In canon he does not know his father and thus is unable to determine his blood status, but Potterworm writes him as a half-blood wizard which places him higher on the racial hierarchy than Hermione in the wizarding world. Yet, Dean faces many of the same prejudices as Hermione that not even Harry Potter (who is also a half-blood) faces. This suggests that being a person of color lowers one's social status more than one's blood status. Hermione recognizes this, and she seeks out Dean's companionship because of their shared identity as black non-pureblood people navigating a new world. She approaches Dean in the library and extends an invitation of solidarity.

Hermione smiles bitterly. She sort of wanted this moment to be unspoken and just understood, but shared heritage and ethnicity aside, she and Dean have never been friends. It's foolish to think he'll be able to read her mind just because he's a half-blood and black. Finally, she says, "I – I know you're not muggleborn like me, but I figured it can't hurt to stick together." Dean looks a little stunned, but her skin matches his, and last week she heard a Slytherin call him a foul, racist name. He may not be muggleborn, but he's close. "Yeah, okay," he says ("Black" chap. 5).

"But he's close" is of particular importance because Hermione's efforts to reach out to Dean in the tense social climate they are in suggests that Potterworm understands how kinship based on race can help the two characters safely navigate a racially hostile environment. Dean has more privilege than Hermione in the wizarding world because of his blood status. And yet, to a racist wizard, like the aforementioned Slytherin student, they are the same. Potterworm brings these two characters together, linking their separate histories on the shared trait of race alone and the resulting interactions within the wizarding world because of it. In short, Potterworm is providing readers with a site to engage in larger discussions surrounding race, racism, and identity.

CONCLUSION

For decades, fanfiction was a phenomenon that existed primarily in the recesses of the internet; either you knew about it because you participated in it, or you were ignorant of its existence. Lev Grossman has compared fanfiction as a cultural phenomenon, to “dark matter” in that it remains primarily unseen by the mainstream and yet, is simultaneously a massive phenomenon (“The Boy Who Lived Forever”). Fanfiction is becoming harder to deny and not acknowledge, a mode of writing that forces those outside the subculture to take notice. Yet despite this recognizable popularity, the medium cannot shake the negative stigma the term “fanfiction” carries in mainstream respectability, signified by pejorative labels such as unoriginal, uncreative, derivative or even outright theft. Labels like these are what provoke the uninformed to turn their nose up at fanfiction. The preponderance of ‘election fanfiction’ that arose during the 2016 U.S. presidential election season is a prime example, though, of how the broader culture came to recognize the value of fanfiction. Journalists regarded ‘election fiction’ as reaction to the turmoil that was unfolding in the political arena. They indicated that such works can be viewed as “election escapism,” a “medium to explore different aspects of the candidates’ personalities,” and “social commentary” (Hill 2016). I point this out not to censure or critique individuals that write this type of fiction. Instead, I hope that the positive media attention that surrounded ‘election fanfiction’ will incline the same journalists and academics that laud election fanfiction to recognize fanfiction’s impact on the way literature and media are consumed and produced in the twenty-first century.

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BIOGRAPHY

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