

Brandon: Welcome to Office Hours, a production at the University of Pennsylvania's Office of University Communications. Today, we knock on the door of Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, associate professor of literacy culture and international education at the graduate school of education. A Detroit native and devourer of literature, Thomas taught elementary language arts, high school English, and creative writing in public schools, and researches how to reconsider the literature students read for the 21st century standards of social change and societal redefinition. She's especially focused on the representation of African Americans in children's and adolescent literature, which she discusses in her new book, *The Dark Fantastic: Race in the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*. In our chat, Thomas talks about her new book, how children's literature shapes our lives, and why she quips she'd have made a great Midwestern homemaker in a past life.

Brandon: Hello Ebony. Welcome to Office Hours. How are you doing?

Ebony Thomas: I'm doing really well, Brandon. Thank you for having me.

Brandon: Yeah, you're in the middle of finals, right, with your students?

Ebony Thomas: Over in the graduate school of education, our students are completing final papers, but also dissertations and masters projects, so the anxiety is palpable.

Brandon: Yeah, it's a very Penn story. You've studied and worked in a lot of different places, in Detroit, and Florida and now you're in Philadelphia. I'm wondering, is there a one place maybe that you feel like shaped your work more than another?

Ebony Thomas: Certainly this chapter at Penn has really influenced my work. One of the things that I was surprised by and really grateful for was as an assistant professor at Penn, I was encouraged to follow my passions to the best of my scholarly ability. In education, often we don't write books before tenure. You write lots of little research articles or big research articles, and the rank of the journal matters. While I did that work, my mentors, and my chair, and being also encouraged me to clear a bar that is usually reserved for the humanities, which is a monogram. Penn certainly influenced that. Also, my hometown of Detroit burns in my heart wherever I go. Very much at a Detroiter. Anyone who knows me knows that one thing about me.

Brandon: How did you first take an interest in education? Is this something that you knew as like a little kid that you'd be pursuing, or is this something that had evolved?

Ebony Thomas: Everyone told me I was going to be a teacher, and I did not want to become a teacher. I went among professions. I thought I would become a doctor, or an attorney, or even an economist because I got a really high score on my AP econ test. But then during my freshman year at FAMU, I went there because they gave me a full ride scholarship, and I'm the daughter of a mailman, and I was

going to go for whoever paid. I went to Florida A&M, and they had a pretty famous business school at the time. They still have it, the School of Business and Industry, which puts you in these prestigious internships. I hated it. No offense to all the business majors, or Wharton folks listening, because many of you are colleagues and dear to me. I just, my mind was constantly on literature, and so I went, and I pursued my passion. Sometimes I think back and wonder, maybe I should have pursued the passion as a hobby, but it's worked out for me.

Brandon: That's how, these journeys to go, right. You do some trial and error and then eventually you land on what you really care about.

Ebony Thomas: Absolutely.

Brandon: How'd you end up at Penn?

Ebony Thomas: Wow. I never thought I would end up at Penn, or be here so long. I ended up here at Penn because unfortunately the... Their famed children's literature professor, Lawrence R. Syke, passed away suddenly, and they were looking for someone with a very specific set of skills. They wanted someone who was an expert in children's and/or young adult literature, but they also want it someone with substantive teaching experience in K -12 and so I...

Brandon: So they wanted you.

Ebony Thomas: I was already an assistant professor at the time at my hometown, big university, which is Wayne State University. Michigan is about an hour away. That's where I did my doctoral work, and I thought I would just live in Detroit forever, and then the golden ticket landed on my lap and I had a decision to make. Do I go and pursue the dream, or you... I never even applied to an Ivy League school because I... Being so working class, more class than race or gender went into my decision. I just thought, Ivies are not a for people like me, and yeah, when one of my colleagues told me about the job, encouraged me to apply, and my former dean and current colleagues, they wanted me, and wow, I'm still here, seven years and counting.

Brandon: Has it at all been what you thought it would be?

Ebony Thomas: It's been better. I was very skeptical at first. I think I was the proverbial poor or working class girl has assumptions about what she thinks upper middle class or wealthy life is like. I don't know. I expected Penn to be a little bit like gossip girl because... Not because I was so much into TV as for... I'm into young adult literature, and television, and film for teens, so that was my impression of this life would be. I found one of the most diverse student bodies I've ever encountered. I experienced more acceptance for who I am ,and what I bring to the table, from not only most of my students, but my colleagues. Just accepting. They totally understand my obsession with children's literature, and fan culture, and fantasy and science fiction, because all of them also have these research

obsessions, or scholarly obsessions that dominate their lives and their... You're constantly thinking about your topic. You're constantly thinking about ways to innovate, and new terrain to explore. It's really fun being here with some of the most intelligent, generous people that I've ever encountered in my life. It's been a really wonderful ride.

Brandon: That's so delightful, so thinking big picture, why is children's and young adult literature so crucial to shaping who someone is?

Ebony Thomas: Those are the very first stories that we read, and I think that those stories prime us for everything that comes after. I think the current two big cultural phenomena really prove how influential childhood, and teen reading, and viewing are for all of us. Avengers Endgame is one of the huge obsessions right now, and people encounter comics in all kinds of forms from the actual 32 page books to the cartoons. That introduces us to a Marvel/DC image, dark horse early on, and then of course, Game of Thrones. We've all seen Disney movies, all of us, even if you were actively trying to avoid them, and the idea of a sweeping narrative that subverts fantasy and fairytale tropes seems to deeply appeal to all of us. Of course, there was the Lord of the Rings trilogy, Peter Jackson, Harry Potter. There's something in us that is primed to look for and to invest in certain kinds of stories from early childhood.

Ebony Thomas: I think that a template, that unexamined template is children's and young adult literature, as well as film and television intended for young people.

Brandon: Part of your work is to kind of reconsider what that template is. Right? How would you summarize your work?

Ebony Thomas: I look at race and difference in children's literature, young adult fiction, fantasy and science fiction primarily. Just because those are things I never gave up. Even now that I'm in my forties, that feels weird to say that, because you blink and 20 years passes by, I wondered why the children's literature, and the fantasy, and science fiction I preferred to read often didn't feature people who looked like me or who had experiences like mine. I can say that I was not represented in those genres, because I was born in the late seventies, and that was after the civil rights movement. That was sort of like eating my vegetables, because often when a black child or teen is represented in those stories in a fantasy or science fiction tale, before the Afro futuristic renaissance we're experiencing in the 2010s, normally we're a helper character or a magical negro character, and so you were not the protagonist, so you have those kinds of stories.

Ebony Thomas: Then in children's and young adult literature, generally if a black kid showed up, it was trying to teach us a lesson, so either the messages... The tacit messages we got from that, where you must learn your history. We were either reading stories about slavery, or marching for civil rights, or somebody was being terrible during Jim Crow, and trying to burn your family off the land. Then if it was a contemporary story, it was a ghetto narrative. While I appreciate all that

story telling now as an adult, and someone who is quite privileged in many ways. When I was growing up in Detroit at the height of the war on drugs, I didn't want to read about surviving in the ghetto, and dodging bullets, and being tempted by gangs because I actually knew people who were killed. I had relatives, my aunts, and uncles, and cousins, whose lives were devastated by crack cocaine, and so why would I want to escape into that?

Brandon: Right. I was going to say that's not escapism. Yeah.

Ebony Thomas: Not at all. Maybe it's for other people, so for instance, I still haven't seen *The Wire*, and I know I risk my pop culture critic credibility and say I've never seen *The Wire*, but I just remember how enamored all my doctoral school or grad school friends were at Michigan about, around it. I was just like, I don't need to see that. I've lived it. Of course, I wouldn't be so glib today. It's one of those brilliant television shows ever made, and I keep saying I'm going to take some time to one summer and marathon it, maybe so I can go back and revisit my childhood in Detroit, when the young boys incorporated ran everything, and our murder rate spiked. We were the murder capital of the country, and there was devil's night. That's not escapism. I don't want to necessarily relive those years.

Ebony Thomas: The totality of those years, or hearing gunshots every night. I want to relive those years selectively, so when I write and think about those years, either on social media, or in current and upcoming work, I like to think about my family. I like to think about sort of the microcosm, and not all the hell that we were actually living through, and I do wonder about people who choose to invest or enjoy that kind of narrative. Almost always I find there are people who did not grow up like we did, so it feels a little voyeuristic, but that's just me. That's just my perspective as a reader and viewer.

Brandon: Have these narratives change for today? What is the average narrative today?

Ebony Thomas: I think they have. They're slowly changing, and I really think it's because of the digital media turn, and the social media age. We're finally getting some of the voices that have previously been subsumed into mainstream discourses and consciousness. What the longterm effect of that will be, I'm not sure, because I... Okay, I was going to actually ruin what just happened in the last episode of *Game of Thrones*, but I am not going to do that for the sake of your listeners, and so this won't have to be.

Brandon: I can imagine what you would have brought up.

Ebony Thomas: Right. Yeah, but there was a huge moment, and it made us feel as if, wow, we're being ignored, but maybe we're not being ignored. There was a writer for the CW show, *The 100*, who was on a panel that Henry Jenkins convened at USC Annenberg out in LA. I was on a panel with him once, and I think I'm going to mess up his name if I try to pronounce it, but he's great. We were talking about how difficult it is to diversify Hollywood, and he gave us a metaphor that I think

really works. He said Hollywood is sort of like an aircraft carrier, so we... Some of us are listening, some are not, but some of us are listening, but it will take decades to steer the aircraft carrier in a different direction.

Ebony Thomas: I take heart in that, but then it's still very hard to feel as if you've been talking about certain things on social media for five, 10, 15 years, and then some terribly racist tropes shows up ain one of the most popular shows on television. That's what drives my work. I really want to see that change because I think it affects the generations coming after us.

Brandon: Yeah, I was thinking about how, Game of Thrones as an example, these fantasies usually tend to take place in places like Ireland, and they all have these like English or Irish accents, and how nice and refreshing it would be if somebody would be more ambitious, and maybe like set it somewhere else. Honestly anywhere else in the world. It's just...

Ebony Thomas: We keep having medieval, magical Englands, and we... Have you seen the map that was going viral on social media a few years ago? It was a world map of countries that England has invaded, and I guess usually the legend has Britain, or Great Britain, or the UK colored pink. Almost the entire world map was shaded, because England has pretty much invaded everyone, and you see that kind of cultural imperialism, to quote Edward Said, the late, great postcolonial theorist. You see that kind of cultural imperialism in the stories that we give to very young people. I do think adult literature and entertainment is changing or grown up, I should say, not adult, but grown up literature and entertainment are changing, but I think we have a lot of nostalgia for those first stories, which is why Disney is a multibillion, trillion dollar empire, and Disney really shapes the kinds of narratives that we receive.

Ebony Thomas: Even non Disney narratives. I think big multimedia companies affect what we read, and view, and perceive to be a true story. The part of the rise of the Marvel cinematic universe really is that it got... Marvel got eaten by Disney, so, and I'm saying that smile with a smile because I was obsessed with Disney long after I should have been. I went to undergrad with Disney themed sheets. I had all the Disney soundtracks. They did a huge collection.

Brandon: You were in Florida.

Ebony Thomas: My mother's family is all from Florida, central Florida, so, and have been there for about a century and a half, so yeah, you've just point... I've never thought about that. Yeah, and I I want to a Florida school. Yeah.

Brandon: What are some shopping tips that you would give to a parent who is trying to find a nice, diverse set of books for their child?

Ebony Thomas: I have several resources that are excellent. One of my favorite is we need diverse books and they have platforms on Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, and

Facebook. They have a wonderful array of articles, book lists. They give an award, so they also mentor young authors from diverse backgrounds. For instance, one of their biggest success stories is Angie Thomas, who wrote *The Hate U Give*, which became a huge blockbuster best seller. It stayed atop the New York Times bestseller list for young adult fiction.

Brandon: And a movie.

Ebony Thomas: Yes, and it became a Fox Searchlight movie, so they are really doing good work that changes the industry. They've received pushback, but they're doing great work. Currently, there's the *We the People* summer reading list, which is excellent, and pulled together by some dear friends of mine. Rethinking schools and the Zen Education Project have a wonderful website called Social Justice Books, which teach but don't preach, so I like those books, and then of course I have my own list here at Penn. Penn actually rates, the best books, or what my graduate students and I think are the best children's and young adult books of each year. We've been keeping that list since 2015, and if you go to GSE's website and search for Penn GSE best books, you will find all four of our reading lists.

Brandon: Great, and speaking of books, you have a new book out, so *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*, so tell me a little bit about what it's about and what inspired it. What inspired it now?

Ebony Thomas: I'm so excited about the book coming out now. *The Dark Fantastic* really has been 20 years in the making, so 20 years ago, well, maybe 19, about 19 years ago, I read my first Harry Potter book, and I became obsessed with the wizarding world. I was teaching fifth grade English language arts and mathematics at the time. I just remember going through all three of the books that were published at that time during the winter break. It was really whole... Detroit is snowier than here, so I was snowed in. My dad had passed away a couple of years before, a little less than that, maybe a year and a half before, so I was still grieving. The man I was in love with was in the military, and so anyway, I was primed to want to escape, and I just fell in love with Joanne Rowling's wizarding world from the very first page.

Ebony Thomas: I just wanted to immerse myself in it, and I really wasn't very judgmental about being 22 years old, and supposed to be... I was supposed to be disavowing childhood, and ended up just falling straight into it. It was the year 2000, and very luckily for me, a lot of other people felt the same way, so I joined a listserv titled *Harry Potter for Grownups* on Yahoo at the time. From there, instead of being discouraged from my obsession... Why are you still... Why are you reading these children's books? I was able to feed it with other adults from around the world, so there were a few teenagers who were on the listserv because, I guess if I were a teen, I would just... I would join that, too. *Harry Potter for grownups*, whatever. I'll join, but I made friends who are lifelong friends, who I've known

since that time all over the world, including Penn graduate, Heidi Tandy, whose son is here, and is a fourth generation Penn student.

Ebony Thomas: She's become one of my best friends in the world, and so that was my first introduction to fandom. I had always been drawn to speculative fiction and narratives, but I just didn't have anyone to talk to about my obsessions, or how much I love these stories, and how much I would rather live in the wizarding world, or be a citizen of the United Federation of planets instead of being a young black woman in Detroit. Yeah, so I wanted adventure. I wanted magic. I wanted a better past and the glorious future, and that's why I think I was drawn to those stories, so yeah. The Dark Fantastic came out of my experiences in fandom, my seven years teaching K112 where I noticed some of the reader responses that my students had to science fiction and fantasy.

Ebony Thomas: Initially, a lot of them did not like Harry Potter, and they said that they didn't like...

Brandon: What?

Ebony Thomas: Yeah, I don't know that they would admit it now. Maybe they were saying that publicly, but 20 years ago, it wasn't exactly woke to like science fiction and fantasy, and so some of them would write about it in their journals, but there were sort of wrestling with fake things versus reality. Maybe it was just Detroit. Maybe it was just the schools I was teaching in, but I certainly had that experience. Encountering racism in fandom. Certainly I did my dirt, because I was a big name fan after a while, because I was one of the very first people who was active in Harry Potter fandom, but yeah, there were some weirdly racialized incidents alongside other kinds of weird things that we encountered. I talk about those in the book.

Ebony Thomas: Finally, I became a teacher and professor who specializes in children's literature, and then I began noticing some patterns in children's literature, especially the fantastic variety. The title of the book comes from Todorov, a classic theoretical text, *The Fantastic: The Structure of a Literary Genre*. I was thinking, well, the dark fantastic. If you flip this upside down, and look at this from the perspective of black characters and black readers, this thing looks completely different. All of those elements were in place in my life and in my studies, and that's how the book came to be.

Brandon: In the book you're doing an analysis of four different texts.

Ebony Thomas: Yes, really three in depth. I noticed that a lot of books that were out that covered, race and racism, and fantasy, science fiction, and horror were sort of taxonomic or they took this sort of comprehensive approach, but what they would do is I would survey or list all the different kinds of diverse books that were out there. I didn't want to do that, and I've received some mixed feedback on that. Some people think I should have surveyed more texts, but what I

wanted to do as an education scholar, and less of a literary critic... My training is more social sciences. What you want to do is once you come up with your theoretical framework, and your methodologies that you're going to use for your research, you want to actually prove what you think is going on well. Instead of taking that more surface level approach and saying, "Hey, look at all these books, and television shows, and films where you know, racist things are happening to black characters," what I wanted to do was to find out what was going on underneath the surface.

Ebony Thomas: I've never been satisfied with this thing that we say about racism and storytelling. Hey, the magical negro or black girl always dies. These tropes are racist. Yeah, but why? Nobody is born with bigotry. No one's born.... You're not born that way, so how did you learn it, and what's going on in the stories to make readers respond in a particular ways? That was really what I wanted to discover, so I just picked three. I only have... I have three books, and then at the end I sort of use my Harry Potter fandom experience. I briefly, very briefly touch on that, and I talk about fandom, and how transformative fandom or what we call transformative works, where fans and audiences take a creator's narratives, characters, story, worlds, world building, and transforms it, so that they can include themselves, or rewrite endings, or, so that's been a lot of my academic work with Amy [inaudible 00:26:47], who is my research partner here at Penn, but the three stories that I cover in the book are Bonnie Bennett's story in The Vampire Diaries. She was the black best friend.

Ebony Thomas: I look at the BBC, Merlin and the black Guinevere character in that narrative, and of course, I look at Rue in The Hunger Games. I know that those texts have been out a while, so The Vampire Diaries series ended in 2017, but I needed closed cannons in order to trace what was going on with fan and viewer response, or fan, and reader, and audience responses, so that those were... That's why I chose to write the book as I did, so I wanted to go deep and identify a cycle. Yeah.

Brandon: The cover illustration is beautiful. Who did the illustration?

Ebony Thomas: Paul [Lewin 00:00:27:42], who is incredible. He's a Jamaican American artist out of Oakland, California, and his work is incredible. I cried when I saw the cover, and I'm just so grateful to New York University Press, who... Even the production of the book, I don't have it with me, but the cover even is kind of iridescent. I've never seen an academic book that looks like that, so I was really pleased.

Brandon: What is a weird hobby that you have?

Ebony Thomas: I like to cross stitch.

Brandon: You like to cross stitch?



Ebony Thomas: Yes. I think that in another life I was a frustrated Midwestern or southern housewife. I really like being at home. I have an insanely big apartment by Philadelphia standards, and I'm the only person in it. I really like crafts, and I like baking, and stitching. One of my colleagues is a quilter, and I think I'm going to take quilting lessons from her. That stuff makes me feel cozy.

Brandon: Oh. Do you collect anything?

Ebony Thomas: Yes. Mugs.

Brandon: Mugs.

Ebony Thomas: That's so boring, but-

Brandon: Me, too.

Ebony Thomas: I love bugs, and here's a funny story. Recently, I have so many mugs and plates and my home decorating style is... It's kind of cheesy and kitschy, but I had so many vintage plates on a shelf that the shelf collapsed a few weeks ago, so I lost so many of my mismatched everyday place. I looked it up, I googled it, and in a lot of cultures, breaking plates is good luck, so I bet this is going to be...

Brandon: There you go.

Ebony Thomas: ... Yeah. A really good year for me.

Brandon: Where in the world would you live if not here?

Ebony Thomas: Probably either London or Detroit. Detroit, of course. I would live there again in a heartbeat. It's so ironic, because half a lifetime ago, I was trying to leave Detroit. It was not fun growing up during the war on drugs, but now there's been quite a renaissance, and then like everybody else, I'm not everybody else, but every other literary geek wants to live somewhere in the UK because it's London. It's easy access to so many places that we first saw in our imagination and our dreams. California if it weren't so expensive, so, yeah, I guess I'm boring. Those are the places, the real world places I would want to live.

Brandon: What is your favorite place to be on campus?

Ebony Thomas: Oh, probably kids lack right here in the library, so I've not been in the stacks much because faculty can get books delivered, or we have students who are working on projects, which is bad, but I think [inaudible 00:30:33] has a beautiful view of campus. I like glass. I just like glass and architecture. It's one of my favorite things.

Brandon: Are you a neat and tidy person, or are you kind of organized chaos person?

Ebony Thomas: Probably somewhere between. Certainly as a child, teenager, and young woman, I was organized chaos, but then when I got this job, it really made me organize, because I have so much to do that the organized chaos no longer worked for me. Yeah.

Brandon: Who was a teacher who had a profound impact on you?

Ebony Thomas: All of my English language arts teachers and English professors in Detroit, so K-12 all the way... K12, undergrad at FAMU, sort of, and then certainly my English major at Wayne State. I just had an unbroken line of excellent English language arts teachers and English professors for about the first 30 years of my life. They were just incredible people who encouraged me, so I can't even say one name. One I would say probably is Mrs. Willie Belle Gibson, our eighth grade English teacher at Bates Academy in Detroit. We all name her. She was... We were reading Toni Morrison in eighth grade, so, yeah.

Brandon: You have three people over, living dead, or fictional, we'll say. Who are they?

Ebony Thomas: I think the three people that I would want to talk to are... I don't know why I'm hearing Mandela in my mind. Nelson Mandela. He came to Detroit when I was I think 12 or 13. Maybe I was 13 in 1990, right after he'd been freed from Robin Island, and I think I want to meet him, so that's the world leader I would want to meet. Entertainers. I really would want to meet Michael Jackson, even with all the scandals and trying, and to ask him about the music and not the scandals. I know that probably makes me terrible, but I grew up in the 80s, and then finally my dad. I want to see him again. I tweeted a little bit about him. He died 21 years ago yesterday, and so he missed half of our lives. He was very influential, and I'd love to talk to him again. That would be a really weird room, Mandela, MJ, and my dad. Ooh, okay.

Brandon: What is an overrated virtue?

Ebony Thomas: Being silent or quiet, particularly when something is unjust.

Brandon: What is a non-political article that you've read recently that really struck you?

Ebony Thomas: Oh, so I read one about the rise and fall of a mommy blogger, and so mommy blogging was in vogue about 10 years ago, and it has since been subsumed under the sort of the rise of the Instagram influencers, so younger, often child free women. Yeah, I read that I think just yesterday or a day before. It was really interesting. I don't have children myself, but just sort of mommy blogger culture. Thought that was interesting. Yeah.

Brandon: What TV show are you watching right now?

Ebony Thomas: Of course, Game of Thrones, I don't really have much time for anything else. I also just finished up the second season of Star Trek Discovery. I love Star Trek,

as any of my students here at Penn could tell you. I have a little bit of memorabilia in my office, more at home. I think I like Star Trek Discovery at this point more than game of Thrones. I think they made a serious mistake by limiting Martin's sprawling narrative to seven or eight seasons. They're rushing towards the end, and so. Yeah. Right now that's my current obsession.

Brandon: Of course, what are you reading?

Ebony Thomas: Oh, my gosh. I have just gotten Marlon James's new book, Black Leopard, Red Wolf, Red Leopard, Black Wolf. I think it's the first, and it is supposed to be an African Game of Thrones, so I'm super excited about that. That's going to be part of my summer reading pile.

Brandon: You mentioned that you bake. What do you like to bake?

Ebony Thomas: Pies. Like I said, frustrated Midwestern homemaker in a past life.

Brandon: What gives you hope?

Ebony Thomas: The young people. Today's young people are just so brilliant, and they're uncompromising, where we were more cynical and detached, and we thought the world was too big for us to change it in a different direction. These young people are pure, straight up fire, and I just love that. They inspire me every day, from young undergrads and graduate students right here to the K-12 students that I encounter through the students I teach more, and the research that I do, and especially my nieces and nephews. I just want to call their names because they're between 16 and one year old right now, but Jaylin and Dasia, Alexis, Kellan, Danielle Junior, and [Alon 00:36:18] are the reason why I do what I do. This has got to be a better world for them, and so I get up every day, and I work with them in mind.

Brandon: This podcast is a production of the Office of University Communications at the University of Pennsylvania. We hope you'll join us again soon for another session of Office Hours.