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A Review of *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019)

Reviewed by Kaja Franck

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# MAKING NEW TRACKS IN AFRICAN FANTASY

Review by Kaja Franck

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**James, Marlon. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*. Penguin, 2019. Novel.**

Marlon James' *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014), a fictional account of the attempted assassination of Bob Marley in 1976 and its ongoing effect on Jamaican culture, won the 2015 Man Booker Prize. Notably, he was the first Jamaican to win this prize. Like *Seven Killings*, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019) poses questions regarding identity, truth, and the power of narrative. However, rather than being rooted in the real world, James crafts a mythical Africa spun from multiple legends and folktales featuring a panoply of folkloric entities.

The novel follows a complex storyline that, despite centring on one central character, moves fluidly and quickly to various geographic locations; equally, the narration jumps through time in a manner that is sometimes difficult to follow. Based on the traditional quest narrative, James' protagonist is called Tracker, a young man with an incredible sense of smell with which he finds lost things and people. Once he has been given a scent to follow, he is unable to prevent himself from searching for the disappeared. He, along with a group of different beings and mercenaries, is tasked with finding a lost boy. The identity of this boy is a mystery and it is never clear whether he was dead from the beginning, or perhaps never existed. Yet this is to diminish the variety of the story – Tracker interrupts the central tale with accounts of his lineage, his history and other missions that he has undertaken. The story is framed as an oral narrative: at the beginning of the novel, Tracker explains that he is being held captive and must confess his story to a man he refers to as the Inquisitor. James' syntax evokes the quality of speech, making it difficult to settle into the story at first. Yet this orality soon becomes key to the effectiveness of the engaging characters and the genuinely terrifying creatures which emerge from the pages. There is an overwhelming impression that the reader is in the cell with Tracker, listening to the cadence of his speech. For such a dense and large text, the reader is pulled through this world at an impressive pace.

James excels at transporting the reader into a world that overcomes the senses. The novel opens with a map of the fantasy world – a nod to more traditional Western Fantasy – but from which the geography of the novel deviates fully. Throughout the novel each location is evoked with a prodigious intensity. This is an embodied novel full of texture, colour, and particularly smells. Tracker 'sees' the world through his nose, detecting people before they arrive and immediately identifying what they conceal. Through Tracker's nose, the reader is offered a multi-sensory experience, as visual descriptions are overlaid with a potent specificity of scents:

The room, dime and plain, walls the brown-green colour of fresh chicken dung, with sacks packed on top of each other all the way to the ceiling. Tall statues leaning against each other, sharing secrets about me. The floor smelled of grain, dust, perfume bottles lost in the dark, and rat shit. (245)

In his reliance on his sense of smell, Tracker is described as wolf-like, blurring the distinction between human and animal. This is heightened by the presence of the Leopard, a shape-shifter who becomes Tracker's close friend and love interest. The Leopard defines himself by his animal qualities, eschewing human norms such as regular cleansing and clothing, and preferring to eat raw flesh. However, James writes against an anthropocentric viewpoint of the world by making Leopard one of the most sympathetic characters in the novel. Though *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* contains many monsters – vampires, shadow-creatures who crawl from the ceiling, cannibals, and blood suckers – animality is never depicted as equitable with monstrosity. Instead, humans are repeatedly represented as violent and horrifying, if only because they kill and torture for power and money rather than to appease their hunger. The array of different beings depicted in the novel will have the reader reaching for a pencil, to underline each entity, in order to research their folklore. James effectively renders a fantastical version of Africa that cleaves from the generic conventions of Eurocentric Fantasy. Moreover, the novel reacts not only to Fantasy but also European and North American depictions of the continent in nineteenth and early twentieth century adventure narratives. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is at its most powerful when such xenophobic and racist depictions are exploded.

There are, however, problems with the novel. Much like Tracker's behaviour, James' prose reads as wilfully oblique and difficult to follow. This is particularly true during dialogue which repeatedly unravels into one-liners creating rather soulless interactions, a conceit which obstructs the development of emotional connections between the characters. Early in the novel, a character tells Tracker he "speak[s] in riddles," an accusation that is repeatedly levelled at him (155). His speech is often overly portentous; this may be an attempt to parody the speech of a wise, old sage – one of the many recurring tropes of High Fantasy. However, if this is meant to highlight the limitations of drawing on traditional Fantasy such as that of Tolkien, it is undone by the fact that such a claim rings true of *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* itself. Though the oral quality of the narrative and the novel's framing technique is effective, the manner in which it is undertaken is frequently confusing and overly mystical. In some ways the prose style is reminiscent of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009); in the sequel *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012), Mantel used a less overt version in order to bring clarity to a difficult story to tell. Given that *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is the first novel in James' *Dark Star* trilogy, minimising the overly arch dialogue and opacity of the prose would allow the brilliance of the storytelling to become more central to its sequels.

More problematically, the continuous violence in James' novel, especially the rape, becomes banal and repetitive. The text fails to engage with the long-term effects of sexual violence on survivors, and in places reads as dismissive of the reality of such violence. The flippant depiction of rape and sex work lacks consideration, and is used for effect rather than serving as a meaningful

aspect of character development. While the central character could be read as homosexual (this term is not explicitly used), the depiction of queer, male identity is trapped in a brutal, performative hyper-masculinity which denounces its own queerness. Homophobic slurs are casually expressed by male characters, including Tracker and Leopard. The violence of this language is not challenged; rather, those subject to such accusations defend themselves by letting it be known that they are, to use the vernacular, 'top' or 'bottom' – a concept which is repeatedly related to gender. In one brothel scene, Tracker sleeps with Ekoie, a young male sex worker "from the land of the eastern light, which means an emissary raped a girl and left her with child to go back to his wife and concubines" (256). The feminised description of Ekoie along with his parentage becomes a throwaway example of Orientalism. The shortcomings in the novel's portrayals of violence – particularly sexual violence – and non-heteronormative identity are such that it reads like a failed attempt at using Fantasy as a revolutionary rather than a reactionary force. There needed to be significantly less phallic affirmation throughout. The novel's repeated problematic moments undo its success in decolonising Fantasy: rather it re-affirms the idea that historically, in Fantasy, men are violent by necessity and women are witches and sex workers.

The overall experience of reading *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is hypnotic and delirious, yet, tinged with frustration. Its opaque style, repetitive violence, and homophobia prevent the novel from achieving its potential – which is great. There is a thrilling and exciting novel lost behind a little too much posturing which cannot simply be blamed on the characterisation of the central character. Hopefully, the later novels in the series will be more at ease in their storytelling, rather than concentrating on the style, in order to allow the reader to enjoy both the imagined world and the characters more fully.

#### BIONOTE

**Kaja Franck** was awarded her PhD in 2017 in the UK. Her thesis looked at the literary werewolf as an ecoGothic monster, concentrating on the relationship between wilderness, wolves, and werewolves, and how language is used to demarcate animal alterity. She is part of the 'Open Graves, Open Minds' research project and has published on the depiction of wolves and werewolves in *Dracula* and Young Adult fiction. She is currently lecturing at the University of Hertfordshire.