Darkening the Dream: The Fantasy of History and Reality of Difference in Libba Bray's *The Diviners*

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ABSTRACT
This essay addresses how Libba Bray's 2012 children's and young adult historical fantasy novel, *The Diviners*, represents an alternative literary articulation of US history in the modernist period that links difference to the material contexts of American history and society. I explore how historical fantasy allows Bray to connect the imaginative possibilities of the speculative genres to a critique of practices of exclusion in the US. Through an analysis of how Bray represents diverse characters in America in the 1920s, I argue that the novel reflects the ways in which the inter-war years shaped the racial and ethnic paradigms that would define a great deal of twentieth-century America. I focus in particular on the novel's engagement with the Harlem Renaissance, nativism, and immigration restriction. In trespassing the borders and boundaries of genre, history, identity and reality, *The Diviners* harnesses the potential of the speculative genres to imagine alternatively.

KEYWORDS
YA Literature, The Jazz Age, Race & Ethnicity, Historical Fantasy, the Harlem Renaissance, American History, Contemporary American Literature, US Immigration

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In a recent *New York Times Book Review*, the American award-winning children's author Alexander Kwame identifies "a seismic shift of tolerance and understanding happening in our country in general, and in children's literature in particular. Authors are calling on publishers to introduce more diverse books and writers into the marketplace, with themes and characters that truly reflect and represent the variegated world we live in" (*NY Times*, 26 Aug 2016). Kwame's comments address the historical lack of diverse authors and books with diverse characters in Children's and Young Adult (YA) literature.[1] Indeed, in 2013, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) estimated that only ten percent of books published were by or about people of color (Fichtelberg xv). Responses to the study, such as the #WeNeedDiverseBooks Twitter campaign and websites such as Diversity in YA have helped to raise awareness about books by or about non-white people in Children's and YA literature.

Libba Bray is one of the YA authors to receive several nods from Diversity in YA (a digital organization dedicated to promoting diversity within YA literature), particularly for her most recent historical fantasy trilogy set in New York City in 1926.[2] The trilogy's first book, *The Diviners* (2012), features a diverse cast of characters negotiating the shifting social terrains of the Jazz Age in the US. The novel's social-historical setting provides a rich context from which to re-vision US history while connecting past to present. From the liminal spaces of YA literature, and working at the intersection of historical fiction and fantasy, Bray's novel represents an alternative literary articulation of US history in the modernist period that links difference to the material contexts of history and society. The novel depicts the American inter-war period as racially, ethnically, and sexually diverse, when an awareness of social class and class-based struggles also shaped public and private discourse. With a nuanced understanding of the importance of *difference* during this historical moment, the novel reflects the ways in which the inter-war years shaped the racial and ethnic paradigms that would define a great deal of twentieth-century America. Indeed, fractious discussion over immigration, race, borders, segregation, population control, and social

class stood at the forefront of political debates in this period, while gender and sexual norms experienced rapid changes. In looking back to the 1920s as a crucial moment in the US's social past, *The Diviners* simultaneously looks forward to a future of greater equality, inclusion, and diversity.

Fusing alternative politics with an alternative vision of the universe where the borders between the real and supernatural are permeable, the novel challenges notions of linear time and accepted reality. The familiar "escape from reality" that the speculative fiction offer readers is, of course, one of its deepest pleasures and sites of potential. In writing of race and historical fantasy in contemporary American ethnic novels, Ramon Saldívar draws on Jaqueline Rose's influential *States of Fantasy* to propose: "Fantasy in this sense links desire and imagination, utopia and history, but with a more pronounced edge intended to redeem, or perhaps even create, a new moral and social order" (Saldívar 587). Following Rose and Saldívar, I am concerned here with the radical potential of the speculative fiction in YA literature to enable social change through diversity and inclusivity. In this essay, I explore how historical fantasy allows Bray to connect the imaginative potential of the speculative genres to a critique of practices of exclusion in the US across time and space. Such a critique rejects the assimilationist myth of the multicultural "melting pot" and refuses to participate in a supposed post-racial America, theoretically achieved through the victories of the Civil Rights Movement(s) and the 2008 election of Barack Obama to President. In wake of the recent American presidential elections and rising tides of new-old nativism in the twenty-first century, it's now more important than ever to look back to the modernist movement as a formative time in history whose effects we are clearly still living. In illustrating a crucial moment in America's modernist past, Bray trespasses the borders and boundaries of genre, history, identity and reality in *The Diviners,* harnessing the potential of the speculative genres, specifically historical fantasy, to imagine alternatively.

As the ghost of Naughty John wreaks havoc on New York City in the 1920s, Bray reminds us that we, too, are still haunted by history. The novel posits that the darker sides of the

American Dream create a type of negative energy that awakens and nurtures nefarious supernatural powers. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,* Toni Morrison argues that the practice of transferring "internal conflicts to a 'blank darkness'" by white artists, which "conveniently bound and violently silenced black bodies," represents a major theme in American literature (Morrison 38). In Morrison's study of American literature, "the image of reined-in, bound, suppressed, and repressed darkness became objectified in American literature as an Africanist persona" (38-39). Thus, themes of evil and darkness have often been codes for the suppression of the racial other or ways of enacting a literary racial violence. In Bray's novel, however, racial others are not suppressed and issues of race and difference are addressed openly throughout the text. The novel doesn't engage "darkness" as allegory for non-white bodies who pose unspoken threats to (white) US identity, in the way that Morrison has suggested. The "darkness" haunting *The Diviners'* America refers precisely to many of the things Morrison argued American literature has historically suppressed-the nation's nightmarish history of racism, exclusion, and violence, which becomes a tangible force of evil embodied in the novel's villains. In "darkening" the American Dream, Bray's novel addresses the failures of the US to live up to its lofty promises of a universal, liberal democracy with equality under the law for all. Instead of "out of many, one," *The Diviners* posits that out of the many diverse groups inhabiting America's cultural and physical landscapes, our failure to see and understand each other as humans has created an evil divisiveness. As the novel's diverse characters are eventually united in the fight against these forces of evil, Bray offers a vision of solidarity where inclusion occurs as the result of shared struggle.

As a historical fiction novel with elements of the supernatural, written for young adults and featuring characters in their late teens, *The Diviners* falls in-between generic categories. However, slippage between genres is hardly uncommon in YA literature. Scot Smith notes, "Young Adult literature has a long tradition of authors whose works defy genre classifications" (Smith "The Death of Genre"). Smith identifies a recent resurgence of YA literature that he

describes as "innovative" and "bending traditional definitions of genre." Within the YA scene, such genre-crossing stories are frequently referred to as "mash-ups." According to Rabey: "A mash-up, first used to describe the combination of two or more songs, now refers to any joining of previously separate items, creating a new format or genre. Set in a historical New York City that is simultaneously real and unreal, Bray's characters move through social and psychological landscapes that are both historically accurate and constantly disturbed by the supernatural.[3] Most of the central characters have special (paranormal) abilities: mind reading, dream walking, healing, the ability to start fire through touch, etc. These superhuman "diviners" are up against ghosts, evil spirits returned from the dead, and the usual master of darkness, whose exact nature and intentions has yet to be fully revealed. In this sense, *The Diviners* falls most definitely within the fantasy genre. Rabey argues that fantasy is one of the most popular sub-genres of YA literature and thus "mash-ups that combine historical fiction with fantasy are perhaps the most popular kind of mash-up."

What the YA scene calls "mash-up," Ramón Saldívar, in his work on contemporary ethnic novels, has called "historical fantasy" and "speculative realism." These, Saldívar argues, emerge out of the urgent need for contemporary writers of color in the US to "to invent a new 'imaginary' for thinking about the nature of a just society and the role of race in its construction" (Saldívar 574). In the twenty-first century, "the relationship between race and social justice, race and identity, and, indeed, race and history" require an alternate imaginary in the form of genre-crossing novels inspired by fantasy, sci-fi, and popular and sub-culture(s). Specifically, historical fantasy links "fantasy, history, and the imaginary in the mode of speculative realism in order to remain true to ethnic literature's utopian allegiance to social justice" (585). Saldívar roots historical fantasy and speculative realism in the material realities of racialization in the US that are particular to writers of color. Authors such as Salvador Plascencia and Junot Díaz, he writes, use historical fantasy and speculative realism to demonstrate "the ways that life experiences, such as migration, diaspora, and the history of economic, social, and legal injustice in the Americas are

represented in fiction as it addresses the enigma of race in contemporary America" (575). While the personal, lived experience of exclusion in the US undoubtedly shapes the writing of many writers of color, they are not the only writers to explore "the enigma of race" using genre-crossing modes that are motivated by alternative political visions. Bray, who identifies as a white woman, similarly foregrounds issues of difference in her historical fantasy, yet avoids lapsing into bland multiculturalism, tokenism, or cultural appropriation.

The question of diversity in the speculative genres and in YA is not insignificant. The genres have been critiqued for a lack of diversity, both in terms of who writes books and what kinds of characters they write about. As Helen Young notes, "Whiteness as a default setting is as much a feature of the Fantasy genre as it is of western culture and society" (Young 1). In *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*, she argues: "The spaces of genre-culture—whether physical, digital, or imagined—have acquired the shape of the White bodies that have habitually occupied them for decades" (11). The same has been true for YA literature. As I noted earlier, there have been several successful campaigns to address the lack of diverse writers and books in the YA genres. Diversity in YA claims that "Diverse = Set in a non-Western world or inspired by a non-Western world; or with a main character who is non-white, LGBTQ+, and/or disabled." Using this working definition, Malinda Lo, one of the website's creators, undertook a serious study of diversity within the books chosen by the Young Adult Library Services' "Best Fiction for Young Adults" list, released every January and including approximately 100 titles. In her study, Lo examined the BFYA lists from 2011, 2012, 2013. While the results of her study are available in their entirety on the Diversity in YA website, in general, Lo found a depressing lack of diversity across these lists. For example, in 2013, only 7.8% of the selected books were written by authors of color. In 2013, 21.9% of the books selected included non-white characters or characters of unspecified race. 23 titles had main characters of color and 15 of those 23 titles were written by white authors. 4.9% of the books on the 2013 list had LGTBQ+ characters. These brief examples clearly indicate a need for greater diversity within in the genre.

Yet both fantasy and YA literature have the potential to embrace diversity. Fantasy links politics to the inner desire to imagine differently and alternatively a world or worlds more just than ours. In *States of Fantasy*, Rose "proposes that 'there is no way of understanding political identities and destinies without letting fantasy into the frame'" (qtd. in Saldívar 585). Or as Saldívar writes: "fantasy compels our attention to the gap or deficit between the ideal of redemptive liberal democratic national histories concerning inclusiveness, equality, justice, universal rights, freedom guaranteed by rule of law, and the deeds that have constituted nations and their histories as public collective fantasies" (594). In *The Diviners*, Bray writes from that very gap between the dizzy, lofty aspirations of nationhood circulating through the US in the 1920s, and the real struggles and exclusions that constitute history. The novel exposes official US history for what it is-a collective fantasy of inclusion, justice, freedom, democracy, and equality under law. Beneath the "new music" of the Jazz Age that "thrills" and "echo[s] the jagged excitement of the city's skyline," the novel's opening pages depict a "country of dreams and soap ads, old horrors and bloodshed" where "some of those starry-eyed dreams have died and yet other dreams are being born into squalor and poverty, an uphill climb" (Bray 7-8). The all-knowing wind, whose omniscient narrative eye opens the novel, sweeps across the city surveying "a time of celebrity, of fame and fortune and grasping" unfolding in different ways in the tenements, ghettos, barrios, Uptown and Downtown, all across New York City. This wind knows America. It has "played mute witness to its burning witches, and has walked along a Trail of Tears; it has seen the slave ships release their human cargo, blinking and afraid, into the ports, their only possession a grief they can never lose" (8). In this heady age "of the future, of industry, and prosperity; the future, which does not believe in the evil of the past" occupies the minds of many. However, like the wind that carries the atrocities of American history with it into the present, unable to forget or look away, *The Diviners* brings the past into the present: both the narrative "present" of 1926 and, by extension, our twenty-first century moment.

Like the novels Saldívar credits for depicting "forms of social belonging that link the realm of public political life to the mysterious workings of the heart's fantastic aspiration for substantive justice—social, racial, poetic, or otherwise," *The Diviner*'s historical fantasy operates on the level of both content and form (Saldívar 596). In combining historical fiction with fantasy, the novel's mash-up form exposes official history as public collective fantasy. The novel's vision of the US, expressed throughout the novel in passages such as the above, challenges the US's triumphant master narratives of liberal democracy, while Bray's diverse cast of characters reflect and embody difference, in all its beautiful messiness, as an integral part of America's past and present.

The novel's third person narrator follows the lives of several central teenage characters. Evie O'Neil, Memphis Campbell, Mabel Rose, Theta Knight, Henry DuBois, Sam Lloyd, and Jericho Jones. Evie, Memphis, Sam, Theta, and Henry are all "diviners" (although they don't all know it yet in at this point in the trilogy): gifted with special powers. Evie can read the minds of individuals by touching something that belongs to them and Memphis can heal people by laying hands on them. Sam can make himself invisible, Henry can "walk" in the dreams of others, and Theta can set things on fire with her hands when her emotions are roused. While not a "diviner" in the same way as the others, Jericho is also a meta-human. Near the end of the novel, he is revealed to be part machine. The characters' separate storylines are gradually united as they fight to stop a serial killer who terrorizes New York City. The renegade band of teenage detectives-turned-superhuman warriors, with the aid of Evie's Uncle Will, a professor of occult studies, soon realize that the serial killer is no ordinary madman. Instead, the perpetrator of the brutal killings turns out to be Naughty John, the ghost of John Hobbes, a religious fanatic who led an obscure cult in the nineteenth century and who was hanged for murder fifty years earlier. However, Naughty John represents only one manifestation of the forces of evil gathering around New York City in 1926. Although Naughty John is eventually cast back into darkness through the combined efforts of the diviners, the novel's ending suggests that the ultimate battle against

the forces of darkness has only just begun: the mysterious Man in the Stovepipe Hat waits and watches from another realm, ready to release the evil forces which the team will tackle in *Lair of Dreams* (Book Two).

Formally, the narrative is divided into chapters that closely follow one of the central characters, switching perspectives with each new chapter. Evie O'Neil, the sassy blond flapper from Ohio who is sent to live with her Uncle Will in Manhattan after getting in trouble for brandishing her special powers at a party, is nominally the main protagonist in *The Diviners*. However, close behind her in terms of narrative space is Memphis Campbell, a young numbers runner in Harlem with literary aspirations. In including both the urban and cultural spaces of Harlem in the 1920s as vital to the narrative, yet without essentializing or tokenizing black history, *The Diviners* avoids replicating a white domination of history.

From his entrance in the narrative, it becomes clear that Memphis belongs to Harlem. When we meet him, he is "perched beneath the street lamp in his spot on the corner of Lenox Avenue and 135th Street" hustling customers for his numbers running business (Bray 23). Memphis and his fellow number runners can be found all over Harlem: "From 130th Street north to 160th Street, from Amsterdam Avenue on the West Side clear over to Park Avenue on the east" (23). In sketching the boundaries of Harlem in 1926, Bray's novel reflects the historical patterns of black migration from the US south to major cities in the early twentieth century and the subsequent transition of Harlem from a white suburb to the heart of the African American cultural renaissance in the 1920s. Before WWI, "roughly 90 percent of America's Negro population still lived in the South, 78 percent of them in the countryside" (Douglas 73). However, in what came to be known as the "Great Migration," blacks began to move northward, pulled by the promise of greater freedom and the employment opportunities that opened up during the war years. As Douglas notes:

> 454,000 blacks left the South between 1910 and 1920; 749,000 more did so in the next decade. Between 1900 and 1930, the total number of Negroes in the North increased by

> almost 300 percent; the black population in all American cities went from 22 percent in 1900 to 40 percent in 1930. In 1890, one in seventy people in Manhattan was a Negro; in 1930, one in every nine. (73)

In Harlem specifically, the black population rose from "a mere handful in 1900" to "close to 200,000" during the 1920s. According to Douglas, Harlem's transformation from "the rural retreat of the aristocratic New Yorker" with rows of "stunning" brownstone houses inhabited by a "traditionally minded British, German, Jewish, and Irish" community to ethnic enclave was largely the result of an ill-planned white real-estate boom prompted by the opening of the Lenox Avenue subway line, which was intended to attract white middle-class investors and inhabitants (310). However, "for various reasons," the plan failed (310). Black renters and realtors, under the leadership of Philip A. Payton, Jr., seized the opportunity to fill vacant real estate at low costs. As blacks moved in, whites moved out. "Between 1920 and 1930," Douglas reports, "118,792 whites left Harlem and 87,417 Negroes arrived" (311-312). In the novel, Memphis, who lives with his Aunt Octavia and younger brother Isaiah in Harlem, represent part of this "Great Migration."

But it's more than his home address that makes Memphis a true Harlemite of the 1920s. While Bray's novel uses concrete detail to situate Memphis and his family within the historical topography of Harlem, his literary dreams emphasize his connection to Harlem. His friend Alma introduces Memphis as the boy "who lives at the library over on 135th Street. Wants to be the next Langston Hughes" (Bray 73). Indeed, Memphis admits to himself that he wants more than anything "to read his poetry at one of Miss A'Leila Walker's salons, alongside Countee Cullen, Zora Neal Hurston, and Jean Toomer—maybe even beside Mr. Hughes himself" (76). As he scribbles lines of poetry in his ever-present notebook, Memphis draws inspiration from Harlem: "All around him, Harlem was alive with writers, musicians, poets, and thinkers. They were changing the world. Memphis wanted to be part of that change" (81). By introducing readers to Memphis via his connection to a community invested in specific racial and aesthetic projects,

instead of through racialized bodily markers (such as skin color or hair texture), Bray's novel avoids defining non-white characters by phenotypical difference, a commonly used, essentializing racialized lens. Furthermore, Bray shapes Memphis' character around his artistic talents and ambitions, which gives him agency as an individual, instead of shaping his character around monolithic constructions of community, heritage, or tradition. While there is nothing inherently problematic with characters whose identities draw from shared values, when it comes to non-white characters, such themes often result in static, stereotypical depictions of sweeping racialized identities where characters lack individual agency. Within the speculative genres in particular, issues of a character's "special ability," while not overtly raced often rely on underlying structures that are arguably racialized. For example, in *Habits of Whiteness*, Young notes that most protagonists in contemporary fantasy "inherit their supernatural identity components biologically, that is, through their family. Race, in twenty-first-century Western society is the category of identity most closely linked to descent by far" (Young 144). Thus even supernatural abilities rely on coded racialized structures of identity. However, while Memphis and his brother Isaiah are both "diviners," the text never links any of the characters' abilities to issues of genetics or descent. Memphis and Isaiah, at this point in the trilogy, represent the only diviners who share genetics as well as supernatural abilities and their individual talents manifest themselves in different ways. Indeed, in the novel, shared supernatural talents bring together, not a descent-based community engaged in a timeless tradition of fighting darkness, but a collection of very different young people from very diverse backgrounds.

The salons hosted by A'Leila Walker that Memphis longs to attend are a historical reality. An heiress, Walker used her money to throw lavish parties and to support the writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance from her Harlem townhouse, the "Dark Tower." Renaissance figures such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Bruce Nugent and Aaron Douglas gathered for art exhibits and poetry readings in the "Dark Tower."[4] In salons like Miss Walker's, the young "Negro" writers idolized by Memphis were rebelling against the "polite" and "well-spoken"

Negritude of a previous generation (Douglas 82). While some of their white counterparts debated whether or not they were, in fact, a so-called "lost generation," it's worth remembering that many (but not all) black modernists felt as if they "faced a national culture in which the Negro artist has always been 'lost'—until, the members of the Harlem Renaissance believed, the present. Now, they proclaimed, was the first hour of real hope for the Negro in America" (87-88). They were, as Memphis says, "changing the world" and he wants to be a part of this social change (87-88).

Langston Hughes' *The Weary Blues*, published in 1926, reappears throughout *The Diviners* and not just within the urban-cultural spaces of Harlem, reflecting how black cultural production reached beyond the borders of neighborhood (in spite of legal and informal social segregation). When a fellow chorus girl spies Theta (who is not from Harlem) with a copy of the book, she scoffs at her for reading "Negro poetry" (Bray 135). But, later, when Memphis and Theta meet during at speakeasy outside of Harlem, she notices that Memphis also has a copy of Hughes' book. Their shared love of Hughes cements an initial physical attraction. On their first date, the two quote lines from the titular poem to each other, each confessing they'd "never read anything so beautiful before" (341). Although it would be many years before Hughes' work would receive much critical acclaim or popularity outside of Harlem, Theta's familiarity with Hughes in the year of *The Weary Blues*' release foreshadows his eventual circulation and appeal. Additionally, Theta relieves Memphis of bearing all of the narrative weight of connecting readers to the Harlem Renaissance and becoming tokenized in the process. Instead of simply linking black cultural production in the 1920s to Harlem via the novel's black protagonist, Bray's novel shows how a text like *The Weary Blues* created opportunities for meaningful connections between and across different people. Indeed, the intertextual presence of Hughes' *The Weary Blues* does more than bring Theta and Memphis together. It connects them to an urban tradition of simultaneous dissent and celebration, a recognition of the limits of the status quo and an invocation for social change. Hughes' work unabashedly chronicled the lives of everyday black people in Harlem in

their own language (for which he was rebuked by both black and white critics at the time),[5] and yet from such a particular locus of enunciation, Hughes' work taps deep into themes of alienation, struggle, survival, and the desperate need to experience joy in times of darkness. These are the themes that draw Theta, who hides her own troubled past and dark secrets behind her good looks and scrappy street smarts. *The Weary Blues* connects the characters and, indeed, the novel itself to what Hughes described as his subject matter: ". . . people up today and down tomorrow, working this week and fired the next, beaten and baffled, but determined not to be wholly beaten" (*Autobiography: The Big Sea*, qtd. on The Poetry Foundation website). As *The Weary Blues* circulates openly through the pages of *The Diviners*, not as a suppressed or shadowed "other" in the way Toni Morrison has written of the unconscious "Africanist presence" in white American literature,[6] it functions as a constant reminder of the existence of America's nonwhite literary history. This intertextual relationship asks readers not only to continually recall a black literary tradition, but to also think contemporarily about literary diversity. More broadly, such intertextuality reminds readers how texts circulate through communities of readers with the power to inspire, not only individual hopes and dreams, but also meaningful collective action and social change.

Bray's novel avoids the pitfalls of a "post-racial" approach to diversity wherein racial-ethnic difference is construed either biologically through physical traits or through a character's connection to "tradition" or "heritage." Rather, it shows how difference affects the real lives of people in her historical-fictional world. The most powerful example of how race shapes the day-to-day lives of people occurs when Memphis brings Theta to a party in Harlem, thrown by Alma and her girlfriend, Rita. While no one at the party appears bothered by the presence of an openly gay couple, the interracial relationship between Memphis and Theta leads to a dramatic scene between Memphis and his best friend, Gabe. Although Theta's dark good looks suggest an ethnically ambiguous heritage, she more or less "passes" as white. For example, when Memphis first meets Theta, he asks her: "You French? Got a French look to you. Maybe even a little

Creole." Theta responds, "I look like everybody" (Bray 264). Memphis decides to call her "Creole Princess" anyway. Later Memphis presses Theta about her heritage—"But where are your people from?" (369). Theta then explains that she was adopted as a baby and doesn't know anything about her ethnic heritage. So when she walks into the Harlem house party on Memphis' arm, they're greeted with "raised eyebrows and one or two stares" (Bray 368). Rita mostly diffuses the situation, but Memphis' pal Gabe pulls him aside to warn him about the social consequences of dating a "white girl." Memphis protests, "It's a free country," but Gabe knows better: "No, it isn't. You know that." Memphis thinks it *should* be a free country. Gabe says, "*Should* and *is* aren't the same thing. What happens when she gets tired of you, or worse, accuses you of something? You remember Rosewood?" Gabe references destruction of the predominantly black town of Rosewood in 1923 in response to rumors that a local black man had sexually assaulted a white woman, Fanny Taylor. A group of 200 white men from the surrounding area burnt the town, slaughtered the animals and killed at least six blacks. No one was charged for the Rosewood crimes.[7] Gabe's warning recognizes the material threat to black lives under the white supremacy of the 1920s. It was a time of anti-miscegenation laws forbidding relationships between blacks and whites, when structures of legal segregation were still in place. Gabe begs Memphis to be more cautious, acknowledging the systematic and intentional targeting of black lives by both state and extrajudicial forces on the basis of anti-black racism. "It's not enough they're slumming it up here and taking the best tables in our own clubs when we can't even get a table in theirs! Or that they're trying to take over our business from the inside . . . Now you want to go around and parade with one of them?" Gabe protests (368-69). Gabe's anger, channeled toward Memphis and Theta, is fundamentally a reaction against how white power and structural inequality were made manifest through cultural and economic appropriations of black spaces and black culture by whites. While some might read Memphis' decision to openly date Theta as a protest against racism, Gabe believes Memphis is needlessly risking his life: "You get caught by the wrong people, and you won't be able to heal what they'll

do to you" (Bray 368-69). Gabe doesn't just imply that Memphis could die as a result of dating interracially, he alludes to deep psychological violence perpetrated on nonwhite bodies by white supremacy—what the Chicana feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as "*una herida abierta*," an open wound that never heals (Anzaldúa 31). Whether or not Memphis and Theta will face threats greater than hostile looks or a stern lecture remains to be seen, but by addressing the real, material affects of racial difference under white hegemony, Bray's novel does not participate in watered down multiculturalism where difference functions solely as a marker of identity. Rather, the text links forms of difference to the social structures and operations of power that create and define it.

The social and cultural shifts taking place in Harlem were part of the larger changes of US society in general, but New York City in particular. If Bray's novel suggests that a connection exists between US polyglot society, moments of particular social upheaval and the emergence of dark supernatural forces, New York in 1926 serves as the ideal setting to showcase this relationship. Indeed, New York functions as a powerful chronotope for American modernism. As Ann Douglas demonstrates, "New York in the 1920s celebrated excitement, danger, record-making and record-breaking, catastrophe and farce, all of it" (Douglas 27). In the era that saw the US become the world's most powerful nation, New York became renown "as the world's most powerful city. The census of 1920 declared America for the first time in its history an urban nation, and New York was the largest city in that urban nation" (Douglas 4). New York was where media was born, the throbbing, Charleston-ing heart of jazz and blues, of glitzy theater and pop art. Home to the writers, black and white, who would define the generation, New York represented America's coolest literary scene. In the 1920s, New York was under constant construction: "modern New York as we still know today, with its skyscrapers, tunnels, bridges, and adjacent speedways" was built during this era (Douglas 17). Infrastructure followed population demographics: "New York's population doubled between 1910 and 1930" (Douglas 15). Bray's detailed, evocative writing captures this booming, bustling hustling metropolis in its

most feverish moment. In *The Diviners*, New York is a "gleaming" city "frantic with ambition, rich in the commerce of longing, a golden paradise of businessmen prophets, billboards advertising the abundance argued on Wall Street, promised by Madison Avenue," alive with "taxi horns, trolley cars, and trains" or the shouts of "the newsies hawking the day's headlines in Times Square," while "majestic skyscrapers" rose "over it all like gleaming steel, brick, and glass gods" (Bray 572, 6). Beneath the shiny optimism of progress and world domination, lies, of course, the chaos, fragmentations, and disappointments of modernism—"Just a bunch of chess pieces moved about by unseen hands in a universe bored with itself," Evie thinks to herself at one point, capturing what Bray sums up at the novel's end as "the longing and the disillusionment of the people" (574). Longings and disillusionment were not only consequences of WWI and global reconfigurations, as scholars of the modernist period have argued, but also the result of intense domestic turmoil:

> This was the age of 'Red' scares and race riots, of a burgeoning Ku Klux Klan and shrinking labor union, of stiff and biased immigration laws and an enormous gap between the incomes of the wealthy and the poor. Shocking to tell, 71 percent of American families in the 1920s had annual incomes below $2,500, the minimum needed for decent living. (Douglas 18)

In the light such real material struggles, Douglas argues that New York in the 1920s had "a dual nature"—"both a No Man's Land expert in modish despair and a city 'built with a wish'" (28). Thus the "conflicts and clashes" of the nation were experienced in a heightened fashion along the bustling avenues of the city. *The Diviners* captures this modernist tension between excitement and despair. While the novel's expert scene-setting and detailed writing invoke New York's pluralistic optimism, Bray's characters also embody the conflicts, disappointments and struggles beneath the fizzy expansiveness of New York in the 1920s.

The novel engages with America's troubled immigrant past, specifically how immigrant communities, new and older, shaped the social landscape of New York in the 1920s. As the

population of New York and, indeed, the US boomed during these years, racial and ethnic demographics shifted. Between 1880 and 1920, an estimated 28 million immigrants arrived, the vast majority of them passing through New York's Ellis Island (304). Indeed, "by the early 1920s, about half the nation's population was first- or second-generation immigrant, and in the big cities the proportion was still higher. Three-quarters of the nation's immigrants in the late nineteenth century came to New York." In contrast to earlier immigrants, who came mainly from the British Isles and Western Europe, during the early twentieth century, immigrants were overwhelmingly Southern and Eastern European. By 1910, Eastern and Southern Europeans made up 70 percent of the immigrants entering the country (*EyeWitness to History*). An early scene in the chapter appropriately titled "City of Dreams," follows second-generation immigrant, Ruta Badowski (Bates), the first of Naughty John's victims, as she returns home from dancing all night. She crosses paths with Naughty John while on her way to Greenpoint, Brooklyn "where her family lived in a two-room apartment in a crumbling building on a street where nearly everyone spoke Polish and the old men smoked cigarettes in front of store windows draped with fat strands of kielbasa" (Bray 61). This image reflects historical patterns of migration and settlement amongst immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. New immigrants "were no longer dispersing themselves across the nation but collecting ominously in vast city enclaves fast becoming 'ghettos'" where cultural elements from "the old country" could be preserved (Douglas 305).

Like many second-generation immigrants, Ruta distinguishes herself from both previous generations of immigrants and the new arrivals. Unlike her parents, who were born in Poland, Ruta's proud to have "been born here, in Brooklyn." In fact, Naughty John secures her confidence by playing into her patriotism when he gestures to a couple of lately arrived "riffraff" passed out on a nearby stoop: "Someone should clean up this sort of riffraff, turn them back at the borders. They're not like you and me, Miss Bates. Clean. Good citizens. People with ambitions" (Bray 63). Ruta agrees: "They *were* different from her family. *Foreign*." In

distinguishing herself from other immigrants, Ruta reflects what Douglas identifies as "the arts of exactitude, of distinguishing one thing from all else that may resemble it," which were, she argues, "the moderns' stock-in-trade" (Douglas 35). When extended to specific groups of people, this tendency to *distinguish* led to a rise in nativism and the passing of immigration restriction laws aimed at preserving a narrowly defined national and racial identity in opposition to others.

Before 1920, numbers or quotas did not restrict immigration to the US. With the exception of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1880), freedom of movement was considered a democratic value and immigration had been historically encouraged (Ngai 18). However, in the 1920s, new immigration laws, mainly the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, established a system of quotas based on national origins in order to control immigration. These laws reflected societal unease over America's changing population. Social perceptions of race and ethnicity became codified into laws, which, in turn, created and reinforced ideas, images, and assumptions about identity that the media were more than eager to disseminate. Like Ruta, many Americans were quick to distinguish between "us" and "them." However, these distinctions often remained fluid. For instance, while Ruta clearly identifies herself as a "born here" American, "New York's finest" see it somewhat differently. When Naughty John's second victim is revealed to be a young Irish immigrant, the police note, "Tommy Duffy was Irish. Ruta Badowski was Polish. The killer could harbor a hatred of foreigners" (Bray 181). Thus, in the eyes of the law, Ruta's Polish ethnicity (and Tommy's Irishness) is understood as *foreign* (i.e., nonwhite) when measured against a white, Anglo-Saxon norm.

Distrust and even "hatred of foreigners" was a social reality in the 1920s. While previously immigrants had been seen as "part of an unending supply of docile, industrious, cheap, and quickly Americanized labor," changing immigration and demographic trends raised, for many white Americans, "the alarming specter of an unemployed, ill-educated, and angry mob of foreigners with no real stake in the American enterprise, with no knowledge of Anglo-Saxon values and traditions" (Douglas 305). Nativist rhetoric characterized and denounced immigrants

"as either a radical threat or an inferior stock that undermined the welfare of American workers" (Portes and Rumbaut 99). Madison Grant's wildly circulated tract, *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), popularized a eugenics movement by arguing, "the immigration of the defective races of the world threatened to erode the US's moral and intellectual character" (Graves 120). Eugenicists not only argued for the use of eugenics measures to preserve the Anglo-Saxon/Nordic race, but also to stop the immigration of those races seen as "inferior."

In *The Diviners*, Evie and Jericho encounter the eugenics movement when they are under cover at a county fair outside the city. An advertising board catches Evie's eye: "THE HUMAN BETTERMENT FOUNDATION: MAKING AMERICA STRONG THROUGH THE SCIENCE OF EUGENICS" (Bray 469). A passing nurse asks the two: "Do you know about eugenics? It's a wonderful scientific movement designed to help America achieve her full potential." She continues:

> There are the unfortunates. The degenerates. The unfit, insane, crippled, and feeble-minded. The repeat criminals found in the lower classes. The defects particular to certain races. Many of the agitators causing such unrest in our society are an example of the inferior element who are leading to a mongrelization of our American culture. Purity is the cornerstone of our great civilization. Eugenics proposes *corrections* for what is sick in our society . . . Imagine an America in which our physical and social ills have been red out of us . . . A true democracy! All men are not created equal, but they could be. (470)

The novel suggests parallel plots between the supernatural and natural, between Naughty John's vision to redeem a broken, sinful world through total destruction and rebirth with eugenicists' desire to cleanse the nation and "restore" it to its (mythologized) Anglo-Saxon roots. "The Brethern," the name Bray gives to the cult-like group of followers Naughty John's spirit commands, find in his pseudo-spiritual rhetoric what many middle-class white Americans found in eugenics: a simple solution to social turmoil.

While pseudo-scientific movements such as eugenics represented one nativist response to immigration, America's legal system responded with restrictive immigration laws. The 1924 Johnson-Reed Act established a system of quotas for immigration based on national origins that included built-in hierarchies of racial desirability. The quota system restricted immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, excluded "aliens ineligible for citizenship" (most Asian immigrants), while placing no restrictions on immigration from the Western Hemisphere. Thus the Johnson-Reed Act

> Constructed a vision of the American nation that embodied certain hierarchies of race and nationality . . . At one level, the new immigration law differentiated Europeans according to nationality and ranked them in a hierarchy of desirability. At another level, the law constructed a white American race, in which persons of European descent shared a common whiteness distinct from those deemed not to be white. (Ngai 23-25)

The national origins quota system created new categories of both race *and* ethnicity in the US. The racial categories of "white" and "nonwhite" became legalized through immigration status (the invention of the "illegal alien" as a nonwhite person) at the same time that national origins cultivated a growing awareness of ethnicity, which emphasized that differences were "socially rather than biologically acquired" (Lee 28). During the interwar years, ethnicity was "a malleable and open-ended concept, emerging from the efforts of social scientists to unseat the notion that biological racial divides were intractable and that races could be ranked as superior or inferior" (Lee 28).[8] Instead, arguments centered on questions of assimilation versus pluralism and a corresponding temporal tension between the past (descent-based identities) and forward-looking politics. Thus, the minority characters in Bray's novel are also significant because they embody the very categories of difference whose present-day meanings were being created and solidified through law and cultural during at this historical moment.

While questions of ethnicity and assimilation were contentious and often murky, the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act firmly institutionalized the question of racial assimilation for Asians. In

addition to creating a quota system based on national origins, the act "provided for the exclusion of persons ineligible to citizenship" (Ngai 37). Ineligibility to citizenship and exclusion applied to all people from East and South Asia. The origins of racial language of restriction, according to Ngai, were located in the legal definition of "white" and the rule of racial unassimilability, which declared "Asiatic" peoples as incapable of assimilating in the US. The law thus extended the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred Chinese from entering the US.

While the particular history of New York's Chinatown and the trajectory of racialization for Asians and Asian Americans play a central role in *Lair of Dreams*, this history is also present in *The Diviners*. As Evie and Uncle Will pass through Chinatown during Mid-Autumn Festival, Evie notices a long line of men in front of a shop. Her uncle conjectures that the men are most likely sending letters home to their wives, in China. When Evie asks why their wives aren't with them, Will responds: "The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 . . . What do they teach in schools these days? . . . The Chinese Exclusion Act was a law designed to keep more Chinese from coming here once they'd finished building our railroads. They couldn't bring their families over. They weren't protected by our law. They were on their own" (Bray 109). The origins of this exclusion lay in a potent combination of economic crisis and unemployment after an age of unprecedented growth and fears over racial purity. "Within this context of economic crisis and social strife," historian Ron Takaki writes, "Congress voted to make it unlawful for Chinese laborers to enter the US for the next ten years and denied naturalized citizenship to the Chinese already here" (Takaki, *Strangers* 111). In 1888, the lawmakers broadened the law to include "all persons of the Chinese race."[9] By legislating the disappearance of the Chinese presence in the US (from 105, 465 in 1880 to 61,639 in 1920), the US deflected anxiety over labor competition into a racial ideology of purity and contamination that became codified through law. White Americans not only agreed that unlike the nineteenth century European immigrant, the Chinese immigrant "could not be transformed into an American," but also that the Chinese represented a serious threat to a white homogenous society (Takaki, *Mirror* 206).[10] Takaki quotes politician John F.

Miller at the 1878 California Constitutional Convention: "'Were the Chinese to amalgamate at all with our people, it would be the lowest, most vile and degraded of our race, and the result of that amalgamation would be a hybrid of the most despicable, a mongrel of the most detestable that has ever afflicted the earth'" (qtd. in *Mirror* 205). The mixed race "hybrid' Miller fears does, indeed, sound "monstrous" enough for a sci-fi or fantasy plot. Yet whatever monstrosity white nativists feared from racial contamination was not more hideous than the practices of exclusion, segregation, and racial hatred already firmly in place in the US.

Upon learning about Chinese exclusion, Evie thinks it "doesn't sound terribly American," but Will is quick to remind her: "On the contrary, it's very American" (Bray 109). Will's rejoinder recalls Gabe's reminder that America isn't actually a free country. Both moments critique the cherished master narratives of American exceptionalism, compelling reminders throughout the novel that injustice and exclusion define "America" and "American" as much as freedom and democracy. Raised on the promises of "God and country. Love your parents. All is fair," part of Evie's journey through the novel is a journey of disillusionment with generation who had "sold their children a pack of lies," while she comes to consciousness about the presence and persistence of evil (554). By the end of the novel, she "knew now that the world was a long way from fair. She knew the monsters were real" (554). The monsters Evie and the other diviners face are, on the one hand, the supernatural forces of darkness, but the novel has also clearly implied from the start that not all evil is supernatural in origin---atrocity, like charity, begins at home.

As the novel progresses (and, indeed, as the trilogy is progressing), other characters' storylines become more important and take up and more narrative space.[11] These characters broaden the scope of difference in the novel to include considerations of class and sexual difference, important sites of tension in the interwar years that emerged at once in line with and odds with race-based struggles. In the modernist period, class struggle was often raced as well. Prominent Harlem Renaissance writers, such as Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, traveled

to Moscow and were directly involved in leninst critiques of imperialism and capitalism.[12] When the Harlem Renaissance journal *The Messenger* wrote about the "new negro" the idea of "social equality" was key: "in fact, the interests of all Negroes are tied up with the workers. Therefore, the Negro should support a working class political party." They advocated that "the Negro join the labor unions" and fight against white union discrimination (*The Messenger*, vol II, August 1920, qtd. in Patton and Honey 8). Indeed the alignment of art and revolution produced "striking, eccentric ways of expressing cultural difference," motivated by the "similar potential of avant-garde and minority cultures to level hierarchies and bring art into life—that is, to shatter or open exclusive canons and to dismantle the divide between high and low" (Lee 2, 4). One of the crucial links between race-based and class-based struggles in the modernist period, was, according to Lee, authenticity: "to be authentic meant to reject mass culture and commercialization" (121). Yet while one could be "authentically black by being anticapitalist," being anticapitalist didn't always align with other social justice projects. Nonetheless, the rejection of mass culture and commercialization, along with Soviet-inspired critiques of capitalism became constitutive of certain radical ethnic identities in New York City in the 1920s. In particular, labor strikes and union organizing amongst Jewish immigrants in the Lower East Side "created a broadly based radical Jewish consciousness" (Takaki, *Mirror* 297).

Mabel Rose, Evie's best friend-neighbor in New York, is a product of this intersection of class and ethnicity in the modernist period. The daughter of prominent New York socialists, Mabel's father is a Jewish immigrant from a modest background, and her mother is a white Protestant (former socialite), whose cross-ethnic love brought her to political consciousness as a young woman. Mabel's background and personal journey into politics accurately represents the heated political landscape of 1920s, which was the beginning of the end for American socialism. In the US, the Socialist Party emerged and blossomed between 1900-1912, under the charismatic leadership of the labor organizer Eugene Debs. However, by the 1920s, support for socialism in the US was rapidly declining, partly as a result of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917, as

well as post-WWI disillusionment and internal factionalism between socialists, communists, and members of the Industrial Workers of the World (founded by "Mother" Mary Harris Jones). Legislature such as the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 included language that made acts of disloyalty punishable by law. By 1919, suspicion of suspected communists and socialists led to the Red Scare, in which 5,000 people were arrested and jailed on suspicion of disloyal activity.[13] 600 of those arrested were deported, reflecting a popular belief that "immigrant workers transported the 'virus' of socialistic ideas that threatened to undermine American democratic institutions" (Portes and Rumbaut 98). Here, the language of contamination used to warn against the threat of socialism echoes the racialized language used to warn Americans against the threat of "invasion" by the Chinese, Irish, and other immigrants who were perceived by nativists to represent a racial and cultural threat to the fabric of America. Thus stereotypes about race, ethnicity, class, and national origin coalesced around political affiliation, contributing to the "hysteria" of the Red Scare and nativist movements.

Early in the novel, Mabel tells Evie that her parents are out for the evening because "there's a rally for the appeal of Sacco and Vanzetti downtown." She says, "my mother and father are representing *The Proletariat,*" referring to the socialist newspaper her parents operated and distributed" (Bray 54). Here, Bray references the famous trial of the communist activists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti**,** whose conviction of robbery and murder was driven by prejudice against their radical political beliefs and a sign of the increasing targeting of communists and socialists.[14] Mabel reveals the extent to which she has internalized her parents' socialist fervor during an awkward supper with Evie and Jericho. Mabel argues that "poverty and ignorance" are the true evil of society and asserts: "I'm an atheist. Religion is the opiate of the masses" (Bray 230). Jericho attacks Mabel for simply parroting Karl Marx and her parents without thinking for herself. Eventually, Mabel finds her own way into socialism, which includes more than just rhetoric. A narrow escape from police brutality and arrest at a political rally encourages Mabel to synthesize her parents' beliefs and her own readings with real life

experiences. In documenting Mabel's class consciousness and growing awareness of her own radical politics, Bray's novel rejects the assumption that young adults are apolitical or apathetic—a label frequently applied to the young mods of the Jazz Age.[15] Mabel's narrative arc creates space for a critique of capitalism within the novel and embodies the historical reality of poverty and deep class divisions, as well the uneven relationship between race, ethnicity, and class in the US during the 1920s. Thus the novel not only counters a white domination of history, it also links forces of social domination to the growing hegemony of capitalism as a monolithic system of social, political, and economic organization and control in the US.

It is this very diversity of the US, represented in Bray's cast of characters, that the novel suggests is at the heart of the forces of darkness preying upon the city. "Something," Uncle Will argues at one point:

> Is drawing the likes of John Hobbes. Some energy here. Spirits are attracted to seismic energy shifts, chaos and political upheaval, religious movements, war and intervention, industry and innovation. There were said to be a great many ghost sightings and unexplained phenomenon reported during the American Revolution, and again during the Civil War. This country is founded on a certain tension . . . There is a dualism inherent in democracy—opposing forces pushing against each other, always. Culture clashes. Different belief systems. All coming together to create this country. But this balance takes a great deal of energy—and, as I've said, spirits are attracted to energy. (Bray 457)

Will links the supernatural to America's past and present struggles to create and sustain one nation out of many "cultures." What Will refers to here (and elsewhere) as "clashes" not only of cultures "but also spirits and superstitions," (42) reflects the kind of watered-down multiculturalist rhetoric that tends to elide histories of racial formation and racialization. However, while multiculturalist rhetoric usually focuses on the collective celebration of diversity ("we're all different together!"), Will instead focuses on the disruptions—those "opposing

forces" of difference that, in the present moment of the novel, are directly responsible for drawing supernatural forces of evil and also for creating categories of difference and identity that remain more or less intact until the 1960s.

In *The Diviners*, Libba Bray "darkens" the promises of the American Dream. America may be a "pledge" and the land "an idea of freedom, born from the collective yearning of a restless nation built on dreams," but in the novel, freedom is more of an "idea" than a reality and dreams are, more often than not, dead or dark or not to be trusted (571). For the US is also a land of "longing and disillusionment" (574). The America dreamt of by immigrant and citizen alike is a fantasy of inclusion and opportunity. The reality of America past and present, Bray shows, is both more beautifully diverse and achingly unjust. The very diversity celebrated by master narratives of multiculturalism turns out to be, in the world of the novel, a fragmenting force that attracts evil. The specter of supernatural darkness thus allegorizes the traditions of exclusion, discrimination, injustice and hatred that constitute US history. Bray uses the possibilities of historical fantasy not only to re-imagine US history from the borders, but also to comment back on the US's present moment. As the diviners reckon with what it means to be different in 1926, the novel asks readers to consider how far we have come. *The Diviners* illustrates continuity between past and present in the US's continuing struggle to manage difference and diversity, from debates over further immigration restriction laws to the continued systematic oppression of nonwhite peoples. Yet by crossing the borders of time, space, reality, and genre, Bray reminds readers of the possibility to imagine alternative possibilities. She uses interstitial space to harness the inner desire to believe in a better world, where sites of difference no longer function as sites of exclusion.

Notes

[1] On their website, the Young Adult Library Services Association defines Young Adult as ages 12-18.

[2] The second installment of Bray's trilogy, *Lair of Dreams*, was released in 2015.
[3] Bray writes of her writing and extensive research processes frequently on her popular blog (https://libbabray.wordpress.com/) and elsewhere on her social media.
[4] See White, "Walker, A'Leila (1885-1931)"
[5] See "Langston Hughes," *The Poetry Foundation*
[6] See Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*
[7] See Goodloe, "Rosewood Massacre, 1923"
[8] Anthropologists at the time were extremely interested in questions of ethnicity vs. race. Franz Boas' work famously attempted to demonstrate how different groups dispersed spatially allowing for intermixture, while Robert Park emphasizes the ability of cultures to adapt and transform, especially in urban areas (Lee 29).
[9] Restrictions to Chinese immigration remained in place until 1943
[10] As Takaki notes, nativist fears over a Chinese "invasion" were unfounded: "The Chinese constituted a mere .002 percent of the United States population in 1882" (*Mirror* 206).
[11] In *Lair of Dreams*, the second book of the trilogy, we are introduced to another central character, Ling Chan. A queer Chinese American young woman, Ling is also a dream-walker, like Henry. Her storyline links a mysterious sleeping sickness which originates in Chinatown to the history of New York's Chinatown, and histories of Asian/Asian American racialization in the US more broadly.
[12] See Lee, *The Ethnic Avant-Garde*
[13] See "Socialism in America," *U-S_history.com*
[14] See Frankfurter, "The Case of Sacco and Vanzetti"
[15] Part-time New Yorker and champion of the age F. Scott Fitzgerald famously dismissed the Jazz Age as "having no politics at all" (qtd. in Douglas 18).

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