

Imagining Africa Then and Now: from *Zeely* to *Black Panther*

Critical Race Theorists sometimes divide along materialist or idealist lines to advance the cause against racism. As Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic point out in *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (3rd ed. 2016), material determinism and racial realism provide essential tools in challenging structural racism and its effects. Political and economic interventions are necessary to effect positive change. Because of a prejudice that material conditions trump imagined ones, fantasy is frequently targeted as a waste of time. Ariel Dorfman, in *The Empire's Old Clothes* (1983), tells of meeting a Chilean woman who found escape in romance fantasies, but who was energized to take to the streets when real revolution came. However, as Jack Zipes and others have argued, liberating the imagination is frequently the first step towards acting on behalf of material change. Since fantasy's resurgence thanks to the Harry Potter phenomenon, new fantasies have begun to re-assess Africa's potential for romance. Important critics such as Ebony Elizabeth Thomas testify to the importance of this movement (*The Dark Fantastic* 2019).

This paper argues that we need imagined homelands to nurture revolutionary change. Although the 1960s saw increased attention to the needs of Black children and of their communities, the focus was realistic rather than imaginative. I consider the tempered realist messages of sixties and seventies-era African-American children's classics such as Virginia Hamilton's *Zeely* (1967), which urge readers to learn about their own history rather than making up stories about the "old country." Hamilton's protagonist Geeder must relinquish her pleasurable and self-aggrandizing fantasies about being a beautiful Watutsi queen and settle for being plain Elizabeth Perry, who may have a "most fine way of dreaming," but who is not a queen. Despite these quelling messages, popular folk- and fairy illustrated by the Pinkneys and the Dillons, such as *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (1987) affirmed desires for utopian images of Africa. Nancy Farmer's *The Ear, The Eye, and the Arm* (1994) imagined Africa as a futuristic place of marvels and challenges. My focus, however, will be upon writers such as Nnedi Okorafor, Zetta Elliott, and Tomi Adeyemi, who have begun to write resonant fantasies for young readers set in Africa. My paper will discuss how new YA series and the *Black Panther* phenomenon are re-imagining Africa and the post-colonial legacy.