

## Even the Weakest Can Change the World: Black Girlhood, Resilience and Systemic Evil in Stephen King's Doctor Sleep and Contemporary Society

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### ABSTRACT

Stephen King's *Doctor Sleep* (2013) and the 2019 movie depict a battle against unfair systems through Abra Stone, a young Black girl with special powers. Her psychic gift, the ability to shine, is both a weakness and a strength. This paper examines how King's horror story can be interpreted as a metaphor for racial injustice, family trauma and abuse of power. Using ideas from Black feminist thought and trauma studies, it demonstrates that Abra's gift is the hidden talent of many young people who are often ignored or used by society. This study allows readers to understand how horror stories can be used to teach kindness, unity and courage. It also demonstrates that even the weakest people can change the world if they have compassion and the will to fight injustice.

**Keywords:** Black girlhood, resilience, Stephen King, horror studies, systemic injustice, trauma, empowerment, intersectionality, cultural allegory.

### INTRODUCTION

Known for his ability to capture the fears of the American psyche, Stephen King has long been considered a master storyteller in his transformation of cultural fears into supernatural tales that span the generations. From the haunted corridors of the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* (1977) to the predatory evil of the True Knot in the latest installment of his horror film franchise, *Doctor Sleep* (2013), King's work has moved away from examining individual psychological terror to examining the collective social hauntings that plague contemporary America. This is a process of evolution that reflects wider cultural changes in how we view power, vulnerability and resistance at a time when we are becoming more sensitive to systemic inequality.

*Doctor Sleep* is an interesting study of how horror fiction re-engineers the traditional balance of power. The novel and the 2019 film adaptation are about Abra Stone, a young black girl whose inhuman psychic abilities, called "the shine," make her both a target and a savior. King's narrative puts a different kind of power in the hands of the most malleable, easily disrespected and subjugated character in traditional narratives: a child, a girl and especially a black girl, who manipulates a system designed to exploit her for its own ends (McPherson, 2025; Nunn, 2018).

Her characterization disrupts the cultural phenomenon of adultification bias that characterizes experience for Black girls who are systematically stripped of their innocence and protection as their white counterparts (Gadson

& Lewis, 2021). Research shows that Black girls as young as five years of age are seen as less nurtured, protected and supported than their White peers but at the same time, more independent, with adult knowledge and less need for comfort in comparison to their White counterparts (Gomez & Gobin, 2020). This twin erasure - of childhood and of vulnerability It creates a dynamic by which Black girls' extraordinary capacities are simultaneously extracted and dismissed, a dynamic that King sets up literally with the predatory nature of the True Knot.

This article contends that *Doctor Sleep* shows how there is a basic truth to social change: anyone, even those whom society deems worthless (particularly young Black girls), can turn collective despair into hope when they are morally and emotionally inspired to do so. Through an intersectional analysis of Black feminist epistemology, trauma theory and cultural studies of horror, this research demonstrates that King's supernatural story is an allegory for the actual systems of racial oppression, intergenerational trauma and potential for resistance that are housed in powerless cultures. Shine is metaphorized as what Collins (2000) calls "subjugated knowledge"—the moral clarity and transformative vision produced by marginal social positions.

By observing Abra's development from a vulnerable child to an agent of systemic resistance, this study helps us better understand how the potential of the most marginalized youth of contemporary society may be identified and nurtured rather than exploited. The analysis follows five interconnected dimensions: one, laying the philosophical grounding in Black feminist thought and trauma studies; two, the mirroring of King's narrative structures into systems of institutional oppression; three, the analysis of Abra's shine in an imprint of power-through-vulnerability; four, the analysis of horror metaphors in relation to patterns of documented forms of exploitation of Black children and communities; and lastly, the implications of education and healthcare for cultural representation. Yet, throughout the book, the central premise remains: that social change only comes to power from above when the leader encompasses skill in compassion, moral vision and unless the leader also possesses the courage to challenge entrenched systems of oppression.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Black Girlhood and Adulthood Bias

Contemporary scholarship on black girlhood has exposed systematic patterns of adulthood, in which black girls are systematically denied the protection and innocence of childhood. Gadson and Lewis (2021) show the intersection between racial microaggressions and gendered expectations that place Black adolescent girls in a position of hypervisibility and invisibility simultaneously - scrutinized for behavior infractions which are perceived as behavioral, while their intellectual contributions and emotional needs go unrecognized. This devaluation is manifested in many ways in systems, including the disproportionate discipline of Black girls in education systems for subjective infractions (McPherson, 2025) and the minimization of their pain experiences by health care systems (Tucker, 2024).

Adulthood is not limited to individual experiences; it impacts life trajectories and limits opportunities. In the case of Black girls, they report more traumatic experiences, such as exposure to violence in the community and family instability but are less likely to receive institutional support to process these traumas compared to White students (Alhourani et al., 2025). This structural neglect occurs at the time when such vulnerabilities may be best addressed with protective measures, such as the recognition of vulnerability and the provision of proper developmental interventions. Nunn (2018) suggests that stories of "super-girl strength" ultimately conceal the fact that expecting Black girls to be super strong is another form of burden rather than empowerment.

### Horror, Race and Representation

In recent years, horror has been recognized as a useful vehicle for discussing racial trauma and systemic oppression. In his study of Black Final Girls in modern horror, Dent (2024) shows how current films' representations of survival are not framed by individual resistance but by the resistance of a community to overcome supernatural and social oppression. This turn represents a broader cultural discourse on the insufficiency of individualistic models in explaining the Black experience of violence and vulnerability. Horror's ability to externalize internal and collective traumas using supernatural metaphors allows for some processing of experiences that cannot be captured by realist narratives (Ogunyemi, 2021).

However, representation is only one and it cannot be sufficient without attending to the way in which narratives reinforce or undermine existing structures of power. Balderson (2024) notes that even progressive horror texts can reproduce harmful tropes when they make Black characters central victims that need white saviours or else the Black characters are extraordinary and manage to survive because they distance themselves from the Black community and culture. Challenging the status quo in genuinely radical ways, the best horror stories offer a new understanding of power relations, where those who are considered weak and vulnerable are shown to have the capacity for resistance that hegemonic discourses actively bury. *Doctor Sleep* takes part in this reimagining by making

Abra's intellectual and moral authority the focus of the story rather than making her the focus through her relationship with white characters.

### **Black Feminist Epistemology and Trauma Theory**

Black feminist scholarship offers important paradigms for theorizing how oppressed social positions produce unique forms of knowing and struggling. Collins' (2000) notion of the "outsider within" describes the formation of a critical consciousness among individuals who are simultaneously inside and outside dominant institutions regarding the workings of the system. This positionality allows individuals to see tensions between espoused values and practiced realities and helps provide moral clarity to individuals who are only partially embedded in the systems. Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality supports the argument that race, gender, age and other identity categories interact in ways that create distinct experiences that cannot be understood by looking at just one axis of oppression.

Trauma theory has shifted in a similar way to embrace the structural theory of oppression, not just in terms of discrete violent events but as ongoing arrangements of structures that limit possibilities for life and affect well-being. Gomez and Gobin (2020) synthesize research about how racial and sexual trauma intersect for Black women and girls, illustrating how the cultural betrayal of violations perpetrated by one's own community or by institutions that are supposed to be protecting one have compounding effects on trauma. However, trauma frameworks have the potential to pathologize responses to oppression by placing the problem in people as opposed to systems. As Mortlock (2025) argues, Black feminist engagement with trauma provides a critical investment in recognizing the facticity (or realness) of harms experienced, as well as the resources to resist them, made available to historical Black communities through practices of collective care and meaning-making.

### **Research Gaps**

While King's work has been analyzed through different critical lenses, *Doctor Sleep* has not often been analyzed through the intersection of Black girlhood studies, intersectional feminism and cultural sociology. Existing studies have emphasized the novel as a sequel to *The Shining* or examined the way recovery narratives are taught in treatment, ignoring how Abra's characterization is a part of contemporary conversations about race, childhood and systemic violence. This discrepancy is especially notable given how directly the text deals with the exploitation of children and the use of the 2019 film adaptation for a Black actress in the role, provoking the reader to consider the frameworks of racial vulnerability and resistance in reading Abra's experiences.

In addition, interdisciplinary uses of horror literature for social policies are not yet well developed. While cultural studies scholars recognize horror's ability to shed light on social anxieties, less analysis has been given to how these stories inform practical interventions in education, healthcare and with children. This research fills these gaps by illustrating both the theoretical and applied aspects of King's work in a way that not only shows how *Doctor Sleep* can be used to further understand Black girlhood experiences but also points to ways in which institutional change is possible.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This analysis brings together three different but complementary theoretical frameworks: intersectionality, Black feminist epistemology and cultural trauma theory. Intersectionality, developed by Crenshaw (1991), is a set of tools for analyzing how race, gender, age and other social categories create unique experiences that cannot be understood through an analysis of any one dimension of identity in isolation. Abra's vulnerability is not the result of being young, female and Black but of being these three persons all at the same time in systems built on the compounding hierarchies of age, race and gender.

Black feminist epistemology and in particular the work of Patricia Hill Collins (2000) who developed the concept of standpoint theory, explains how a marginalized social position produces unique modes of knowledge and moral seeing. The 'shine' serves as a literal manifestation, for Collins, of what she terms "subjugated knowledge"; that is, understandings of social processes that have emerged from the experience of oppressed persons but that are unrecognized or devalued by the institutions of the dominant world. Abra's psychic abilities allow her to see things that adults around her cannot or will not see, as is often the case with Black feminist scholars who have seen that Black women and girls are keen and astute readers of systems that pretend not to see their presence or hear their voices (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015).

Trauma theory and more specifically, those theories that focus on the collective and structural aspects of traumatic experiences put the suffering of an individual in perspective with the resistance of a community. Rather than finding trauma as separate events or individual psyches, modern trauma scholars increasingly consider the extent to which ongoing structural arrangements (poverty, discrimination, environmental racism and educational inequity) make up chronic traumatic conditions that affect the possibilities of life across generations (Alhourani et

al., 2025). However, trauma models also run the risk of pathologizing agency by focusing on damage rather than agency or how someone responds to oppression. This analysis is thus attentive to the issues of vulnerability and resistance and explores how practices of care and meaning-making are developed by communities to interrupt cycles of harm.

Horror studies provides a fourth theoretical pillar with scholarship of particular interest to narratives of the supernatural that externalizes and processes social anxieties that realist fiction has difficulty capturing. Horror's power is partly that it makes visible the ordinarily invisible operations of power - through monsters and malevolent forces - the systemic violence that operates through bureaucratic procedures, statistical disparities and everyday exclusions. The True Knot's predatory consumption of children's "steam" (life force) becomes metaphor to the way institutions suck the value from vulnerable populations and deny their humanity and limit their futures.

Combining these ways of conceptualizing allows for an examination of *Doctor Sleep* as an aesthetic artifact, a commentary on current culture and a possible tool for imagining alternative social formations. The power of the narrative lies in its ability to work on multiple registers - entertaining as horror fiction but at the same time illuminating real patterns of exploitation and modelling forms of resistance with empathy, community solidarity and moral courage. Focusing on the point of view and agency of Abra, King's text is a part of what Harris (2025) calls Black girlhood speculative practices, imaginative practices that envision a world in which the brilliance, vulnerability and moral vision of Black girls are acknowledged and safeguarded instead of exploited. Figure 1 shows the intersectional analysis of *Doctor Sleep*: Theoretical framework combining feminist epistemology, trauma theory and horror genre conventions. As illustrated in Figure 1, the intersectional framework is a combination of Black feminist epistemology, trauma theory and horror studies used to examine systemic oppression in *Doctor Sleep* (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000).



Figure 1. Theoretical Framework.

**Note:** Theoretical framework integrating intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), Black feminist epistemology (Collins, 2000), cultural trauma theory and horror studies to analyze *Doctor Sleep*. The framework examines Abra Stone's character through the lens of systemic oppression metaphors and intergenerational trauma, emphasizing power through vulnerability and collective resistance.

## METHODOLOGY

This research uses qualitative textual analysis as the main method of research and the subject of investigation is both the 2013 novel by Stephen King, *Doctor Sleep* and his 2019 film adaptation. Textual analysis facilitates close attention to narrative structures, character development, symbolic systems and thematic patterns that can be used to understand how fiction relates to social realities. The texts are not approached as clear windows onto authorial intention but as cultural artifacts that reflect and contribute to the shaping of collective categories regarding power, vulnerability and resistance.

The interpretive approach is built upon the traditions of hermeneutics which emphasizes the construction of meaning in the dialogue between texts and contexts. A close reading of certain scenes and relationships among characters helps to light up the symbolic aspects of the story, including the shine as a metaphor for subjugated knowledge, the True Knot as a model of institutional predation and Abra's relationships with Danny and her parents as a model of intergenerational transfer of both trauma and resources for resistance. These textual analyses are in turn placed in larger contexts that are established by a review of the empirical research on Black girlhood experiences, theoretical frameworks from Black feminist scholarship and cultural studies of horror as a genre.

Cross-disciplinary synthesis is the second major methodological dimension, which brings together insights from the literature, psychology, gender studies and sociology to develop multifaceted interpretations. This approach acknowledges that social phenomena such as systemic racism and the exploitation of children are dynamic and complex and cannot be properly understood from any one disciplinary perspective. Literary analysis provides the symbolic and narrative aspects; psychological research evidence is provided for the effects of adultification and trauma; sociological frameworks are used to examine the structural arrangements producing disparate outcomes; and feminist theory is focused on the intersections of race, gender and age. The combination of these perspectives leads to a deeper interpretation than can be gained from any one approach.

The analysis also uses comparative approaches to examine the parallels between fictional representations and social realities. Because True Knot uses children as the site of extraction of their vital force, an analysis of the novel relates to the research of how institutions are using Black children's creativity, labor and resilience in exchange for insufficient support and protection. When Abra shows the moral clarity that adults lack, the analysis relates this story element to the understanding of Black feminist epistemology regarding the knowledge produced from marginalized social positions. The comparisons made here are not strictly analogical but rather discuss how patterns discovered through empirical research are illuminated in fiction writing.

Finally, the approach to interpretation concerned with "reading for possibility" focuses attention not merely on the ways in which texts can be said to represent existing conditions but also on how texts envision possibilities. Abra's victory over the True Knot thus not only same as traditional heroic tropes but follows what might be an alternative account of heroism modeled on the key concepts of empathy, intergenerational solidarity and acknowledgement of vulnerability as strength-and not just weakness. By thinking about what the text represents, as well as what it imagines, text analysis illuminates the possibilities for social transformation outside the frame of fiction.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### Haunted Institutions and Structural Evil

The Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* and the True Knot in *Doctor Sleep* are complementary allegories for institutions that are parasitic on human vitality while at the same time appearing to be benign or even beneficial. The Overlook with its Indigenous burial grounds and 100-plus years of violence is a symbol of how American prosperity is built on the foundation of dispossession and exploitation that haunts the present. Its "malevolent sentience, that is, its active desire to possess and destroy, is analogous to the ways in which institutions acquire autonomous logics, through which certain interests and amounts of harm are perpetuated, independent of the intentions of any particular person" (Alinia, 2015).

True Knot takes this institutional critique even further by portraying exploitation as literally parasitic on children. These demi-immortal creatures survive by torturing and consuming children who have the shine, extracting what they call "steam" - the psychic energy that is released by suffering and death. The metaphor works on multiple dimensions: how the profit-making ('surplus extraction') process from labor is appropriated, especially racialized and gendered labor; the use of natural resources that perpetuates privilege for some and undoes the possibility for others; and the production of such institutions that are able to feed off the creativity and resilience of marginalized communities without mobilizing institutional support in return, offering neither recognition nor support.

Crucially, the True Knot members look normal, even attractive; they blend right into American society, traveling in RVs and dressed in uninteresting clothing. This ordinariness emphasizes that systemic violence need not be monstrous to those perpetuating it. The True Knot members consider them natural predators, even necessary for their survival. They come up with elaborate excuses: these children have special gifts, their deaths are for a higher purpose, the cycle has always been. She overcomes Rose the Hat not by might but by wit, emotional insight and the courage to risk vulnerability: Black children are "resilient" and therefore don't need as much help; their work is an "opportunity"; their suffering is unfortunate but unavoidable given the limited resources. By presenting predation as a supernatural horror, King makes the operations of systems for which violence against vulnerable populations is natural visible (Dent, 2024).

The specific targeting of children that shine brings another dimension: exploitation seeks out, specifically, those gifted with extraordinary gifts, those that see what others cannot. This is reflective of documented trends in which Black children's capabilities, be they intellectual, creative or empathetic, are not seen as resources to be invested in and protected but as resources to be extracted or exploited. Educational systems label "gifted" Black students while subjecting them to greater surveillance and punishment because of infractions of behavior (McPherson, 2025). Cultural industries exploit Black creative innovations without giving Black artists ownership or fair compensation for their work. Black women are recruited by healthcare systems to act as mummies and are expected to provide endless care without ever having the right to their own needs (Tucker, 2024). In this reading, shine is any ability that makes individuals valuable to systems that nevertheless deny their full humanity.

### **Abra Stone's Shine and the Power of the Vulnerable**

Abra Stone's characterization disrupts traditional accounts of power in terms of either physical strength, institutional authority or adult knowledge. Her strength comes precisely from the qualities that we usually see in weakness: youth, empathy, emotional openness and acceptance of fear. The bright is not in domination but in connection - the ability to see other people's experiences, to feel their suffering, to recognize their humanity. This emotional-epistemic orientation makes Abra the center of the moral compass of the story, the character whose vision the readers are invited to trust.

However, the narrative avoids glamorizing vulnerability and indicates that suffering is a noble thing. Abra's strength lies not in her being a victim of trauma but in her ability to empathize despite her knowledge of evil. When she sees the True Knot torturing Bradley Trevor, she may become a hardened, cynical and selfish person. Instead, she turns that anguish and anger into a resolve to defend others and ensure that no other child has a fate similar to hers. This transformation from passive victim to active defender is not achieved by individual heroism but by connection-to Danny, who gives validation to her experience and a sense of direction; to her parents, whose love gives her the basis for risk taking; to the memory of Bradley and unnamed other victims, whose suffering demands a response.

Shine is also a metaphor for ways of knowing that are excluded by hegemonic epistemologies as subjective, emotional or dubious. Abra is aware of the existence of the True Knot and its dangers before she has any empirical evidence to convince the authorities. Her intuition, developed through pattern recognition (the missing children's reports, the True Knot's itinerary, the character of their predation), is accurate, even if it cannot be verified in the conventional way. This reflects Black feminist understandings of subjugated knowledge: oppressed communities generate rich understandings of the structures that oppress them but these understandings go unacknowledged because they come from experiential rather than abstract knowledge (Collins 2000). Abra's psychic abilities literalize this epistemological dynamic, which highlights how people who are placed as lacking in power by society often have important insights that are unavailable or inaccessible to those in power. Figure 2 shows Abra Stone as she grew from vulnerability to collective resistance, which focused on empathy as moral action and not heroic individualism (Gadson & Lewis, 2021; McPherson, 2025).



**Figure 2.** Abra Stone's Transformative Journey.

**Note:** Four-stage developmental trajectory mapping Abra Stone's development from vulnerability to collective resistance. Stages involve being first experiences in the hypervisibility and victimization (Stage 1), awakening and systemic recognition (Stage 2), to cascading as solidarity (Stage 3), to protective transformation and collective resistance modeling (Stage 4). Key principles include empathy as important action instead of individual heroism.

The film adaptation's choice of casting a Black actress for the role of Abra contributes to the multiplication of different levels of meaning, making it an invitation to interpret her experiences through the frameworks of racial vulnerability and resistance. Abra's hypervisibility to the True Knot - her shine is so bright they can see her at great distances - mirrors the hypervisibility and invisibility that Black children, especially Black girls, experience at the same time in social institutions. They are criticized for so-called behavioral transgressions and their intellectual contributions are ignored. They are required to exhibit remarkable resiliency without being given support which would reduce the need for such resiliency on their part. They are appreciated for the things they can contribute and yet their own needs are not met (Gadson & Lewis, 2021).

Abra's defeat of the True Knot is therefore not only a victory for the individual but for the potential for collective resistance of those that are so positioned by systems of power as to be considered powerless. She vanquishes Rose the Hat not with strength but through wit, emotional understanding and the courage to take a risk by opening up her heart. She allows herself to be helped by Danny instead of being heroically independent. She finds strength in love - for her parents, for the memory of Bradley and for a world where children can live safely without the threat of predation. These narrative choices represent types of power that are different from the dominant forms, emphasizing dominance, invulnerability and autonomy. They say it is a transformation that does not mean the reproduction of already existing power structures but a redefinition of what power is and how it functions. As shown in Figure 3, the "shine" functions as subjugated knowledge that represents Collins's (2000) principle of marginalized epistemologies as sources of moral clarity.

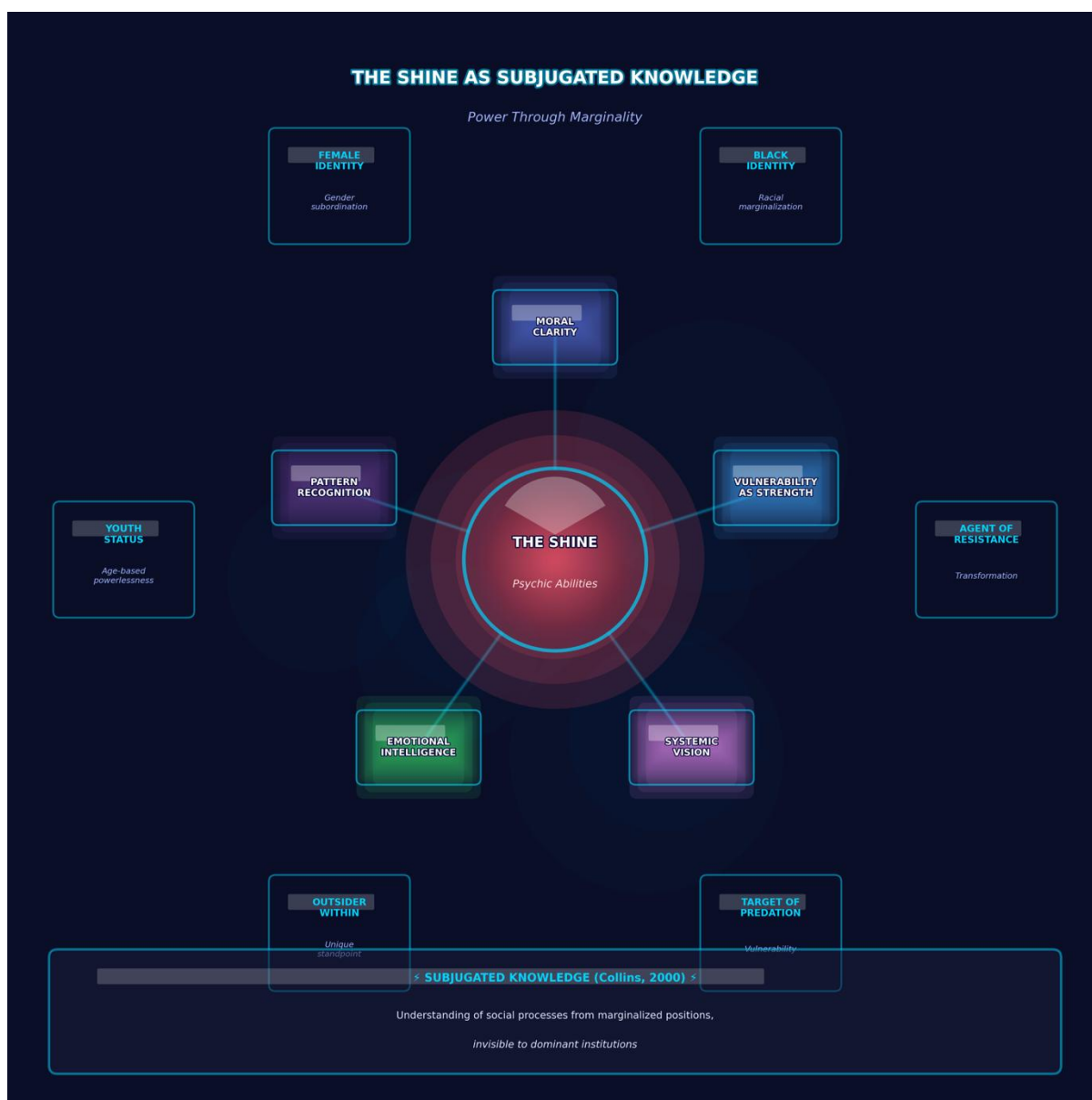


Figure 3. The Shine as Subjugated Knowledge.

**Note:** Conceptualization of "the shine" as subjugated knowledge (Collins, 2000), representing power through the marginality. The framework illustrates the workings of psychic abilities as metaphors for multiple marginalized identities (female, Black, youth) while functioning as agents of resistance and change. The core attributes include moral clarity, pattern recognition, a way of dealing with emotions and systemic vision.

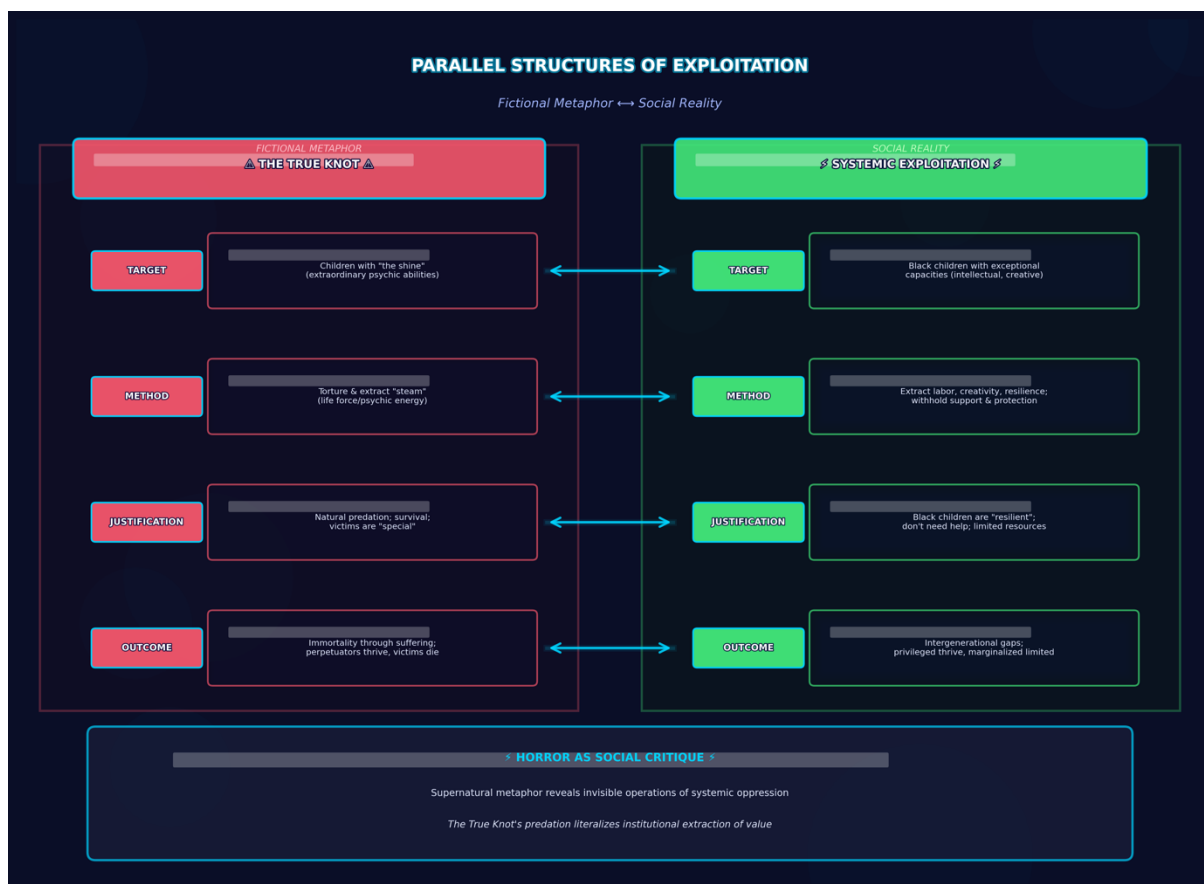
### Psychic Predation and Exploitation of Black Genius

The True Knot's particular predation mode - singling out children with extreme psychic gifts in order to "suck the life out of them" - is an effective metaphor for the systemic exploitation of Black creativity, intelligence and labor. The steam they drink is not just any life force but the torture of those with advanced perceptual and emotional awareness. This deserves to be seen as a controlled and planned extraction of value by institutions from innovations of Black communities, coupled with the denial of credit, remuneration and ownership (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015).

Consider educational settings where the intellectual gifts of Black students are appropriated as a source of institutional prestige - diverse student populations will garner funding and promote institutional reputation - while the students themselves are subjected to hostile environments and insufficient support and are forced to perform emotional labor educating their peers about racism (Harris, 2025). Or healthcare settings that work to devalue Black women's caregiving labor while under- and overlooking their own health concerns and downplaying and undertreating their pain (Tucker, 2024). Or cultural industries where Black artistic innovation creates enormous value that is paid almost exclusively to white-controlled corporations and gatekeepers (Nunn, 2018). In both cases, this exceptional capacity is used as the basis for exploitation rather than for investment and reciprocity.

The immortality of the True Knot through the suffering of others is how privilege is bred through generations by taking those who are positioned as resources rather than people. Rose the Hat has existed for centuries and will continue to exist for as many more as long as she has access to steam. She survives by living off the fact that others die young, their possibilities denied, to prolong hers. Systemic oppression, on a wider range, can be described as the thriving of some at the expense of others. Wealth gaps between racial groups represent not only individual situations but also the cumulative effects of policies that took resources from black communities and gave them to white ones over several generations. Environmental racism has resulted in chemical concentrations in Black communities. Educational inequities are a result of funding structures that send resources to communities that are already privileged and starve those in the greatest need.

However, Abra and the other shine-possessing children are not presented as victims in this story. Before he dies, Bradley Trevor fights with all the resources at his disposal. From the moment she feels threatened, Abra fights, plots, seeks help and learns to use her talents to defend herself. This insistence on agency, even within the structural conditions of absolute vulnerability corresponds to the Black feminist insistence on the ways in which oppressed communities produce practices of resistance, even in conditions of complete subjugation. From this point of view, the shine is not only what systems want to exploit but also resources for opposition—that is, perceptual capacities to understand how systems work, emotional capacities to want to take collective action and moral capacities to be clear about the difference between legitimate authority and plain old domination. Figure 4 illustrates the parallel of King's fictional True Knot and institutional exploitation of marginalized populations in real-life that has already occurred and continues to occur daily within the economy.



**Figure 4.** Parallel Structures of Exploitation.

**Note:** Structural comparison between metaphor (on a fictional level: The True Knot) and social reality (on a real social level: systemic exploitation). The model shows the parallel mechanisms of predation on vulnerable populations, ways of extracting value, institutional justifications and outcomes. The analysis exposes the literalization of the invisible operations of systemic oppression in supernatural horror.

### Intergenerational Healing and Motivated Resistance

Danny Torrance's relationship with Abra Stone is an example of intergenerational transmission of the resources of trauma and resistance. Danny is scarred, physically, psychologically and spiritually from his childhood at the Overlook and his scars contribute to his present adult life. For years, he has attempted to deal with these wounds alone and through substance abuse, which provides short-term relief and closes doors for real healing or

connection. His ability to help Abra is only realized when he embraces his vulnerability, admits that he needs help and decides that he is needed to help rather than just survive.

This means that healing from systemic trauma requires more than individual healing—it requires interaction with other people threatened by the same system. Danny does not begin to break free of the curse of the Overlook, which has followed him for so many years, until he realizes the danger presented by Abra and decides to do something about it. His knowledge (which comes with a price, that of suffering) becomes valuable in protecting the next generation. Such an intergenerational format reflects the ways in which the legacies of trauma and resources for resistance are passed down from generation to generation in communities engaged in this kind of work. Parents who have dealt with hostile institutions learn things that may help their children but transmission is complicated: how much to communicate about risks without shutting off opportunities, how to build strength without passing adult burdens on the young (Alhourani et al., 2025).

Importantly, the story places Abra as an active rather than a passive recipient of Danny's knowledge. However, she teaches him just as much about the True Knot's weaknesses, selflessness and what drives resistance from something other than self-protection. Their collaboration model is more of a transformational partnership than a top-down mentorship. This reciprocity reflects our efforts to resist both paternalist narratives that operate on the assumption that adults are the only ones with anything to offer young people and idealized tales that operate on the assumption that young people are somehow inherently more intuitive or more moral than adults. Instead, it argues that intergenerational solidarity that appreciates the particularities and constraints of each generation is necessary to successfully resist systems of oppression.

This opposition is based on concerns and not self-interest. Initially, Abra could only think of defending herself against the True Knot. Instead, she demands that she take them on and make sure they can do no harm to other children. Danny might keep on his way of isolated recovery. He eventually becomes the main character in the game and it is revealed that he died for Abra, sacrificing everything so that she would survive. These decisions reflect the kind of things hooks (2000) calls "love as the practice of freedom": a willingness to take risks for the well-being of others, the health of the public rather than just for ourselves and a realization that true security is possible only by changing abusive relationships instead of just finding safe places in them. As depicted in Figure 5, the intergenerational exchange between Danny Torrance and Abra Stone is a model of reciprocal healing and solidarity through love as a practice of freedom (hooks, 2000; Alhourani et al., 2025).



**Figure 5.** Intergenerational Transmission.

**Note:** Bidirectional model of intergenerational knowledge exchange between Danny Torrance (past generation) and Abra Stone (new generation). Danny transmits understanding of systemic evil, recognition of value, validation of experience and willingness to sacrifice. Abra returns reciprocity with moral clarity, courage via vulnerability, commitment to protection and refusal of injustice. The model converts the legacies of trauma into protective-action and cycling breaks between the solidarity.

The resolution of the story essentially strengthens this ideal of motivated empathetic resistance. It is the sacrifice of Danny that results in the ultimate defeat of Rose, with Danny's use of the residual power of the Overlook for this act being a powerful metaphor for the way in which facing rather than running from the histories of trauma transforms. It is possible that Danny cannot destroy the legacy of the Overlook but he can make sure it destroys Rose instead of Abra. Communities cannot deny the histories of oppression but they can transform their outrage over injustice into the strength to build different futures. This model of resistance recognizes the work of accumulated harm as well as the possibilities of breaking the reproduction of harm through motivated collective action based on care rather than domination.

### Implications for Society and Policy

The most important insight of *Doctor Sleep* is the proposition that those in the underclasses of society have extraordinary moral, transformational capacities that have great significance for institutional practice and public policy. If we appreciate the fact that Abra's fictional light symbolizes actual, though non-supernatural, kinds of wisdom, emotional intelligence and moral frame of mind, which oppressed youth exercise every day of their lives, then existing arrangements for systematically undervaluing and exploiting these capacities are not only ethical but practical failures. Structures for value creation, which simultaneously limit recognition, cannot tap the totality of human potential required to solve complex social issues. Figure 6 links the literary analysis with the application of reform by associations of the findings of *Doctor Sleep* with educational, healthcare and media reformations (Harris, 2025; Balderson, 2024).



**Figure 6.** From Literary Analysis to Social Practice (Implications Framework).

**Note:** Implications framework Behan McCarthy Literary Analysis for Social Practice: 3 areas of implication - Education: Transform (Restorative Justice, Black Feminists Curricula, Youth Agency, Asset-Based, Socially Informed, Healthcare Reform: Trauma Informed Care, Implicit Bias Training, Patient Validation, Social Determinants, Media Representation: Black Creators in Media Leadership, Community Storytelling, Complex Portrayals, Transformative Genres) The framework is youth-centred in its approach to marginalised youth capacities and calls for paradigm shifts from deficit to asset-based approaches.

### Educational Transformation

Educational systems are the first context for the application of these insights. Rather than training them to be both exceptional and resilient while seeming to stand for all that Black youth aren't allowed, schools could try what Harris (2025) calls "otherworldly pedagogy" - pedagogies that center Black girls' intellect, creativity and moral intuition instead of mainly their compliance and proper behavior. This demands going beyond mere cosmetic inclusion and a fundamental re-examination of whose knowledge is valued, whose experiences are used to inform curricula and whose perspectives are used to help inform institutional policies.

This could include adopting restorative justice methods of responding to harm by holding people accountable and repairing relationships instead of punishing them through exclusion, which disproportionately impacts Black girls (McPherson, 2025), designing curricula that incorporate Black feminist scholarship positions Black girls as knowledge producers instead of objects of study. creating advisory systems that offer adult mentorship and respect youth agency; creating systems of student input in policy decisions that impact them; and educating teachers to be aware of how their own socialization impacts their views of Black girls and their behaviors and abilities (Gadson & Lewis, 2021).

## Healthcare and Trauma-Informed Care

Healthcare systems must also be transformed with an awareness of the full humanity of Black girls and women. Tucker's (2024) work on the embodied experiences of Black mothers shows that the systematic erasure of Black women's pain and disregard of their issues by medical institutions is what leads to drastically higher maternal mortality rates, even when accounting for socioeconomic status. These disparities stem not from biology but from implicit associations that healthcare providers have with the synonyms of Blackness, pain tolerance and dishonesty about symptoms - associations that parallel how the True Knot views steam-potter children as resources rather than persons.

Trauma-informed care approaches provide useful ways to organize care in promising ways but these approaches can only be successful if they consider how trauma intersects with systemic oppression. As Alhourani et al. (2025) show, Black children are disproportionately exposed to potentially traumatic experiences such as community violence and family instability and interact with hostile institutions but receive less recognition and support to process these experiences. Therefore, successful trauma-informed care must be based on efforts for individual healing, as well as on attempts to address structural conditions that generate traumatic exposure. This might include educating healthcare providers on implicit bias and its impact on health, implementing policies that mandate taking patient self-reports seriously, regardless of race, creating spaces for Black girls to discuss health issues without being judged and ignored and working to implement policies around social determinants of health, such as housing, food and environment.

## Media Representation and Cultural Imagination

Cultural representation is important because cultural stories create the collective imaginations of what is possible and who is allowed to be a hero, victim or villain. Dent's (2024) analysis of Black Final Girls shows how recent horror films have increasingly focussed on the Black women's agency and their survival as communities. *Doctor Sleep* is part of this shift in that we now have Abra as a protagonist rather than a sidekick, someone who knows something that needs to be learned by the adults who must be saved by more powerful beings than Abra.

However, representation without attention to who controls the means of production, whose stories are given resource and distribution, however, it is not a sufficient solution to aim for and includes questions of whether thererepresentation challenges or reinforces existing structures of power. Balderson's (2024) dangers of progressive horror, which end up generating dangerous tropes, are relevant here. Authentic transformation does not only involve the inclusion of black characters but it involves putting black creative voices at the table in terms of decision-making, making sure that stories do not originate from Black communities but are generated by them and asking whether stories position Black characters through their relationship to white protagonists or whether stories position Black characters as fully realized agents in their own locales.

Media institutions could therefore actively hire and resource Black creators, engage communities in development processes and provide evaluation frameworks that not only focus on representation but also recognize that representation is never in the form of excellence or moral perfection but rather vulnerability, complexity and failure. The goal is not merely to insert Black faces into existing genres but to transform those genres themselves but to actually alter the genres themselves through contact with Black aesthetic and intellectual traditions.

## Recognizing and Nurturing Marginalized Youth Capacities

However, the essential paradigm shift that needs to take place in all contexts is from deficit-based approaches that focus on what marginalized youth do not have to asset-based approaches that acknowledge their capacities, knowledge and contributions to society. This is not to romanticize poverty and oppression, pretend that there are no structural barriers or place all the pressure for social change on those who are suffering the most from the current setup. Rather, it means acknowledging that marginalized communities have always produced sophisticated knowledge about systems that oppress them and developed practices for survival and resistance under conditions of constraint and moral clarity about the difference between legitimate authority and mere power (Collins, 2000).

Student activism around issues of poor school resources and movements against police violence are just some examples of these capacities being played out by young people's own movements for social change. However, institutional responses tend to ignore youth activism as naive, artificially directed by adults or purely emotional and not substantively informed. *Doctor Sleep* explores alternative reactions: seriously considering children's subjectivity and judgment, seeing those in a vulnerable position as seeing dangers that the powerful do not see and remembering that effective resistance depends on intergenerational cooperation rather than adult condescension or romanticizing children.

Literature can evoke moral imagination by showing what is ordinarily invisible about the operations of power and by modeling other possibilities. King's story demonstrates this possibility by giving literal expression to the metaphorical processes of exploitation, of how people at the bottom of the social hierarchy are capable of

challenging exploitative social systems and of making empathy and moral courage the foundations for change. The question is how institutions might develop such imagination - acknowledging that existing arrangements are not natural or inevitable, that alternative futures are still possible and that those whom systems seek to marginalize often have the clearest vision of the failure of existing arrangements and the possibility of transformation in the future.

## CONCLUSION

Stephen King's *Doctor Sleep* exemplifies horror fiction's ability to both entertain and socialize, with its use of supernatural fiction highlighting structural forms of violence while demonstrating mirroring forms of resistance that are based on compassion, community and moral strength with empathy. Through the characterization of Abra Stone, the novel and film offer a counter-narrative that questions dominant stories that place power in institutional authority, physical strength or adult knowledge and instead opens up new understandings of the capacities for moral clarity and transformative action that are held by those placed as weak or vulnerable and systematically undervalued and exploited by society.

Thus, this analysis shows how King's work participates in current discourses of Black girlhood, institutionalized oppression and social change. The True Knot's predatory use of children's vital force is a powerful metaphor for institutional arrangements that take value from marginalized communities and deny them recognition, support and protection. Abra's shine is subjugated knowledge - knowledge about how social processes work resulting from experiences of oppression but not acknowledged by dominating epistemologies. For Wiecek, her resistance in relation to Danny, her parents and other victims can be a mode of collective struggle rather than singular heroism, as a cultural model of transformation, which draws from intergenerational solidarity and a willingness to center care and justice as opposed to domination.

The intersectional, Black feminist epistemological and trauma theoretical paradigms used in this study illuminate aspects of King's story that would not be visible through traditional horror analysis. The examination of intersections between race, gender and age to expose how race, gender and age intersect to shape Abra's experiences helps to expose both her particular vulnerabilities and unique resources for resistance. Viewing shine as an expression of marginalized knowledge production makes it possible to link fictional depictions and the documented experiences of Black girls negotiating institutions organized according to intersecting hierarchies of oppression. Considering trauma as both a microinjury and a structural state sets up the painful situation that characters face and prevents an approach that pathologizes reactions to oppression.

While this study has literary implications, it also has practical implications for institutional changes. If fictional texts can make visible operations of power that are normally not seen, create models of alternative arrangements and develop the moral imagination needed to see that current conditions are neither natural nor inevitable, then serious engagement with cultural texts is a necessary part of social transformation. *Doctor Sleep* proposes education systems that may center instead of marginalizing the intellectuality and morality of Black girls; healthcare institutions that may acknowledge the full humanity of Black patients rather than deny and dismiss; and media that may highlight Black creative voices instead of appropriating their innovations while denying credit and control.

However, the text remains aware of the limits of this transformation. She only dies when she is challenged for a long time and Danny's sacrifice is the final blow to her. The evil of The Overlook cannot be destroyed but is only held back temporarily. The systems of oppression are extremely inertial and adaptive, as history shows through frustrated resistance efforts. Acknowledging such realities should not create resigned fatalism but an opportunistic willingness to fight as long as there is hope and such hope is rooted in a willingness to do the hard work in compassion and grounded in solidarity.

The central argument - that even the weakest can change the world if inspired by feelings of empathy, community and courage to fight the darkness of the system - comes not as an optimistic naivete but as an explanation of how change actually happens. Those not in power do not have institutional power but they do have resources: moral clarity about the difference between legitimate and illegitimate power, knowledge created by living in oppressive structures, emotional resources to sustain collective struggle and courage to be vulnerable in the name of justice. These resources are amplified when they are combined through solidarity, where both parties see that they are dependent on each other and have a mutual interest in developing more equitable arrangements.

There are several ways in which this analysis could be extended in future research. It would be interesting to compare the work of other horror writers to see if patterns similar to those found here are common across the genre or if they are unique to King's vision alone. Empirical studies of youth consumption of horror narratives could demonstrate whether and how fictional portrayals affect youth political awareness and willingness to act. Policy research could contribute specific models for putting into practice recommendations on education, health care and cultural production and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions aimed at identifying and developing rather than exploiting the capacities of marginalized youth.

In the radiance of Abra, we see a general truth: the smallest spark, if inspired with courage and compassion, will light up the darkest world. Her resistance to predatory systems that would devour her proves that power for social change is not produced by the reproduction of prevailing hierarchies but by a renewed conception of the meaning and workings of power. However, when those on the bottom refuse to accept their assigned place, the community becomes cohesive across differences and solidarity and when it becomes morally apparent that injustice is injustice and that there is a commitment to change that lasts over time, even the most firmly rooted systems of oppression can be displaced. Through an intersectional analysis and a broad understanding of black feminist thought, King exposes these dynamics in her narrative while setting an example of the kind of imaginative critical awareness, empathy and courage that is required to create more just worlds. The shine is finally a symbol of possibility - the idea that we can see other futures and the willingness to struggle towards their happening despite the most daunting odds.

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