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(De)constructing Imagination: Racial Bias And Counter-Storytelling In Young Adult Speculative Fiction

By: **Jewel Davis**

Abstract

This critical content analysis examines representations of race and ethnicity in three young adult speculative novels: Children of Blood and Bone, The Black Witch, and Carve the Mark. This study utilizes Critical Race Theory to closely analyze texts to find and critique elements of bias and highlight counter-stories. Three major themes emerged from the analysis: BIPOC characters as dark aggressors, the construction of systems of oppression in world-building, and the transformation of characters encountering racism. In the discussion and implication, the author argues for supporting counter-storytelling and provides questions for analyzing representation in speculative fiction.

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INTRODUCTION

The need and demand for more authentic youth literature published by and about underrepresented populations has long been established and called for by well-known scholars and authors. While the number of titles published every year featuring underrepresented populations is still low (CCBC, 2019), the numbers are growing, and finding representative diverse titles has become easier due to organizations like We Need Diverse Books (https://diversebooks.org/) and Social Justice Books (https://socialjusticebooks.org/). As more diverse titles are published, the need grows for more critical content analyses that evaluate authenticity and other issues of representation in diverse youth literature.

When researchers have previously conducted critical content analyses on authenticity and issues of representation, they have primarily focused on board books, picture books, and youth literature within the genres of realistic fiction and historical fiction. Using critical content analyses, researchers have also developed anti-bias guidelines, tools, and resources to help educators and librarians analyze and critique diverse titles within these formats and genres.

While the developed tools and past research have laid the foundation for current scholars' work in critical content analyses of youth literature, additional critical content analyses are needed for novels in other genre fiction categories. Young adult (YA) speculative fiction is a genre with a long history of persistent problematic representation of Black and Indigenous People/Person(s) of Color (BIPOC), and a small number of researchers have published analyses on these issues calling for better representation. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as my theoretical framework, I add to this conversation by presenting a critical content analysis of three recently published speculative fiction titles. The following research question guided my analysis:

- How has recently published YA speculative fiction portrayed authentic and racially biased narratives about BIPOC characters?

LITERATURE REVIEW

For over a century, scholars, authors, and youth advocates have called for more authentic diverse representation. Some of the well-known past voices in the conversation include W. E. B. Du Bois (1919), who created publications to counter negative portrayals of African American children, Nancy Larrick (1965), who published one of the first reports on the lack of representation, the Council on Interracial Books for Children (Social Justice Books, 2017), which provided anti-bias toolkits and critical reviews on damaging titles, and Rudine Sims Bishop (1982, 1990), who provided a framework for critical examination and a foundational metaphor to understand the power of representation. Newer voices in this conversation include Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), who described the importance of counter-stories in literature, Walter Dean Myers (2014) and his son Christopher Myers (2014), who spurred a modern revitalization of the call for more representation in their *New York Times* articles, the We Need Diverse Books (https://diversebooks.org/) organization, which promotes and supports diversity in the publishing industry, and the See What We See Coalition (Social Justice Books, n.d.), which is continuing the work of the Council on Interracial Books for Children.

Many scholars, authors, and youth advocates from underrepresented communities use social media as a platform to analyze and critique inauthentic representation. These reviewers, many of whom are part of the Diversity Jedi and See What We See Coalition, have directly impacted conversations around diversity in youth literature and questioned publishers about their promotion of inauthentic texts (Smith, 2019). The work of these reviewers has not gone unchallenged, and their

critical reviews have been accused of promoting censorship among publishers and self-censorship among authors who are writing outside their cultures and experiences (Rosenfield, 2017, 2019). In her 2019 May Hill Arbuthnot Lecture, "An Indigenous Critique of Whiteness in Children's Literature," Debbie Reese highlighted some of the challenges these social groups have faced and urged attendees to recognize the importance of analyzing texts for critical review, amplifying the voices of diverse reviewers in social and academic spaces, and calling out the industry for continuing to author, publish, and promote harmful representations of underrepresented and marginalized groups.

Additional advocates have contributed to the conversation around authentic representations of race and ethnicity by conducting critical content analyses. A critical content analysis is a qualitative method of content analysis that utilizes theoretical frameworks to closely read a text (Short, K. G. & Worlds of Words Community, 2016). Significant analyses of African and African American representation in children's literature include studies by Bishop (1982), Taxel (1986), and Smith-D'Arezzo and Musgrove (2011), who all emphasized the importance of not only applying a traditional literary critique to texts but also considering and analyzing texts through sociocultural contexts. Yoo-Lee, Fowler, Adkins, Kim, and Davis (2014) conducted a critical content analysis on cultural authenticity in African American, Asian American, and Hispanic American picture books and utilized researchers who identified as being within the culture group the text represented to show how insider knowledge of a culture is important to critical evaluation. Johnson and Gasiewicz (2016) as well as Sung, Fahrenbruck, and Lopez-Robertson (2016) analyzed representations of immigrants in children's literature and highlighted the various frameworks researchers can use to examine power, privilege, and the othering of non-dominant U.S. cultures.

One theoretical framework that can be used in a critical content analysis of youth literature is CRT, which focuses on the analysis of race. In literature analyses, CRT is used to examine, challenge, and critique racism and racial construction in narratives. One key tenet of CRT is the belief that racism continues to be pervasive and has been normalized in our society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Another key tenet is interest convergence, which describes the benefits of racism to the dominant culture and their resulting lack of incentive to eliminate pervasive racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Additionally, CRT supports the use of counter-storytelling--narratives created by marginalized groups to challenge stereotypical portrayals from the dominant culture (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Using these tenets, researchers have critically examined various races and ethnicities

in youth literature. Some of these researchers include Brooks (2009), Mcnair (2008), and Yenika-Agbaw (2014), who analyzed African and African American youth literature primarily in historical fiction and traditional literature, Koss (2015), who examined various races and ethnicities in picture books, Chaudhri and Teale (2013), who evaluated multiracial characters in middle grades realistic fiction, and Chappell and Faltis (2007) and Braden and Rodriguez (2016), each of whom explored the portrayal of Latinx characters primarily in picture books.

While there are many critical content analyses available in youth literature utilizing a variety of theoretical frameworks including CRT, there are a small but growing number of studies that focus on both the YA speculative fiction genre and issues of racial and ethnic representation. Researchers have noted both the low number of YA speculative fiction titles published with racially and ethnically diverse characters and research focused in this intersection (Bishop, 1982, 2012; Harris, 1997; Hood, 2009; Davis, 2017). A few researchers who have focused in this intersection include Smith (2000), who analyzed the treatment of black characters in YA fantasy, Couzelis (2013), who examined how whiteness in YA dystopias maintains racial hierarchies, James (2016), who explored the characterization of non-white females in YA Indigenous futurism, Hentges (2016), who examined female characters of color in non-whitewashed racialized dystopian futures, and Toliver (2019) who analyzed how Afrofuturist YA literature can challenge ratchetness and respectability politics. More recently, Thomas (2019) published a critical examination of race in speculative fiction providing a new theory and critiquing black representation in well-known fiction and popular media. Many of the researchers in this area call for the publication and critical analysis of more authentic titles featuring BIPOC characters.

In their 2014 *New York Times* articles, both Walter Dean Myers and Christopher Myers pointed out the harm in the delegation of characters of color to only historical books and traditional literature. Almost 50 years prior, Nancy Larrick (1965) remarked upon her discovery of black characters primarily in slavery settings and traditional literature. For too long, BIPOC characters have been disproportionately delegated to genres outside of the imaginative, futuristic realm of speculative fiction. Readers deserve to see themselves in all genres, and speculative fiction deserves a scholarly focus. We need to continue expanding the great body of work that has been created to illustrate authentic representation matters in every genre.

METHODOLOGY

To address my research question, I conducted a critical content analysis using CRT as my theoretical framework. CRT provided the theoretical lens needed to closely analyze texts in order to find and critique elements of bias and highlight counter-stories.

I selected three recently published (2017-2018) YA speculative fiction novels for the study. Table 1 provides a brief overview for each selected text. I began by finding speculative fiction titles with BIPOC characters that had been starred or highly praised in trade review journals (*Voice of Youth Advocates, School Library Journal, Kirkus, Booklist,* and *Publishers Weekly)* and included on bestseller and popular book lists. I narrowed the selection to identify one counter-story, *Children of Blood and Bone* (Adeyemi, 2018), by reading additional reviews from alternative review sources that specifically evaluate and recommend titles for cultural authenticity (*Africa Access Review* (Winmilawe, 2018) and *Black Girl Nerds* (Wilson, 2018)). To continue I selected two titles, *The The Black Witch* (Forest, 2017) and *Carve the Mark* (Roth, 2017, as having biased and problematic representation by reading social media and popular news reviews. I decided to search through social and popular media because these outlets had recently been at the forefront of calling out well-reviewed and bestselling books that have problematic BIPOC representation (Smith, 2019).

TABLE 1

Overview of Selected Texts

Title	Major Characters	Brief Description
Children of Blood and Bone (Adeyemi, 2018)	Zélie (Protagonist narrator) Amari (Deuteragonist narrator) Inan (Antagonist narrator)	When Zélie discovers she can bring back magic to her land and people, she journeys with her brother and Amari, a runaway princess, to conduct a ritual that could help overthrow a ruthless monarchy. Inan, heir to the throne, gives chase, hoping to permanently eliminate magic and the power it has to change an empire.

The Black Witch (Forest, 2017)	Elloren (Protagonist narrator)	Elloren is the magicless granddaughter of the last powerful Black Witch. She leaves home to attend a university integrated with various magical and non-magical races who challenge her to confront her and her race's prejudices.
Carve the Mark (Roth, 2017)	Cyra (Dual protagonist narrator) Akos (Dual protagonist narrator)	On a planet with conflicting races, Cyra, the sister of a ruling dictator, is forced to depend on Akos, the kidnapped son of a farmer. Together they confront their differences and learn they need each other to survive.

Figure 1 and the following methodology outline the process for the study, which is a modified approach to the critical content analysis methodology illustrated by Kathy G. Short and the Worlds of Words Community (2016).
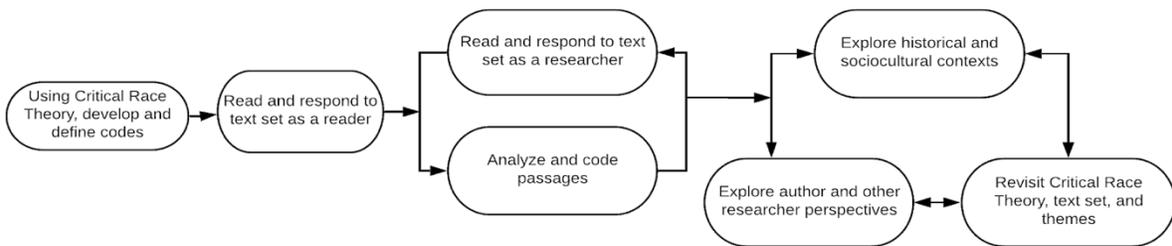

Figure 1. Critical content analysis process.

I conducted a deductive thematic analysis of the selected texts by utilizing my research question and the CRT tenets that most align to this study's purpose, i.e., inherent racism, interest convergence, and counter-stories. While I had previously read *Children of Blood and Bone,* I followed the process below with each text for the study. I conducted two readings of each text, with the first consisting of a close read to familiarize myself with the common elements of the narrative structure. In these readings, I made notes about my response as a reader aesthetically experiencing the text (Rosenblatt, 1978).

In my second critical reading of the text, I highlighted passages and made notes about my response as a researcher analyzing the text. During this reading, I used guiding questions to help frame my analysis and focus on the codes developed using CRT. My questions included:

- What common racial tropes, stereotypes, or biases are present in the text?
- What counter-stories are present in the text, and how do they counteract common racial tropes, stereotypes, and biases?
- How are BIPOC characters described (in terms of physical traits, mental capacities, personality, etc.) and treated by other characters?
- What actions do BIPOC characters take in navigating spaces with other groups from dominant races, ethnicities, or cultures?
- How are BIPOC characters positioned in the created world?
- How are BIPOC characters positioned in power compared to characters and groups from dominant races, ethnicities, or cultures?

After the second reading and analysis, I explored professional literature to gain more insight into my understanding of each text's historical and sociocultural context. I also went back to social and popular media sources to explore additional perspectives on each text, including author interviews and writings, news articles, and industry responses. This helped me organize my codes and find patterns to develop themes.

BIPOC CODING IN SPECULATIVE FICTION

Because speculative fiction can be set in futuristic or imaginary worlds, it is important to address how BIPOC identifiers are coded for characters, races, and cultures within these settings. Even though these stories frequently take place in worlds that are not our own, the genre nevertheless reflects and comments on our world's history, current issues, dreams, and fears. Because it is a reflection of us, we can analyze and deconstruct this genre through our societies' sociohistorical and political contexts. To apply BIPOC coding to the genre, one can look for a combination of indicators including real and/or inspired geographical settings, physical descriptions of skin, eye, and hair color, cultural practices, traditions, languages, religions, mythologies, or histories that parallel real culture groups, explicit racial or cultural identification in the text, and identification of real or inspired races or culture in paratext. Below I describe how I applied BIPOC codes for races in each text.

In *Carve the Mark's* world set on the planet Thuvhe, both the Thuvhesit and Shotet races are varied in color displaying varied skin, eye, and hair color. The Shotet in particular are described as having "mixed" (p. 55) and "blended" (p. 61) blood. In their historical accounts, the Shotet describe themselves as a nomadic group who moved to an uninhabited planet that was later colonized by the Thuvhesit. While the Shotet were taking a seasonal off-planet sojourn, the Thuvhesit invaded Shotet homes and kidnaped Shotet children. When the Shotet returned, they fought for the return of their children, and many of the Shotet were killed in the ensuing conflict (pp. 127-129). In the present day, the Shotet struggle to seek sovereignty and recognition as an independent nation, reparations from Thuvhe for the invasion of territory and murder of citizens, and reclamation of kidnapped children who speak the Shotet language (pp. 253-254). The Shotet are able to determine who belongs to their nation due to the cultural, historical memory stored in Shotet blood. This cultural memory is tested through the innate ability to speak the Shotet language (p.253). These descriptions parallel to America's historical treatment of indigenous cultures through the colonization of their lands, the forcible separation of indigenous children from their homes, issues of tribal sovereignty and nationhood, and Native tribal enrollment through lineal descendancy and blood quantum. These indicators led me to code the Shotet race as representative of indigenous groups in American society.

There are a variety of fantasy races in *The Black Witch*. Traditional fantasy races in the text include Mages, Elves, Sorceresses, Fae, Selkies, Lupine Shapeshifters, and wyverns. Within this fantasy there are also Urisks, a race of male geomancers and non-magical women; Kelts, an immigrant ethnic group of mixed ancestry; and the Icarals, winged demons who have mixed ancestry with wyvern and at least one of the above races. The Gardnerian Mages are the dominant race and are described as having pure blood, green eyes, black hair, and shimmering skin in the dark (pp. 14-31). Their allies, the Alfsigr Elves, have silver eyes and white skin and hair (pp. 55, 75, 215). It is implied through their hatred of mixed-blood races that the Alfsigr Elves also have pure blood (p. 139). The remainder of the above races are described in either varying colors or as mixed-breeds or half-breeds. This led me to code Gardnerian Mages and Alfsigr Elves as representing whiteness and the other races as non-white due to their variance in skin colors and descriptors of perceived racial impurity.

Children of Blood and Bone is set in the African fantasy land of Orïsha which contains cities that are actual locations in Nigeria. The novel also includes elements of Nigerian culture such as the

Yorùbá language and deities. Two main groups appear in the text: the non-magical kosidán people and the magical maji people. Both groups are Orīshan and are described in varying hues of brown. I coded the characters in *Children of Blood and Bone* as black.

FINDINGS

In this section, I bring together my analysis and interpretation of major themes that highlight broad indicators of racial bias and counter-story found in the texts. In the Appendix, I provide a more detailed view into each text by listing a selection of quotes that show elements of racial bias and counter-story. I focus on three major themes that turn attention to the use of BIPOC characters as dark aggressors, the construction of systems of oppression in worldbuilding, and the transformation of characters encountering racism. My analysis and interpretation of themes were informed by using CRT. I begin with defining terminology and explaining how texts show the theme, and I end with my observations on each theme's impact.

DARK AGGRESSORS

The dark aggressor is a savage, uncivilized race or character used as a dangerous antagonist. Dark aggressors are commonly non-white, dark in skin color, and described using dehumanizing violent, animalistic, or unnatural characteristics. In the construction of the dark aggressor, the ideations of what we fear when encountering a dark entity--violence, brutality, and immorality--are placed on groups who are outside of and different from the dominant race. *Carve the Mark* and *Children of Blood and Bone* both use the dark aggressor trope in contrasting ways.

While members of the Shotet race in *Carve the Mark* have varying skin colors, they are described with numerous indicators that build and support the dark aggressor trope. The Shotet are the antagonists in the story and are described as fierce and brutal murderers and thieves who cut savage marks into their arms for every life they take (p. 16). They train their children in war and are able to slaughter the strongest and fiercest Thuvhesit soldiers (p. 16). They host seasonal arena games where it is legal to challenge people to fight to the death (p. 104). They are described as scavengers who survive off the garbage of others (p. 39) and take from cultures to create their own (p. 96). The Shotet's historical account of the atrocities committed against them is disputed by the Thuvesit, who have their own opposing historical record (pp. 38, 127-129, 132, 340-341). These opposing histories,

combined with the portrayal of the current Thuvesit as a peaceful agrarian race, create sympathy towards the Thuvesit and contribute to the othering of the Shotet as a naturally violent race that cannot be trusted. Because the Shotet can be coded as representative of indigenous people, this depiction reinforces the damaging stereotypes of the savage uncivilized native.

The Thuvhesit and other races in the text attribute these savage characteristics and actions to the Shotet's genetic makeup. Their brutality and violence cannot be helped or cured because it is an infection that runs through their bloodlines. The Shotet are described as believing that language and cultural memory can be carried through the blood (p. 127). This concept brings into question what racial characteristics can be passed down, and if elements of culture like language can be passed through bloodlines, why can't savagery and brutality?

In *Children of Blood and Bone,* the dark aggressor trope is used to instill fear of the magical maji. Magic is considered an unnatural source of evil and is similarly described as an infection carried through the blood. Inan's kosidán father, King Saran, cultivates this fear within his people by describing the danger of magi using their power to overtake the kosidán and harm them. This fear is brought to life through Kwame, a young burner maji who has the ability to summon and control fire. Upon seeing Kwame's ability, Inan thinks, "A Burner...The sight stops me in my tracks, reigniting a fear Father's pounded into me my whole life. The type of maji that incinerated Father's first family. The monsters who set him on his warpath. An indomitable fire rages..." (p. 335). The idea of a near invincible aggressor feeds into the fear created around the trope and allows rationalizing the use of extreme violence to stop the aggressor. Later, Kwame transforms through blood magic into a deadly force killing hundreds of kosidán men in seconds and is only stopped because his own magic consumes him. A conversation between Zélie, the main maji protagonist, and Inan shows they both understand Kwame acted not out of aggression but of sacrifice to protect and save the innocent maji who were under attack (p. 411). Even so, they know how the perception and impact of his action worked to reinforce the fear of maji aggression within the kosidán. Inan says to Zélie, "But imagine how it looked to the guards...I know Kwame's intentions were pure, but he took it too far. For years we've been warned about magic like that. What Kwame did was worse than anything Father's ever said!'" (p 412).

This type of revealing dialogue is repeated throughout the narrative and works to show the humanity, beauty, and sacrifice of maji magic as well as the dangerous fear it instills when viewed by the non-magical kosidán. Both sides of the aggressor trope are shown through cultural insider and

outsider perspectives. This shows the trope's complex reality by providing a critical view into what happens when a society fears a group and places exaggerated characteristics of aggression onto people, and the sometimes self-fulfilling nature of the trope when those who are characterized as such are forced to take violent action that works to embody elements of the trope.

In contrast to Kwame's aggression being explained to counter the trope, *Carve the Mark's* treatment of Vas, a Shotet soldier who is unable to feel pain, emphasizes the unnatural aspect of the trope applied to the Shotet race. Vas is described as a "war machine, a man of muscle" (p. 147) who not only has to set alarms to remind himself to eat and drink and check for bruises and broken bones (p. 199), but is also void of emotion and "numb inside as well as outside" (p. 440). Vas' stripped humanity, along with the brutal and savage characteristics already applied to his entire race by the Thuvhesit and other races they encounter, breathes life into an exaggerated monstrous representation of the unfeeling brute, leaving little room for compassion for a race already vilified.

The author uses Cyra, the Shotet protagonist, to confront some of the assumptions and beliefs around Shotet culture by providing a limited view into how the non-ruling Shotet class peacefully live, the opposing history of colonization and violence brought onto their people, and her own ability to question and challenge the violent nature of her family. However, Cyra's character arc works to redeem primarily herself and reinforces the counterpart trope to the dark aggressor: the noble savage, a docile brute who can be trusted. To further complicate the one likeable character of the Shotet race, it is revealed Cyra is not related to her Shotet family, leaving open the possibility she is not actually Shotet (p. 462).

The dark aggressor is a familiar trope commonly used in speculative fiction. When the trope is used without providing perspective into the culture group, we are socially and emotionally distanced from that culture. That distance provides room for justifying violence against a racial group due to the trope's ability to garner unwarranted bias and irrational fear. When the aggressor can be coded as a BIPOC, the trope works to perpetuate real life perceptions of these characteristics. When the trope is constructed and then countered through humanizing interactions and characters who call out and challenge misrepresentations, we are able to see how the trope is employed and how it can be challenged and subverted to highlight the actual aggression conducted without consequences by dominant racial groups.

WORLDS OF OPPRESSION

Worldbuilding is an important part of speculative fiction because it provides the backdrop and foundation for the story's plot and characters. In order to help readers suspend disbelief, the world is constructed with internal systems, laws, economies, and histories, providing realistic and relatable entry points into the narrative. Through analyzing the mechanics and systems used in these worlds, we can understand the historical and/or sociopolitical contexts of the invented world and compare those to the real systems within our own societies. The texts in this analysis have worlds that parallel our own understanding of racial hierarchies enforced through supremacist ideology, oppression, and colonization and imperialism. Worlds built upon these types of systems have the potential to reinforce the normalization of these systems or highlight and confront the injustices of these systems.

The Black Witch employs a racial hierarchy based on a supremacist ideology. The pure-blood Gardnerians and Alfsigr Elves are at the top of the hierarchy with the Gardnerians at the very top enforcing the structures below. The Gardnerians place most of the mixed blood and breed races in middle positions on the hierarchy. The lower-positioned Urisk females and children are used for an indentured servant and slave economy. Female Icarals are on the lowest part of the hierarchy, and male Icarals are imprisoned. Treated as animals, the Selkies are kept in human form and used as sexual pets, and the wyverns are binded into their non-human dragon form and used as soldiers. The Gardnerians committed genocide against male Urisks and the Fae race.

The Gardnerians belief of supremacy and domination is deeply embedded into their history and religion, which supports the enforcement of the racial hierarchy. Their current beliefs revolve around the mantra of "dominate or be dominated" (p. 220), which is due in part to the tumultuous violent history many of the races have with each other. Their history is a complex cycle of subjugation, uprising, and oppression between the Kelts, Fae, and Urisks. At the time of the story, the Gardnerians distrust all mixed blood and half breed races. They have created an alternate historical record and religion minimizing their historical involvement in harming other races and marking them as the race chosen by their creator to rise and kill the infidel races. Their current anti-miscegenation marriage practices ensure their bloodline stays pure, and they propose and pass laws dehumanizing, criminalizing, and imprisoning mixed blood and breed races.

The Gardnerian altered history and constructed religion provides them with (in their minds) justified reasons for violent retribution, oppression, and the subjugation and annihilation of races. The protagonist and only narrator of the story, Elloren, is Gardnerian, and she provides a perspective into the justifications for this racial hierarchy. Elloren initially subscribes to this ideology, and as she

learns more about her culture and begins to question and challenge the system, her narration provides the only view into the lives and experiences of mixed race and half breed people.

Children of Blood and Bone is similarly constructed using a system of oppression based on a racial hierarchy due to a previous violent period. The Orïshan hierarchy places the kosidán (non-magical Orïshans) above the maji (magical Orïshans). In the beginning of the historical account, the maji are revered, live peacefully with the kosidán, and rise in power to become the first kings and queens. The royal maji begin to abuse their magic, so the gods take magic away from the royals. Over time, "'love of the maji turned into fear. Fear turned into hate. Hate transformed into violence, a desire to wipe the maji away'" (p. 15). This desire came to fruition when the current ruling kosidán king, Saran, found a way to cut off magic and kill all of the adult magi leaving behind the children who were too young to manifest any magical ability. Under the current system, magi are treated unfairly, demeaned, and abused. They are also frequently criminalized and punished to be used within a forced labor system that works their bodies until they die.

This system of oppression is justified by the kosidán's hatred and fear of the maji and the King's personal desire for retribution due to the loss of his first family at the hands of a few maji. Similar to the Gardnerians in *The Black Witch*, the royal kosidán use the mantra "duty before self" (p. 73) to alleviate the personal guilt, emotion, and responsibility they may feel when disenfranchising the maji. It is the royal kosidán's duty to protect the kosidán from the maji, and as King Saran remarks, "'Magic is a blight...A fatal festering disease. If it takes hold of our kingdom the way it's taken others, no one will survive its attack'" (p. 84). Self-preservation is a common thread between *The Black Witch* and *Children of Blood and Bone's* dominant group.

In contrast to *The Black Witch's* single narrator, *Children of Blood and Bone's* maji protagonist, Zélie, narrates along with two royal kosidán siblings, Inan and Amari. These three perspectives explore the system and show the viewpoints of maji who suffer under the system, kosidán and maji who question and challenge the system, and kosidán who benefit from the system and are working to empower it. It is through Zélie that the maji gain agency and are led to rise up, resist, and seek vengeance.

Carve the Mark employs a traditional science fiction world where imperialism and colonization provide the systems upon which the world operates. Nine planets are governed by the Assembly leaders who reside on a planetary spaceship. The main planet in the story, Thuvhe, is valued by the Assembly for its production of a native medicinal plant (p. 8). The Shotet settled first

on the planet, and the Thuvhesit came later to farm and export the planet's resources (p. 128). The Shotet are disenfranchised and treated as second class citizens because the Assembly does not recognize their nationhood and desire for sovereignty. Cyra, the Shotet protagonist, describes her people as having "no real exports, and hardly enough natural resources to sustain ourselves independently. Some other planets send aid…but that aid falls into the wrong hands, and is distributed based on status rather than need" (p. 123). Similar to Zélie's cultural insider narration in *Children of Blood and Bone*, Cyra deomstrates how this system harms the indigenous Shotet. However, Cyra is part of the ruling class of Shotet who help contribute to this system and limit the agency of her people. An exiled Shotet renegade tells Cyra her family soils the Shotet society with inequity, starves and hoards medicine from their people, and mercilessly tortures Shotet who speak out (pp. 278-279). All of this is true, so while Cyra does shed light on the system, the Shotet's perceived violent nature and real violence against each other works to reinforce the stereotype and dominant worldview that colonization is justified when the native people and resources that are exploited are not as civilized as the empire's settlers.

All three worlds are created with systems that oppress BIPOC, and it is important to consider how those groups are viewed and if they are provided with agency. *The Black Witch's* single narrator viewpoint centers the dominant white perspective and supports the white savior narrative. It is only through Elloren that we see the plight of the other races, and it is only through Elloren's actions that we begin to see races being helped and gaining agency to act. *Carve the Mark* provides limited agency for its indigenous characters, and Cyra's cultural insider perspective both highlights the inequities of the system and works to undermine the possible compassion felt while viewing the plight of the Shotet. In contrast, the maji in *Children of Blood and Bone* have the agency to begin to uplift themselves, and the multiple narrators provide an examination of the complexities of privilege, agency, and activism under an oppressive system. When worlds are built without giving exploited BIPOC the voice and agency to challenge and dismantle them, they work to justify, perpetuate, and reinforce the damaging popularity of the white savior narrative and the historical and current systems built on racial hierarchies.

CHARACTER GROWTH

Many major characters in fictional genres have character arcs that take them on challenging journeys, providing them with obstacles and opportunities that work to transform them into different states of

awareness. Major characters in both *The Black Witch* and *Children of Blood and Bone* have transformative character arcs due to encountering racism.

In both novels, the narrating characters provide viewpoints into the racial hierarchies of their society and undergo personal transformations that challenge the system. In *The Black Witch,* Elloren journeys through a tumultuous personal awakening. For the first half of the novel, Elloren subscribes to the supremacist ideology of her people, and when confronted by others who challenge her worldview, she ranges in emotions from denial, defensiveness, blame, and anger to guilt, shame, and acceptance. Her growth is one of fits and starts with frequent regression. It is only when she begins to realize she does not have pure blood herself that her progress in challenging the system and working alongside other races moves in a more consistently forward pattern. This brings into question if her newfound acceptance is fundamentally self-interested. Even with her new knowledge and understanding of the oppressive history and actions of her people, Elloren does not fully let go of her own prejudices and inclination to place blame on people outside her race. Near the end of the text, after a hurtful encounter with her new lupine friend, Elloren falls back into believing some racial groups are too different from each other to be friends (pp. 553-554). This sentiment is also repeated at the very end of the novel when she thinks about the irreconcilable racial differences between her and her Kelt love interest (p. 589). While Elloren's character arc is incomplete at the end of book one, her shifting group alliances do parallel real journeys of racial awakenings.

As the main narrator of the three major characters in *Children of Blood and Bone*, Zélie provides direct access to the experiences of the oppressed maji, and it is through Zélie's sharing of her and her people's experiences that Amari and Inan have their own awakenings. Amari's awakening begins when her maji chambermaid is murdered. Amari flees and steals a scroll that can help bring magic back to Orïsha. She is at first a hesitant ally until Zélie challenges her to understand her privilege and shows her the reality of the exploitative systems used against the maji. Once Amari sees the system at work at a maji labor camp (p. 198), she realizes how both her privilege and ignorance have contributed to the system and she begins working towards active allyship.

Inan's awakening is a forceful one of transportation into Zélie's painful memories and experiences of past trauma. Inan describes her memory as, "Red Skies. Shrill screams. Running blood....The world Father created. The pain she's forced to live in....The horror sears into my brain. Maji bound by majacite chains. Ornaments of death. Hanging for the whole world to see" (pp. 284-287). After this experience, Inan understands the true horror of the actions taken by his father and

the kosidán. Like Elloren, Inan's awakening is filled with uncertainty: he too struggles with allying with the maji and has also become aware of his own impure magical blood. Both Elloren and Inan have the privilege of being able to hide the illicit parts of who they are, but only Inan has to actively hide that part of him to the detriment of his own well-being, and he goes through a complex internal struggle of trying to reconcile his conflicting identities and the privilege he still has.

When Inan pleads with Zélie to help him understand why Zélie lives in constant fear, she says "You can't. They built this world for you, built it to love you. They never cursed at you in the streets, never broke down the doors of your home. They didn't drag your mother by her neck and hang her for the whole world to see" (p. 313). It is this type of explanation of the cultural insider perspective that *The Black Witch* does not provide through Elloren or any characters in the text. Like Inan and Amari, Elloren's world was built for her, but she does not grow to fully confront her continuous involvement because there are no consequences to her falling back on her prejudice.

Unlike Elloren, both Amari and Inan are made to confront their involvement without the privilege of being able to deny it and hide behind tears, anger, or friends and family who will protect them. Amari and Inan experience real ramifications of challenging the system by witnessing the murders of maji children (pp. 399-401), the torturing of Zélie (pp. 418-419), and being attacked by their own people. Even so, their new understanding and awakening does not provide a pass of racial awareness or wokeness because real allyship requires an active, ongoing commitment to practice empathy and provide support.

Both novels end with characters in various realistic stages of the racial awakening character arc. What *Children of Blood and Bone* provides that *The Black Witch* does not is the impact of an ally's shifting group alliance and the harm felt by those groups when their allies betray them to make easier choices for their own self-preservation or internal conflicts. *Children of Blood and Bone* also provides more fully realized perspectives and viewpoints that explain why racial awakenings are necessary and how allies can take part in ways that are positive and authentic rather than performative.

DISCUSSION

The themes illustrate some of the ways BIPOC characters are misrepresented in speculative fiction. Thomas (2018) offers an astute observation about what BIPOC readers encounter when they turn to the genre. They see themselves represented as the villains, the horde, the enemies, and the

monster. Thomas (2018) continues to point out that "rarely is the narrative focalized through [their] eyes," and the narrative violence enacted against them is expected because "it mirrors the unending spectacle of violence against the endarkened and the Othered in our own world" (p. 4). Both speculative and realistic genres comment upon the world in which they come from and are not only a reflection of dominant beliefs, but an influence on readers developing their own beliefs and perceptions. Counter-stories are necessary to shift the focus onto BIPOC stories and to challenge damaging misrepresentation.

As a white racial awakening narrative, *The Black Witch* has been praised with star reviews and defended as a blueprint for the "similarly privileged and clueless" (Smith, 2017). I question recommending white racial awakening narratives to specific populations, for I believe this can undermine the power of a counter-story's ability to speak to *all*–the privileged in dominant cultures, other cultural outsiders experiencing their own issues of discrimination, the cultural insider, etc. When we center issues of race around white perspectives, we run the risk of silencing BIPOC voices and uplifting white savior narratives, white redemption arcs, and white supremacy culture. *The Black Witch* teeters between centering white growth to engender empathy and centering white growth at the detriment of BIPOC characters and readers. *Children of Blood and Bone* as a counter-story recenters the perspective to highlight the black experience while also providing opposing viewpoints. It dives deeply into the complex issues of race and shows an authentic view into the lives of people experiencing racial injustice.

Listed on multiple bestseller lists, *Carve the Mark* highlights the popularity of dark aggressor colonial narratives. Employing the dark aggressor trope reinforces real world stereotypes of non-white races as violent, unnatural, and primitive. Throughout history, we have witnessed the impact of dehumanizing BIPOC through colonization and enslavement; today, the criminalization of BIPOC has led to racial profiling, police brutality, and murder. Depicting BIPOC as dark aggressors removes responsibility from dominant groups and justifies their active contributions to creating violent systems of oppression and bias. *Children of Blood and Bone* as counter-story humanizes a group that has been dehumanized and criminalized for centuries. It exposes the exploitative and detrimental impact of a system built on a racial hierarchy, and it shifts responsibility into a space that can be examined, critiqued, and accepted.

In CRT, interest convergence describes how dominant groups will only change if such change is to their benefit (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The promotion and popularity of *The Black*

Witch and *Carve the Mark* highlights the current issue around the continued popular consumption and publication of media containing stereotypes, tropes, and dominant societal constructions. These types of representations and constructions have persisted throughout history because they benefit the superiority of dominant groups. CRT also describes these types of inauthentic representations and hierarchical constructions as pervasive and normalized (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In science fiction, it is common to see worlds with empires expanding into so-called "new and uninhabited lands." When these explorers encounter outsiders such as aliens or primitive natives, creators commonly employ the popular trope of conquering or subjugating a dangerous, violent other. Social hierarchies reign in fantasy worlds ranging in settings from magical medieval lands to paranormal worlds with supernatural beings. In many of these narratives, white characters are the chosen ones who save these troubled worlds and the non-dominant groups within them. When we encounter these familiar and popular narratives, it is important to critically engage with them and move beyond initial aesthetic responses. The next section provides implications and questions for engaging with these texts.

IMPLICATION FOR EDUCATORS

As students engage with speculative fiction, they may encounter texts that perpetuate dominant ideologies, stereotypes, and bias. As educators, we must create opportunities for students to critically engage with and discuss texts. Providing definitions and critical analysis frameworks like CRT can help support students recognize the problematic in the traditional and popular media they consume. Below are questions educators can use as starting points to student discussion, analysis, and critique:

1. Who is telling the story? What voices are left out?
2. Who are we being asked to empathize with, and who benefits from this story?
3. What systems make the fictional world work?
4. How does the fictional world's population describe and treat BIPOC communities? Are BIPOC communities dynamic and nuanced or monolithic?
5. Are there commonly used racial stereotypes and tropes? (Examples of common tropes include: mystical BIPOC, exotic other, doomed BIPOC sidekick, dark aggressor, noble savage, etc.)
6. Who is empowered in the text? What agency do BIPOC characters have in relation to other groups present?

It is vital for educators to not only provide support for critical examination of the genre, but to also highlight and promote texts that provide authentic and empowering representation. Speculative fiction offers readers an escape into fantastical, futuristic, and adventurous settings. Readers enter into worlds that on the surface appear unlike our own, but are disguised reflections that highlight what we value, what we fear, and what we imagine. When BIPOC readers enter into these worlds, they may find damaging distorted views that have persisted over time in limiting the imaginative flight of BIPOC characters. Speculative fiction counter-stories are vital and show BIPOC readers they, too, can have adventure rooted in the very foundations of their cultures. BIPOC readers should have starring roles in texts and see their magic is beautiful, their futures are limitless, and their stories matter.

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APPENDIX

This appendix lists a sample of quotes highlighting instances of character bias and counter-stories found in the analyzed texts. The comments in italics provide contextual notes. All page numbers are in reference to first edition hardcover printings of the texts.

The Black Witch

Examples of Gardnerian supremacy ideology

- "We Gardnerians are a pure-blooded race, free from the stain of the heathen races that surround us. And my family line has the strongest, purest Mage blood of all" (p. 16).
- "Gareth's black hair has a trace of silver highlights in it--very unusual in Gardnerians, and read by many as a sign of his less-than-pure blood. It's been the source of relentless teasing all throughout his life. 'Mongrel,' 'Elfling' and 'Fae blood' are just a few of the names the other children called him" (p. 22).
- "'The Verpacian Council is full of half-breeds. As is most of the University's hierarchy. They mandate an absurd level of integration, and, quite frankly, it's dangerous'" (p. 23).
- "'Wandfasting is a beautiful sacrament, meant to keep us pure and chaste. The lure of the Evil Ones is strong, Elloren. Wandfasting helps young people such as yourself to stay on the path of virtue. It's one of the many things that sets us apart from the heretic races all around us'" (p. 47). *Wandfasting is marriage.*
- "'Lupines don't ever marry, did you know that? They simply grab whomever they like and mate with them in the *woods.*'
  'Like animals,' Echo chimes in..." (p. 71).
- "'...she ran off with that *Kelt*'...'He took advantage of her,'...'Isn't that just like a *Kelt*? He *used* my sister, forced his *filthy self* on her...'" (p. 94).
- "Most Gardnerians are as distrustful of mixed-breeds as the Alfsigr Elves are. It's understandable--we were almost wiped out several times. Of course we want to keep our race pure and intact" (p. 139).
- "The Kelts are not a pure race like us. They're more accepting of intermarriage, and because of this, they're hopelessly mixed" (p. 163).

Examples of the Gardnerians' justifications for oppression and violence toward others:

- "The Icarals are hideous things of great Evil, and need to be destroyed before they destroy us....I shudder to think of those creatures armed with overwhelming power at their disposal" (p. 135).

- "Verpacia is bound by international treaty to surrender only *male* Icarals to Gardneria. Because of the Prophecy.'.... 'Imprisonment of female Icarals is still voluntary, and the discretion of the Icaral's family. For now. There are some on the Mage Council who hold romantic ideas about Icaral "rehabilitation," but they're slowly being voted out'" (p. 206).

- "The Gardnerian government killed all [the Urisk] males during the Realm War. Urisk males are powerful geomancers, able to harness the full, destructive powers of stones and gems. Their existence would pose a serious threat to our country. The women, on the other hand, are completely devoid of magic and are allowed to live in Gardneria as guest workers" (p. 74).

- *Gardnerian History and Botany Professor Priest Simitri explains to Elloren why they have Urisk women and children in a system of labor:* "The Urisk were living like savages, worshipping stone statues of false gods, the men taking multiple wives. They waged war on each other almost as much as they waged war on others. They were uncivilized and very dangerous. Now, because of our intervention, the Urisk women lead quiet lives of morality....hard work...can help keep people from devolving into savagery...'
'So,' I press, uncomfortably, 'there aren't any children working there?'
Priest Simitri turns thoughtful. 'If there *are*, I'm sure it's out of the goodwill of their overseers--so that their mothers can keep an eye on them...Urisk children are not like Gardnerian children. They are not First Children. They need structure and hard work to rein in their baser instincts. They lack the intelligence, the sensibility...the soul of our people'" (p. 358).

Carve the Mark

Examples of the dark aggressor trope:

- "Sometimes it is easy to see why people become what they are...Ryzek and Cyra, children of a tyrant...Lazmet, child of a woman who murdered her own brothers and sisters. The violence infects each generation'" (p. 17).

- "He heard Shotet, a language he had never learned. So unlike graceful Thuvhesit, which was like wind catching snowflakes in its updraft" (p. 30).
- "I'm sure you think many foolish things....Servant of the Noaveks. You're like the dirt I remove from under my fingernails'" (p. 30).
- "You're a Noavek...Brutality is in your blood'" (p. 94).
- "The arena challenges....people killing each other for social status, or revenge, or money. It was a legal practice--even a celebrated one, these days" (p.104).
- "Akos rubbed at the marks by his elbow, and thought of the savagery of them" (p. 185). *As a kidnapped servant of the Shotet, Akos was made to mark his own skin.*
- "'No,' Cyra said, almost snapping. 'I mean...no, thank you.'
  'You Noaveks,' Malan said. 'How is it that simple words like "please" and "thank you" sound so unnatural coming from you?'" (p.260).

Children of Blood and Bone

Examples of countering the dark aggressor trope:
- "I study him, really seeing the maji for the first time. Alive, he looked three times his actual size, a beast shrouded in white. The symbols that covered his dark skin glowed as he threw our ryders through the air. With his death, the symbols have vanished. Without them, he looks strangely human. Strangely empty" (p. 185).
- "Like Binta, Zu's magic is beautiful, so different from the horrors of what Father taught me to believe" (p. 318).
- "My mind paints the flames around his face once more, but somehow they aren't as menacing. His magic made my blood run cold, but he fought for his people. *Our* people. Even the gods wouldn't fault him for that. How can I?" (p. 343).
- "I once thought she wore the face of a monster" (p. 362).
- "Be a good little maggot'....That miserable, degrading slur. Whispered with no regard" (p. 6). *This slur is repeated 52 times in the text and is used to show the pervasive dehumanization of the maji.*
  - "I wait for the slurs, but there's something worse about the way he looks at me. Distant. Removed. Like I'm some beast dragged from the mud" (p. 414).

Examples of revealing and challenging oppressive system:

- "He wants to believe that playing by the monarchy's rules will keep us safe, but nothing can protect us when those rules are rooted in hate" (p. 27).

- "...the stocks act as our kingdom's labor force....Those stuck in the stocks toil endlessly, erecting palaces, building roads, mining coal, and everything in between...it's no more than a state sanctioned death sentence. An excuse to round up my people, as if the monarchy ever needed one. With all the divîners [Maji children who have not yet developed their powers] left orphaned from the Raid, we are the ones who can't afford the monarchy's high taxes. We are the true targets of every tax raise....If I'm forced into the stocks, I'll never get out. No one who enters escapes. The labor is only supposed to last until the original debt is worked off, but when the taxes keep rising, so does the debt. Starved, beaten, and worse, the divîners are transported like cattle. Forced to work until our bodies break" (p. 28).

- "I pass the slums, I notice the vast majority of the divîners roaming its streets aren't much older than me. In Lagos, it's almost impossible for any divîner children who lived through the Raid to reach adulthood without being thrown in prison or getting forced into the stocks" (p. 52).

- *Conversation between Zélie and Inan about King Saran's actions:* "'That monster took magic away so that he could slaughter thousands. He took magic away so the innocent couldn't defend themselves...'
'He did what he thought was right.' [Inan] speaks slowly. 'But he wasn't wrong to take magic away. He was wrong for the oppression that followed...'
'Our lack of power and our oppression are one and the same, Inan. Without power we're maggots. Without power the monarchy treats us like scum!'" (p. 311).

- "'Trust the guards?'...The same guards who chained my mother by her neck? The guards who beat my father half to death? The guards who grope me whenever they have a chance, just waiting for the day they can take everything when I'm forced into the stocks?'" (pp. 311-312).

- "'You could've taken magic away without killing us. Without beating our bodies into the ground!'" (p. 415).

- "'You crushed us to build your monarchy on the backs of our blood and bone'" (p. 416).

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