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**Black Heroines in Young Adult Fiction**

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## Summary

This thesis investigates Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), Namina Forna's *The Gilded Ones* (2021), and Tracy Deonn's *Legendborn* (2020). All three books take the marginalized position of the Black woman making them the center of their story. As this thesis argues, an Intersectional framework is the most relevant when researching the lived experiences of Black women as they so often are the product of both racism and sexism simultaneously. Their unique discrimination consists of intersecting patterns of both. (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1243). This literary analysis highlights Systems of Oppression and Dominance, and Strategies of Resistance. Analyzing the Systems of Oppression and Dominance means researching underlying values and the structural issues of society and how institutionalized racism, and sexism are upheld within it. Within Strategies of Resistance, I examine how the protagonists challenge and resist these oppressive and often patriarchal systems. Another aspect of interest within the thesis is how multicultural literature works as counter-stories to the traditional white and male-dominated area of literature and can change society's racist and sexist perceptions of Black women. Nancy Larrick's article from 1965; "*The all-White World of Children's Books*" is still relevant today, where many Black children cannot relate to or find strong real-world connections in their literature experiences (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001 p. 811). The paper argues that multicultural literature is key to developing intercultural readers and understanding, and thus complies with the Norwegian Department of Education's Curriculum for Schools of 2020, which states the importance of developing intercultural understanding and multicultural literature (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2017 n.p.).

*Keywords: Children of Blood and Bone, The Gilded Ones, Legendborn, Intersectionality, Young Adult Literature, Representation, Multicultural Literature*

## Sammendrag

Denne oppgaven analyserer bøkene *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) av Tomi Adeyemi, *The Gilded Ones* (2021) av Namina Forna, og *Legendborn* (2020) av Tracy Deonn. Disse bøkene tar for seg den marginaliserte posisjonen til Afrikanske kvinner, og forteller historier fra deres perspektiv med dem som hovedperson. Denne oppgaven argumenterer for at et interseksjonelt rammeverk er det mest relevante når man forsker på den Afrikanske kvinnes opplevde erfaringer, siden de så ofte er påvirket av både rasisme og sexismen. Deres unike type diskriminering består dermed av en unik kombinasjon av disse (Crenshaw, 1991, s. 1243). Denne litterære analysen undersøker “Systemer for Undertrykkelse og Dominans”, og “Motstandsstrategier” som kommer til uttrykk i bøkene. Analyse av “Systemer for Undertrykkelse og Dominans” betyr å undersøke de underliggende verdiene og de strukturelle utfordringene i samfunnet, og hvordan institusjonalisert rasisme og sexismen opprettholdes innenfor samfunnet. Innenfor “Motstandsstrategier” undersøker jeg hvordan hovedpersonene utfordrer og kjemper mot disse undertrykkende og ofte patriarkalske systemene for undertrykkelse. Et annet sentralt poeng i oppgaven er hvordan multikulturell litteratur fungerer som alternative historier til tradisjonell hvit og mannsdominert litteratur, og kan endre samfunnets ofte rasistiske og sexistiske oppfatninger av Afrikanske kvinner. Nancy Larrick sin artikkel fra 1965; *The all-White World of Children's Books* er fortsatt relevant i dag, hvor mange ikke-hvite kan forholde seg til eller finne sterke linjer til den virkelige verden i sine litteraturopplevelser (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001 p. 811). Artikkelen argumenterer for at multikulturell litteratur er nøkkelen til å utvikle interkulturelle lesere og interkulturell forståelse, og dermed tilpasse seg Utdanningsdirektoratet sin læreplan for skoler i 2020, som understreker viktigheten av å utvikle interkulturell forståelse og multikulturell litteratur (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2017).

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*All of us in the academy and in the culture as a whole are called to renew our minds if we are to transform educational institutions—and society—so that the way we live, teach, and work can reflect our joy in cultural diversity, our passion for justice, and our love of freedom.*

*-bell hooks, 1994, p.34*

## Preface

This thesis originated from an unsatiated thirst for inclusive literature. During my master's courses with readings on bell hooks and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, it became apparent to me how unjust and non-representational popular literature is. My initial infatuation started during my reading of *Children of Blood and Bone* in 2018, the first book I ever read with a protagonist of color. This book was revolutionary to me as a white woman who had only so far been presented with a very limited range of diversity. I have been reading books all my life, loving, and needing to immerse myself into their magical worlds where everything seemed possible. Books gave me so much, and I am unsure what I would do without them. Whenever I meet someone who has never read *Harry Potter*, I am always amazed at how they got this far in life without it (Rowling, 1997). As literature has been such a big part of my own life, I was disturbed by the fact that many children are not able to see themselves in the literature they read. Finding *Children of Blood and Bone* made me realize how important representation is, and I wanted to read every book that continued the important work of showing powerful and fearless women of color. My advisor Colin Haines has been my partner in crime during this time, starting as the teacher who introduced me to these topics in class. As my advisor he has been so positive about me making it happen, helping me along the way with encouragement and critique, and being the one I could channel all the frustration to. Thank you for introducing me to the magical worlds of *The Gilded Ones* and *Legendborn*, not letting me go through life without knowing Deka and Bree who matter so much to so many. I want to thank my husband Torbjørn, who has been with me throughout this entire journey, always ready to give me lots of love and support. Lastly, I want to thank my mother-in-law Rebecca Solevåg who read my paper and gave me invaluable insight and support, my mom who always manages to make me laugh and keep writing, and my siblings who give me so much love and funny memes throughout long days.

# Introduction

“[T]he American Woman’s understanding of racism as a political tool of colonialization and imperialism is severely limited” (hooks, 1982, p. 119). With this quote, bell hooks argue that society has taught us to think about racism solely in the context of race, hatred, and discrimination. Consequently, we become unable to see racism in the context of politics and racial imperialism (hooks, 1982, p. 119). The argument is that when we think of racism as a “social evil perpetuated by prejudice white people”, we overlook racism as an internalized tool used systematically within a system of dominance to oppress certain people. Tunisian writer Albert Memmi and bell hooks (1982) advocate how racism:

is the highest expression of the colonial system and one of the most significant features of the colonialist. Not only does it establish fundamental discrimination between colonizer and colonized, a sine qua non of colonial life, but it also lays the foundation for the immutability of this life. (p. 122)

Racism is so deeply embedded within the system in which we live, and it will continue to work as a tool for dominance and oppression unless we recognize it as such. Additionally, racism, sexism, and discrimination can have a different impact based on factors like race, gender, socio-economic status, language, and background (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). In other words, racism experienced by an Indian man will be different from racism experienced by a Nigerian woman. As such, bell hooks argue that to fully understand the “black female experience and our relationship to society as a whole”, we need to simultaneously recognize the politics of racism and sexism, implementing an intersectional framework, where you don’t look at racism and sexism individually, but as a combined force (hooks, 1982, p. 13).

Tomi Adeyemi, Namina Forna, and Tracy Deonn are all young African American women, who have chosen to use their voices to raise awareness and critique upon systematic racism and sexism. They also offer themes such as intergenerational female empowerment, agency, and insight into African American culture and heritage. The authors each created a fictional space for young readers to examine real-world issues, and to “rediscover who gets to be legendary” (Deonn, 2020, p. 498). The different strategies they have applied to address these

themes of social justice make up the Systems of Dominance and oppression that this thesis will take a closer look at.

## What this study does:

This thesis investigates the young adult fiction novels *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) by Tomi Adeyemi, *The Gilded Ones* (2021) by Namina Forna, and *Legendborn* (2020) by Tracy Deonn. What all three books are doing is taking the marginalized position of the black women and making it the center of the story. The protagonist in *Children of Blood and Bone* is 16-year-old Zelig, the only person who can bring magic back to her kingdom Orisha. She belongs to the marginalized group called diviners, a magical group of people, whose magic has been taken from them, and has left them to be systematically discriminated against by society. In *The Gilded Ones*, the protagonist Deka is faced with racist remarks, living in an ultra-patriarchic society where women must hide their faces behind masks and prove their purity at the age of 16. In *Legendborn* the protagonist Bree enters the very white secret society of the Arthurian legend as the only black girl, to find out what happened to her mother. Here she tackles historic and generational trauma, loss, sexism, and racism. By centering three young black girls within a traditionally male-dominated and often white space, the writers offer young adult readers counter-narratives that can: “challenge the stereotypes often held by the dominant culture, give voice to marginalized youth, and present the complexity of racial and ethnic identity formation” (Hughes-Hassel, 2013, p. 212). The protagonists are striving to take down oppressive systems that have been centuries in the making, where patriarchal values lie at the core of all three societies.

The overall aim of this thesis is to explore how these novels construct fantasy worlds that mirror or critique our own in terms of racism and sexism, and what strategies of resistance they offer.

In addition to looking at the oppressional systems the protagonists are within, the Strategies of Resistance that the authors provide them with will also be of importance in the book discussion. An Intersectional framework has been applied in this work, where the investigation has largely been on the intersectional dynamics of gender and race, and how these interact and overlap (Cho & Crenshaw & McCall, 2013, p. 785). The other aspect of the theoretical background is the importance of multicultural representation in Children’s and young adult literature.



Intersectionality as a framework has been deemed the most appropriate within this study, as “the experiences of women of colour are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism and how these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or antiracism” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1243-1244). Black women are one marginalized group that has been researched intently within intersectionality, as their experiences are based on both the fact that they are black, and that they are women (hooks, 1982, p. 53). Intersectionality as a theoretical and methodological engagement has been used by many feminists and anti-racists, because of its willingness to expose a single axis of thinking that can deem large groups of people invisible (Cho & Crenshaw & McCall, 2013, p. 787). The framework can also be used as a tool to make visible the dynamics that are at play within a system of oppression and to find systems of resistance (Cho & Crenshaw & McCall, 2013, p. 789). This will be further explored in Chapter 1.

## Relevance for Norwegian Schools

In 1965, Nancy Larrick wrote her article *The all-White World of Children's Books*, bringing to attention the desperate need for multicultural literature (Larrick, 1965). Among the 5,206 books she examined, only 6,7 percent included “one or more black characters”, and less than 1 percent of them included contemporary African Americans without the historical element also present (Hughes-Hassel, 2013, p. 212). Larrick concluded that “There seems to be little chance of developing the humility so urgently needed for world cooperation...as long as children are brought up on gentle doses of racism through their books” (Larrick, 1965, p. 63). Many critical literacy scholars argue that the need for multicultural and diverse literature is even greater today (Hughes-Hassel, 2013, p. 213; Delgado & Stefani, 2017; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001).

Literature is a medium that holds great power, in that it helps children construct meaning and messages about their culture and their role in it. It holds up a “mirror” for them to see themselves within (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 1). When children relate to the literature they read, it can give them “positive affirmation of themselves”, and stories and characters that give them insight about themselves that they can connect with (Hefflin & Barksdale, p. 810). Within this space they can find connection to their own lives, giving their experiences meaning (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. xiii). Culturally relevant stories allow children and

young adults to “establish personal connections with characters, increasing the likelihood that reading will become an appealing activity (Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd 2001, p. 818). One of the major joys of reading fiction is the pleasure of finding characters you can relate to, and reading about their experiences, problems, and thoughts you can see yourself in (Hefflin & Barksdale, p. 810; Colby & Lyon, 2004, p. 24).

The second benefit of multicultural literature is when it works as a “window” to other cultures (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. xiii). “Stories are the oldest, most primordial meeting ground in human experience. Their allure will often provide the most effective means of overcoming otherness, of forming a new collectivity based on the shared story” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2438). Stories have the possibility of sharing knowledge, experience, thoughts, and stories about others, so that we can better understand each other and see the world through others’ eyes (Delgado, 1989, p. 2439). The more we listen to stories about others, the more acquainted we are with the praxis of listening and understanding, a praxis that can help avoid intellectual apartheid (Delgado, 1989, p. 2440). “When young children are presented with literature that only reflects their background, cultural heritage, and experiences, they may believe that their experience dominates all others” (Braden & Rodriguez, 2016, p. 58). Literature as a “Window” helps children become “Intercultural readers”, and better understand the cultural heritage of other groups (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2017). The literature needs to be inclusive to all, as the classroom is one of the main places they will interact with literature (Braden & Rodriguez, 2016, p. 58). This will be further explored in the theory part of the paper.

*Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), *The Gilded Ones* (2021), and *Legendborn* (2020) provide children with representation as a mirror and as a window. They are giving black girls representation, and even more importantly, it creates positive visibility where black girls are shown as strong, beautiful, smart, and brilliant. The books have elements of Black Girl Magic in them, a term that will in this thesis be defined as “a corrective discourse in the face of racist neglect, Black Girl Magic affirms the achievements and capabilities of young women of color that have always existed but have gone unrecognized or ignored by white society” (Whitney, 2018, p.110). Operating under this term, Black girl magic becomes a source of black girls’ greatness and excellence, a way to promote it and to gain power within it. It becomes a term that recognizes Black girls’ “contributions, strength, and resilience”,

something that has largely been used to represent “white and heteronormative girlhoods” (Whitney, 2018, p. 109).

## Conclusion

What these books are doing is bringing diversity to young adult fiction, both by including black people in either white spaces where they have been excluded (*Legendborn*), having an all-black cast (*Children of Blood and Bone*) or a world much based on our own, where girls who bleed golden are killed (*The Gilded Ones*) They deal with stories about Black women’s experiences and histories have often been silenced, bringing them front and center and valuing their experiences. In this paper, the different ways they create Systems of Oppression and Dominance, and Strategies of Resistance will be looked at with an intersectional and representational theoretical background.

# Chapter 1: Theory /Literature review / method

## Theory

### Intersectionality as a framework

In this part of the paper, the theory that will be used in the literary analysis will be presented and discussed. First, this chapter will look at intersectionality as a theory that seeks to account for the treatment and discrimination of Black women and girls in society, and how this theoretical framework is used to uncover and critique the structures within society. Second, this chapter will look at how multicultural literature can bring positive representation to the classroom, and that by following liberatory pedagogy teachings, we can create intercultural readers in Norwegian schools.

As bell hooks have observed, “I was disturbed by the white women`s liberationists insistence that race and sex were two separate issues. My life experience has shown me that the two issues were inseparable” (hooks, 1982, p. 12). During a time in American history when the fight for female and racial liberation was in full action, black women were left in a double bind (hooks, 1982, p. 3). “What had begun as a movement to free all black people from racist oppression became a movement with its primary goal the establishment of black male patriarchy” (hooks, 1982, p. 5). Black women were forced to choose between joining the black movement that “primarily served the interest of black male patriarchs” or the women`s movement that “primarily served the interests of racist white women” (hooks, 1982, p. 9). During this time, white feminists refused to acknowledge that black women were both victimized by sexist and racist oppression and tended to “romanticize the black female experience rather than discuss the negative impact of that oppression” (hooks, 1982, p. 6). Because of this refusal to recognize racial aspects within discrimination, women” had become synonymous with white women, which in turn “perpetuates racism in that it denies the existence of non-white women in America” (hooks, 1982, p. 8). This contradiction prevents black women and every non-white woman from achieving full subjectivity or selfhood (Madsen, 2000, p. 213). When feminism solely focused on one group of identification, it excluded every woman that did not also identify as “white”. This became very problematic, as black women often experience discrimination both as women and as Blacks, simultaneously (Smith, 2013, p. 1).

Black feminism arose as a critique of this “mainstream feminism” where colored women have been excluded from the women’s suffrage conversation. Black feminism became a critical theory where every minority and colored woman was included because race too became an important overlapping social variable that affected them simultaneously (Madsen, 2000, p. 213). They brought the conversation on racism into the sexism platform and started fighting against the racist and sexist socialization that had conditioned them to devalue their femaleness (hooks, 1982, p. 2). No other group in society has so had their entire “identity socialized out of existence as have black women” (hooks, 1982, p. 7). Black feminism finally created a space for women of color to insist upon an intersectional recognition of the inextricable relation between race, gender, and class (Madsen, 2000, p. 215). Intersectionality as a theory became a critique exposing the single-axis focus, and how it undermines social justice and knowledge production. Intersectionality as a theoretical framework was first introduced in the 1980s as a movement that investigated political and anti-discriminatory practices in the society, by Intersectionality facilitated the consideration of race, gender, class, and other axes of power in a wide range of academic disciplines (Cho & Crenshaw & McCall, 2013, p. 787). As a theory, it is especially useful when investigating marginalized groups, because it does not discriminate or leave out important social variables. The theory supports the notion of looking at several groups of identification at the same time, appreciating the complexity of oppression and discrimination (Cho & Crenshaw & McCall, 2013; Guittar & Guittar, 2015). The framework emphasized the fluid and overlapping categories that any individual or group has, and the complex power relationships found within these intersecting categories (Cho & Crenshaw & McCall, 2013, p. 795). Within the intersectional lens, the multiple and interconnecting layers, and social categories a person identifies with are seen as intimately linked together and operating simultaneously. When investigating the lived experiences of any individual it is therefore necessary to look at how the social dimensions work in relation to each other, rather than seeing which has the most influence on its own. This theoretical framework allows an understanding of how each category works with each other, as well as how they can manifest themselves within a social context (Guittar & Guittar, 2015, p. 657).

Intersectionality containing points from both Black feminism and Critical Race Theory can be part of giving visibility and voice back to black women who have been suffering under the “silence of the oppressed” (hooks, 1982, p. 1). By treating multiple and interconnected layers

of identity as operating in complex power relations (Gines, 2011, p. 275; Cho & Crenshaw & McCall, 2013).

One could therefore say that intersectionality is a synthesis of oppression, and these are suffered as a single synthesized experience (Smith, 2013, p. 5). Applying intersectionality as a lens means investigating social phenomena without trivializing individuals' experiences. This is the power of intersectionality, and the complex possibilities it can offer the researcher when investigating individuals' lives (Guittar & Guittar, 2015, p. 659).

Legally speaking, black women have for a long time been rendered legally "invisible". This is largely because they do not look at black women's experiences with an intersectionality lens but rather force them to choose a category. Implementing intersectionality here would mean they would get a more accurate description of the lived and experienced discrimination of Black women. They should not have to choose if they are a woman or Black first, they are both simultaneously, and their experiences are dependent on both identities (Smith, 2013, p. 3). I will use intersectionality to counter this relative invisibility, and as a method to better understand the compound effect that the synergy of race and gender has on Black women (Guittar & Guittar, 2015, p. 657).

In a time where questions like "Do black girls' lives matter" and "Why are girls of color deemed 'less worthy of protection?', Black Girl magic seems more necessary than ever (Coleman-King & Groenke, 2019, p. 128; Hines & Menefee, 2022, p. 67). Questions like these are increasing in importance and relevance because black girls are largely targeted by an assault culture, that for decades has gone unnoticed and undiscussed. Race and gender become important factors of identity when we look at oppression, assault, trauma, and healing (Coleman-King & Groenke, 2019, p. 128). Black girls are especially vulnerable to sexual assault because they are being hypersexualized by our society, something that has been a problem since before colonial times.

Scholars who write about mass sexual exploitation of black women during slavery rarely discuss its political and social impact on the status of black women. It led to a devaluation of black womanhood that permeated the psyches of all Americans and shaped the social status of all black women once slavery ended. (hooks, 1982, p. 52)

Even though black women are the largest group targeted by sexual assault, the default survivor is usually” straight, white, cisgender, middle class” girls (Coleman-King & Groenke, 2019, p. 128). Black girls’ reality and experiences with police violence and sexual assault have been quite absent from contemporary YA novels, marking their experiences as less valuable and important than those of white women (Coleman-King & Groenke, 2019, p. 124). Black girls are still experiencing different systems of oppression today. The social control they experience today is especially seen within the “overrepresentation in school disciplinary sanctions, imprisonment, physical assault by police, sexual harassment, and rape” (Coleman-King & Groenke, 2019, p. 124). “Black girls are over-policed and under-protected in various ways that are documented daily” (Hines & Menefee, 2022, p. 67). Luckily, many female authors of colour such as Tomi Adeyemi, Namina Forna, and Tracy Deonn are taking it upon themselves to write about the reality of sexual assault against black women, emphasizing the subject’s importance.

As the two most important aspects of the literary analysis in chapters 2-4, both Systems of Oppression and Dominance and Strategies of Resistance need some explaining. Within the Systems of Oppression and Dominance, I will look at the institutions within the society, specifically at how they contribute to elevate the dominant groups, while reinforcing oppression of the marginalized groups. The different social identities that one belongs to determine which groups one is placed within. The oppression that is experienced within these frames can be “discrimination, disregard, insult, control, exploitation, oppression, violence” (Sultana, 2010, p. 7). By recognizing the Systems at play, one can criticize the underlying values that evoke hate and violence and see how sexism and racism are enforced within the System (Dean-Ruzicka, 2012, p. 199). The main goal in recognizing the oppressive systems, is the opportunity it creates to resist the status quo and the systematic barriers. This way, one can lay a new foundation built on systems that are fair and just to everyone. These are the Strategies of Resistance. All three specific Systems of Oppression that are analyzed in this thesis are patriarchal. The strategies are therefore feministic, and their systems are based on feminist values of equality. The protagonists challenge these pre-made concepts of womanhood and manhood and what this entails and work to fairly distribute the power between all genders. The goal is not to take the power away from men, but for all to enjoy the freedom and access to this power. This will be further explored within the literary analysis.

## The Importance of Representation

“From the time they enter school, most African American children read literature that seldom offers messages about them, their past, or their future” (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001 p.810). Non-white characters in literature and popular culture are often either represented based on racial history, where the Black characters are depicted as slaves or maids, or they would be represented in appearance only (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001 p. 810).

Sometimes the role would be that of the sidekick to the white protagonist, only present to help them on their way to self-discovery. The role would be defined by whiteness (Moore & Coleman, 2015, p. 953). Seldom would Black people be depicted as “real people doing meaningful things” (Latimer, 1973, p. 22). As Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd (2001) argue:

If teachers continually present African American children with texts in which the main characters are predominantly animals and white people, it stands to reason that these children may begin to wonder whether they, their families, and their communities fit into the world of reading. (p. 811)

It becomes problematic when the stereotypes of the dominant culture become the only representation of Black people (Hughes-Hassel, 2013, p. 212). The reality of this is that Black children are continuously exposed to fictional worlds where all the significant and lovable characters are white. It reinforces the “inordinate value placed on whiteness in our society”, and further confirms how inferior we view blackness to be in society (Latimer, 1973, p. 21; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001 p. 810). Moor and Coleman argue that the pattern of black representation is that it’s either “marginalized, excluded, used to define whiteness, or marked as different” (Moore & Coleman, 2015, p. 954; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). One can only wonder what this does to their feelings of self-worth (Moore & Coleman, 2015, p. 962).

This “dominant framework of whiteness” in our culture is damaging both to Black children because they cannot relate to the characters they encounter, but also to all children who now interpret this as the cultural practice (Moore & Coleman, 2015, p. 964). The whiteness they are consistently met with will be the vantage point from which children will understand their social world, themselves, and their identities. They start developing notions of who in our society is “inherently desirable, lovable, and worthy of empathy and respect” (Moore & Coleman, 2015, p. 964). White children are imbedded with the notion of “superiority from



their earliest encounter with literature”, and black children receive the message that “they do not matter or count” (Latimer, 1973, p. 21). They all learn and internalize the “white default” that our society keeps reproducing by excluding black people from literature (Moore & Coleman, 2015, p. 961). Whenever children are presented with a new piece of literature, the expectation will be that the characters will be white, as they most often are. The negative representation and the exclusion of people will only keep creating more racism and colourism in the next generation because it perpetuates an existing cultural repertoire (Moore & Coleman, 2015, p. 962).

Another consequence that can arise from enforcing the white default, is a lack of emotion and empathy when the child then eventually encounters coloured characters. This became evident by the deeply racist backlash against the film adaptation of *The Hunger Games*. Among the white young adult fanbase, racist comments were flourishing about the fact that the character “Rue” was played by Amanda Stenberg, a black 13-year-old girl. In the book, Rue was described as an African American, but because of the white default and otherwise general whitewashing of the cast, the expectation they had, was for her to be white. The comments Amanda Stenberg received after the film was released was how Rue’s death was no longer a tragedy because she was black. Within these racist statements there exist an “unwillingness to define Rue in any way except as an “Other,” reflecting deep-seated prejudices stemming from historically reiterated representations of race” (Moore & Coleman, 2015, p. 961). This is in stark contrast to a society that keeps claiming itself “post-racial”. This word is usually defined as moving away from judgment and discrimination based on skin tone and ethnicity. This uprising and hate towards the black cast are based on systematic issues rather than an isolated problem based on a few people (Moore & Coleman, 2015, p. 948).

Delgado (1989) advocates strongly for the use of counternarratives to overcome “ethnocentrism and the unthinking conviction that our way of seeing the world is the only one” (p. 2439). Counter-stories can challenge negative stereotypes that are created by the dominant culture, as well as give a “voice to marginalized youth, and present the complexity of racial and ethnic identity formation” (Hughes-Hassel, 2013, p. 212). Giving a voice to those who have been silenced is so important, as it can create spaces for resisting systems of dominance and oppression and give agency to both the fictional characters but also the young reader (Andreassen, 2021, p. 3).

As we will see in the literary analysis in chapters 2-4, the systems of dominance tend to create complacency within the dominant group by creating their explanations for why certain groups are oppressed: “The dominant group justifies its privileged position using stories, stock explanations that construct reality in ways favourable to it” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2438). Delgado claims that counterstories the oppressed groups make can attack this complacency in positive ways, creating rifts in the dominant group’s theories and justifications (Delgado, 1989, p. 2438). Multicultural young adult literature such as the three literary works included in this thesis can “make the oppression and victimization of people of colour and indigenous peoples visible – visible to themselves and the majority culture. It can show that racism and inequality still exist in contemporary American society” (Hughes-Hassel, 2013, p. 225).

### Education as the Practice of Freedom

According to bell hooks, education can be one of the main sources of social change. She was taught to “embrace the very system that oppressed us, that she encouraged us to support it, to stand in awe of it, to die for it” (hooks, 1982, p. 121). These notions were created by an oppressive system, and yet she was taught to blindly trust the knowledge they had formed and shaped. She argues that educators need to teach students to think critically for themselves, to challenge and confront what they meet to be truly free (hooks, 1994, p. 149). Specifically, she advocates the use of Liberatory Pedagogy, as it promotes freedom to students (hooks, 1994, p. 148). This pedagogical method is used to broaden students’ worldviews and uses their own experiences and narratives as the base from which they can speak and connect to the academic information. This personal perspective of one’s immediate experiences used about learning is to enhance their capacity to know (hooks, 1994, p. 149). She argues that “Repressive Education Practices” are the norm and that this form of education does not promote freedom (hooks, 1994, p. 149). Students’ inputs and constant feedback, criticism, evaluation, and suggestions are valued and used every step of the way by the teacher, and the classroom becomes a place for discussion where everyone’s voice is of value (hooks, 1994, p. 205). The goal of liberatory pedagogy is to create independent students that can think critically

Other scholars follow this type of teaching, albeit under different names. Kathryn Gines calls it a Black woman philosopher’s pedagogical practices, but the goal seems to be the same (Gines, et al., 2017, p. 145). Through her education, she is trying to challenge the “traditional

white male philosophy canon as the only source of knowledge production and include diverse voices and perspectives in the courses that I teach”. By encouraging student activity, using contributions by women and people of color, and diversifying the subjects, she as bell hooks does – uses the opportunity that is education as an expression of political activism and social justice. “the classroom serves as a temporary space where we can evoke and evaluate our collective memory of what is done to us, and what we do in turn” (Russell, 1982, p. 196). Michele Russell argues that political education becomes radical when the classroom becomes this temporary space where the learning process is made conscious, the content-specific, and everyone can recognize themselves in history (Gines, et al., 2017, p. 144). This type of education makes it possible to expose systems of dominance that we are living within, and by doing so becomes liberating as we are more conscious and aware of the societal structures we live within. As bell hooks said, “how does one overthrow, change, or even challenge a system that you have been taught to admire, to love, to believe in?” (hooks, 1982, p. 121). Liberatory pedagogy creates systems of resistance because students are encouraged to be critical and explore the systems of dominance that exist around them. An example would be to collectively explore systems of oppression or internalized racism within different works of fiction, as is the goal of this paper. This type of education can create systems of resistance because it is built on exposing the problem, and critiquing and challenging what is being said rather than taking it as truth (hooks, 1994, p. 196).

In 2022, UNICEF conducted a research project on racial discrimination among Norwegian children. According to the study, where 1815 13 to 19-year-old children participated, 37% reported experiencing racism. 57% reported these racist encounters occurred at school (p.6). These findings make it clear that Norway has yet to eradicate racism, as it seems to be thriving in Norwegian schools. The students are demanding actions, among them being the need for a better language around race, as well as better education in the classroom on the topic (UNISEF, 2022, p. 17). The Norwegian curriculum of 2020 states the importance of the “development of intercultural understanding”, and the “development of attitudes” by imparting knowledge of other people and traditions (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2017, n.p.)

To develop an intercultural understanding, the students need to be subjected to and exposed to a different culture than their own. This way of using literature is regarding the “mirrors, windows and sliding glass door” metaphor, where literature lets us see other cultures and people that are different from ourselves (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. xiii). When students

are presented with multicultural literature, they emerge into a story based on people with other cultures, religions, traditions, experiences, and thoughts than themselves. They can also find common traits that make them relate to their experiences, perhaps even learn something new about themselves in the process. This metaphor will be developed further in relation to the application of the literature.

## Literature review

This paper focuses on sexism and racism experienced by three black female protagonists in the young adult speculative fiction novels *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), *The Gilded Ones* (2021), and *Legendborn* (2020). These literary works all bring the marginalized group of black women to the center of their stories and diversify this traditionally white and male-dominated area of literature. Among these three novels, *Children of Blood and Bone* is the one that so far has gotten the most academic attention. Academic attention to the other two novels has been slow in forthcoming. A literature search has revealed little of any mention of these titles at the time of this writing. As to the reasons behind this, the date of publication is probably the most relevant. Publishing an academic paper can be a time-consuming task and seeing the two other novels were published in 2020 and 2021, not much time has elapsed. Firstly, I will mention the three academic articles published on *Children of Blood and Bone*. Secondly, I will look at some of the other sources that became important, beyond the academic field.

The first academic article on *Children of Blood and Bone* is *Notes toward a Black Fantastic: Black Atlantic Flights beyond Afrofuturism in Young Adult Literature* by Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019). This article focuses on how the contemporary Black young adult literature uses the fantastic element to comment on the unique black experience and concerns. The article looks at literary works whose focus lies on the Black imagination within storytelling, as well as looking at why they so often end up falling into the “dark fantastic cycle” (Thomas, 2019, p. 287). Thomas’s research literature goes beyond Afrofuturism, where she concludes how tragedy is more often deployed than a triumph (Thomas, 2019).

The second article is *The Human and its Others: A Posthumanist Reading of Tomi Adeyemi’s Children of Blood and Bone and N.K. Jemisin’s The Fifth Season* by John Marvin Walter

(2019). Walter looks at how the systems of power within these two books define humanity and its “other” and searches for the underlying assumptions about humanity within the literature (Walter, 2019). The books have been selected because both are dealing with oppression and othering, they have a protagonist who belongs to an oppressed group, and both are written by American women of color. The article’s focus on oppression is very similar to that of this thesis and therefore added value to the literary analysis

The third article is *Realities of the Fantasy: Violence and Trauma in Tomi Adeyemi’s Children of blood and bone* by Kumar and Dr. Sreelakshmi (2021). This article looks at how violence and trauma are inflicted and experienced by the characters in the book, and how the cycle of violence is an integral part of the work. The researchers connect the violence and state control to that of colonial masters, and research how the main characters deal with their individual and collective trauma. The paper concludes that the female characters cope better with the trauma and violence inflicted on them and use it for personal development, while the King succumbs to his trauma in a “self-perpetuating cycle of violence” (Kuma & Dr. Sreelakshmi, 2021). The article has an intersectional approach in which gender and race become important, and the article proved valuable when researching the underlying structures of society within Systems of Oppression and Dominance.

Looking beyond the academic field, all three books have generated a lot of discussion and posts among fans on different digital platforms. Fans of all ages, genders, and ethnicities have posted their enthusiasm and opinions on the books in everything from blog posts to articles in magazines, often doing interviews with the authors. These have been of great use as academic articles were scarce to find. My goal was to see the reader’s reactions and if the books worked as mirrors for children of color as was their goal. I will mention some of these articles as they have been important in this research. Vreeken (2021) “*You just want our blood on this floor*” *Review of Namina Forna’s The Gilded Ones* is one of these sources used in the thesis. The article is part book review part a conversation with the book’s author, Namina Forna, and why she wrote this particular story. Puckett-Pope’s article in Elle (2021) *Namina Forna’s The Gilded Ones Brings The Beauty And Tragedy Of Sierra Leone To YA* is a story about the author and her background, and how this influences her writing. Farrah Penn (2021) conducted an interview with Forna in her article *Namina Forna’s Feminist Fantasy Novel “The Gilded Ones” Shines A Spotlight On Femme Oppression*. Questions about her choices within the book and how it came to be is the focus point. These inputs helped greatly when

trying to understand where the writer was finding her inspiration. Novaro (2019) wrote *Women make magic, men wage war: Gender dichotomies in Children of Blood and Bone*. In her article she discusses the different gender roles in the book and how these are portrayed throughout the book, with women being the superior magical beings. Lawrence (2018) writes in her article “*Children of Blood and Bone*” by Author Tomi Adeyemi on Creating a World Where Readers of Color Can See Themselves about the importance of positive, Black representation and how Adeyemi contributes to this.

These articles show how much buzz has been created outside of academia, especially on *The Gilded Ones* and *Children of Blood and Bone*. This is only a small collection of what the readers have written on the books. Many of them express how this representation was sorely needed when they grew up, and how important it is to spread, what has been called, #BlackGirlMagic. This term has become a rallying phrase that Black Women have taken up as a “critical reimagining of their subject positionalities as Black women” (Mason, 2021, p. 707). The term carries with it political, historical, and cultural interoperations of Black women and girls, and their lives in relation to Western philosophic thought (Mason, 2021, p. 707). The hashtag is a reclaiming of selfhood and providing opportunities for reimagining Black womanhood. Movements like #WeNeedDiverseLiterature and #BlackLivesMatter are also promoting multicultural literature in the classroom.

## Method Section

The method used in this paper is a literary analysis, where I have chosen three books that center Black girls as their main protagonists. Specifically, I will analyse the Systems of Oppression and Dominance the three authors have created in their novels, and how these relate to real-world issues that affect Black girls. I will look at similarities and differences within their choices and look at the Systems of Resistance they offer to their protagonists. The literary works are *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) by Tomi Adeyemi, *The Gilded Ones* (2021) by Namina Forna, and *Legendborn* (2020) by Tracy Deonn. These have been divided into three separate chapters, with a comparison in the end.

In the research on the novels, the academic research available in Oria was limited, as previously mentioned in the literature review. What was important to me was the author’s reflections and thoughts on the books, and why they wanted to write them. These sources

were discovered through extensive google searches, where a whole world of articles can be found discussing these books and their topics on social justice. The readers expressed their love for the books and what it meant to them to finally be able to read books that they recognize themselves in. Some of these articles from blogposts to magazine interviews have been used in this paper, as this was one perspective that I wanted to include. The fact that all three books are so outspoken on racism and sexism and the intersecting discrimination that black girls experience makes the books even greater in my opinion, as it urges the reader to look at these issues in the world on a systematic level, and they encourage them to fight oppression on these levels.

Some of the most important word-searches in Oria and Google Scholar were *feminism, black feminism, critical race theory, intersectionality of race and gender, bell hooks, Kimberlè Crenshaw, Alice Walker, counter-story, representation of race and gender, multicultural literature, mirrors, windows and sliding doors, African American representation, diverse literature, Afrofuturism, Olivia Butler, slavery in YA fiction, decolonisation, Children of Blood and Bone, The Gilded Ones, Legendborn.*

During the extensive reading process, I specifically looked out for articles that talked about sexism or racism, intersectionality, Black representation, and multicultural literature. Articles that did not include any of these topics or related to them in some way, providing critique or the history of the theory were excluded from the search. Some of the most influential articles that have been included will be summed up and put into context.

Under the theoretical framework of intersectionality, many writers have made themselves and their books or articles especially useful to this thesis. Under will give a short description of their value and the context they have been used in. In bell hooks' work (1982) *Ain't I a woman*, she writes about the devaluation of Black womanhood, the exclusion of Black women within feminism, and how Black women were treated during slavery. She talks about the intersecting experiences of being a Black woman, and how they find themselves in a double bind. In her second book *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) she argues for the use of liberatory pedagogy, and how it is a practice of freedom. Didactics and classroom practice those values of critical thinking, challenging, and confronting, and using the student's own experiences as a starting point to learning academic subjects. Cho & Crenshaw & McCall (2013) *Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis* argue for the use of Intersectionality, the different ways of using it and the layers of

intersectionality. Where intersectionality comes from, and its usefulness as an analytic tool in addressing other marginalized communities. Kathryn Gines's (2011) *Black Feminism and Intersectional analyses* support this, by writing a defense of intersectionality, mentioning the different critiques the framework has gotten and how to use intersectionality as a tool. Offering a review of previously silenced African American female voices in her paper. Offering groundwork and the history of Intersectionality. Guittar & Guittar (2015) *Intersectionality* builds on this research. They wish to draw scholarly attention to how varied people's lived experiences are, and that to see the full picture of someone's experiences one needs to use an intersectional framework. Delgado & Stefancic (2017) *Critical Race Theory*: is an introduction to critical race theory, and how beneficial it is to have a language to talk about race. They also mention counter-storytelling and the double bind that black women in America find themselves in when legal systems do not have an intersectional approach.

On the representation of marginalized voices in literature, Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd (2001) *African American children's literature that helps students find themselves* consider the importance of African American children to find themselves within the literature they are presented with and relate to the characters and their experiences. They also discuss what the consequences can be when one never sees oneself in the literature, and how to choose quality African American literature. Building upon their research, Colby & Lyon (2004) *Heightening Awareness about the Importance of Using Multicultural Literature* set out to explore how prospective teachers' understanding of the importance of using multicultural literature in school. They divided the responses into five categories, it opened my eyes, finding yourself, opening their minds, not just African Americans and it is my responsibility. Bettye Latimer (1973) wrote an article called *Children's books and racism*, where she shares her results from an extensive reading process on five traps, flaws, or "syndromes" that is often found in children's literature. She argues that children's literature further reflects the segregated world we live in, where whiteness has an inordinate value in our society. Botelho & Rudman's book (2009) *Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children's Literature* also states the importance of multicultural representation and diversity in Children's literature, as well as putting it within the intersectional context of race and gender. The book argues that multicultural literature can be both a mirror for the reader to see themselves, a window to learn about other cultures, and a door to the world. Delgado's (1989) *Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative* talk about counterstories, and how storytelling is of great importance and can make us understand each other better and bring us closer. Challenge the listener to challenge



assumptions, lowering their defenses and jarring their complacency. Hughes-Hassel's (2013) *Multicultural Young Adult Literature as a Form of Counter-Storytelling* builds upon Delgado, where she too argues for the importance of multicultural children's literature, and how these can function as counter-stories, and cast doubt over myths and stereotypes of other people. She also writes about how stories can both help us learn about other people, and ourselves better.

## Chapter 2: Children of Blood and Bone

### Introduction

In this chapter, the focus will first be on Nigerian American writer Tomi Adeyemi's debut novel *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018). The literary analysis of the book will be based on the Systems of Oppression and Dominance she has created within her fictional realms, as well as the System of Resistance that it offers. In Adeyemi's childhood, she never met stories that acted as a "mirror", where she could see herself, her culture, or her experiences represented. Realizing the importance of representation and the impact this can have, she took matters into her own hands and wrote *Children of Blood and Bone*. This is a book filled with positive representation where the entire cast is unmistakably all black, and the story is deeply rooted in African culture and mythology. She wrote the story so that young readers of color, and especially black girls felt seen "and not just seen, I want them to feel epic and know that they are epic" (Lawrence, 2018, p. 1). The book is told in first-person, where the reader experiences the story from the points of view of the central protagonist, Zelig, and from the princess and prince of Orisha, Amari, and Inan. By centering the story around their voices, the reader gets to feel the full impact of the hardship and discrimination of the protagonist. It creates an emotional availability, empathy, and recognition of social injustice (Heflin and Barksdale-Ladd 2001, 818; Delgado, 1989, p. 2440). The text is created to shed a light on the current racial injustices happening in America, where black people are perceived to be targeted by police. Adeyemi has based many of her fictional characters on victims of police violence in America (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 526). She also shows readers how black girls are beautiful, fierce, and the heroes of the story (Delgado, 1989, p. 2439).

This chapter will provide a brief synopsis of *Children of Blood and Bone*, followed by an analysis of how systems of dominance and oppression are represented and how the central characters resist that oppression. A long time ago, the maji in Orisha wielded great power, a power they had been blessed with by the Gods and Goddesses. Eleven years ago, King Saran stripped the lands from magic, severing all ties between the maji and the Gods. He slaughters every maji, leaving only those under thirteen whose powers had not been awakened yet: The diviners. The King did this to make sure they would never rise to power ever again. The main protagonist Zelig is forced to watch her mother's murder at the tender age of six. Since then, Zelig's people who can be identified by their white hair and silver eyes have been referred to

by the slur “maggots”. They are facing oppression, abuse, slavery, and taxed beyond means of payment by the oppressive state run by the King. This will be the focus on this next section, Systems of Oppression and Dominance within Orisha. After that, I will look at the System of Resistance where Zelig, her brother Tzain and princess Amari come together to bring magic back and fight the oppressional system.

## Systems of oppression and dominance

As introduced in Chapter 1, every book has created its own Systems of Oppression and Dominance. The theoretical frame the system will be analyzed within is intersectionality, where gender, race and to some extent class will be the key components. The system within *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) will later be compared to the system within *The Gilded Ones* (2021) and *Legendborn* (2020).

In many ways, the oppressional system in Orisha utilizes several suppression techniques like the colonial masters that dominated in the African continent (Kuma & Sreelakshmi, 2021, p. 9055; Thiong'o, 1986, p. 8). As Kenyan post-colonial theorist and novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o writes in his important work *Decolonizing the Mind, The politics of Language in African Literature*, one's language is of great importance to the building of identity (p. 11-13). He shares the traumatic experience of the colonialization of Kenya where English was the only language allowed. In *Children of Blood and Bone*, the magical language *Yoruba* is banned by the System of Oppression, and Orishan was instated as the only allowed language. It became punishable by law to speak Yoruba, as happened under colonialization. This was used as a way of controlling their minds and their spirits, therefore making the conquest of power over the subjects permanent (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 10). Language has strong suggestive power that goes well beyond any communicative or lexical meanings. Language is strongly connected to human culture, experiences, perceptions of reality, the world and self. In its entirety, language can be explained as the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 16). Enforcing the colonial language is a way for the oppressors to reinforce dominance, as it alienates the people from their own “culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature” (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 17). Living under such circumstances, one loses the harmony between language and culture, and more control is granted to the oppressors (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 11).

Yoruba is the language of the Gods and of magic, and Zelig describes the loss of it as tantamount to losing all ties to her magical heritage. Without it, the oppressed maji will no longer be able to read the incantations or perform the magical rituals, severing all ties they had to the gods, to ensure the continuation of power. Since her mother was killed, Zelig has only ever heard the harsh stops and guttural sounds of “Orishan, the tongue we are forced to speak. It’s been so long since I heard an incantation, too long since the language of my people didn’t only exist in my memories” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 90). The elevation of the Orishan language is a conscious way of systematic suppression of the marginalized maji and diviners and gives the King great power over his people.

The King then went on to change the storyline of the past to one that fit his plans better, where the diviner heritage became “a thing to hate” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 27). “In the beginning, white hair was a sign of the powers of heaven and earth. It held beauty and virtue and love, it meant we were blessed by the gods above” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 27). The system the King created continuously oppresses the diviners, making sure of their low status and minimal access to power within the society, The system is based on oppression, exploitation, violence, and fear. “We are the people who fill the king’s prisons, the people our kingdom turns into laborers. The people Orishans try to chase out of their features, outlawing our lineage as if white hair and dead magic were a societal stain” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 27). Because the maji and diviners have access to magic and therefore presented themselves as something “other”, the non-magical people *koshidans* became afraid and jealous. The hate grew stronger and stronger; “Over generations, love of the maji turned into fear. Fear turned into hate. Hate transformed into violence, a desire to wipe the maji away” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 15). As the King changed the storyline and turned diviners into something to hate, the *koshidans* started believing that they as a group possess unparalleled greatness and supremacy over the diviners. Greater and greater separation and xenophobia started building, casting them out of society. In the end, one can argue that within the system there exists a collective narcissism that continues the belief that diviners deserve to be treated as maggots. This psychological division of people is very similar to the colonial master, who thought himself to be above the people he colonized (Kuma, 2021, p. 9055).

The very laws and “justice system” in Orisha are made to keep them in their place, not to protect them. “Nothing can protect us when those rules are rooted in hate” (Adeyemi, 2018,

p. 27). The King continues to further fuel this hate by implementing higher and higher divîner taxes. Anyone housing a divîner must also pay a fine, with a rapidly increasing sum. This damaging financial sanction keeps divîners from ever being prosperous and reaching any level of power in the society. Those who can't pay the tax are sold to the stocks, which acts as a state-sponsored death penalty: “We are the people who fill the kings’ prisons, the people our kingdom turns into laborers” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 28). They are sold into slavery or to the underground brothels, where they have no rights and cannot repay the debt for which they were initially sent (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 30). They are subjected to violent and torturous treatment, without trial.

As a society in which the power of women (here magic) has been subjugated and overthrown, it is largely controlled using violence and brutality (Novaro, 2019). The people that are in a position of power are largely men, apart from the King’s right hand and lover, Keita whom he entrusts with important tasks. The guards mentioned in the book are all men, who treat women – and especially divîner women with little respect. Whenever their path crosses, they demean and devalue her being by using physical power and violence: “He grabs me by the hair – pain laces through my skull. In an instant the guard slams me to the ground facedown, knocking my breath out” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 11). Violence is regularly and systematically used to express dominance over the divîners. This systematic oppression resonates with our own world, where police brutality towards African Americans is an ongoing issue. On several occasions, the guards kill innocent divîner children; “the acid smell of burnt flesh hits me as the stocker presses the cane into the boy’s back” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 53). Their actions are cruel and violent and socially sanctioned. Their collective narcissism allows them to view the divîner as less than themselves, someone who can be treated as property. “The boy’s back is already ripped raw from former beatings, but neither monster lets up. He’ll die under their blows” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 215). These episodes describe very well what life as a divîner is. They are cast away, treated like lesser people, always afraid, and always living in fear of the violence the system may inflict on them. When Zelig encounters the first boy being beaten to death, she tells herself to “Move, or that’ll be you” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 53). Because what the guard is doing is legal, there is no way for her to stop him in the name of justice. She too would be flogged. A divîners experiences with the police are quite different from the princes. He tries to reason with Zelig to listen to the guards, as he has never experienced them doing anything out of order. “Trust the guards? I scream” (Adeyemi, 2018. p. 311). His experiences as a noble and a man are the experiences of the one the system was created for. Zelig on the

other hand, has only negative experiences with them, as they treat her with anything but respect. The system is set against her in every way possible, and when she realized this, the fear paralyzes her, and she crumbles to the ground. As Zelig tells Inan: “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” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 313).

Institutional crime for economic and psychological gain such as sexual assault is socially sanctioned in Orisha, with no laws to protect the diviners (hooks, 1982, p. 51). This is a problematic and yet not uncommon “method” men use to diminish women and their worth (hooks, 1982, p. 62). In the eyes of the guards the diviners are dehumanized and can be bought at their whim for 2 bronze pieces; “you have your fair share of maggots’ He grips my thigh with a rough hand ‘I’ll start with this one” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 11). This entitlement to female bodies is a common praxis within the violent walls of a patriarchal state, as the men are the ones in power and the ones who stand for most of the sexual assault. “His touch erases everything I am, everything I’ve fought so hard to become” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 12). There is no safe space for women in a world designed purely around a man’s urges and desires. This is a constant reminder of their safety, and the threat is forever present. Zelig feels the need to help Amari in her time of need even though she and her family have nothing left because the other option is to leave her alone with the violent guards; “will the guards take turn passing her around? Destroy her from within until she suffocates from grief?” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 58). Black women have continued to be sexually assaulted by men long after slavery ended, and it is used as yet another system of oppression against them. The use of “erasure, gaslighting, and brutality” are ever-present to reinforce this system (Patterson-Hurst, 2021).

The patriarchal structure and the gender roles that often come with this system limit women in several ways. The King’s two children, Amari and Inan are brought up with very different roles intended for them. Amari’s role is limited to her beauty and her silence. The roles of duties for women are traditional and have already been decided for them. They are “congratulated on being “good little women” and then told to sit down and shut up” (hooks, 1982, p. 7). Both Amari and the Queen are powerless because of their gender. Amari expresses her discontentment with being treated with so little freedom; “I am a princess, not a prop”, and will later discover what she is capable of when free from the shackles of the patriarchal system (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 264). She recognizes this violent circle that is her

father's rule and wishes herself to take over as queen to create a better Orisha; "Do not treat me any differently. My father is responsible for this pain. *I will be the one to fix it*" (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 264). The Queen's freedom is limited also, just like her daughter Amari. Her role in the palace is to keep the king happy. To affect what happens to her children and herself, she must "Scheme and manipulate through sympathy" to try and influence his will (hooks, 1982, p. 101). Her life, freedom, and actions are therefore greatly dominated by her husband, and she must tread carefully so as to not upset him. Even when she knows her son will receive a brutal beating from the King, "she can't interfere. Not unless she wants to face father's wrath herself" (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 72). The privilege of manhood is only upkept if women are kept in their place, which the systems make sure of (hooks, 1982, p. 103).

Inan on the other hand, blinded by the male ego of the system, believes he needs to save Amari "from herself". While living in this society that continues to oppress women, he too starts believing in her inferiority. His role in the palace is that of the "youngest captain in history" (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 35). His freedom is not taken away as with Amari's, and he joins the soldiers in their travels around Orisha, while Amari has never seen the lands beyond Lagos, the capital city, That is not to say that the prince only reaps benefits from the patriarchal system. He too experiences violence within its cage. He repeatedly receives "brutal beating(s)", and lives in constant fear of his father; "I wonder how badly this will hurt. If Father doesn't ask me to remove my armor, he'll go for my face" (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 73). This male-dominated culture is one that condones violence in men as something positive, as an expression of masculinity (hooks, 1982, p. 104). This has negative consequences for both women and men, as it only generates more violence and more control to those who wield it. Once the circle of violence started, it seems unable to stop.

Lastly, I want to mention the systematic racist backdrop that Adeyemi utilizes throughout the text. Our protagonist Zelig is described as ebony-skinned with silvery eyes and white hair, a trait shared with the other diviners. Upon meeting a young girl from Zelig's village who appears lighter-skinned, Inan rationalizes this with; "Perhaps there's some nobility in her blood. A father who played in the mud" (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 108). The rest of the people living in her fisher-village Ibadan seems to be dark-skinned too. Nobility, on the other hand, is shown through the lightness of one's skin. Amari finds herself at the hands of her mother's scrutiny, always looking for new ways to make her appear lighter, and not "look like a farmer's hand" (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 36). Her mother has a "strict beauty regiment", often at

great expense on Amari's part: "I cringe, remembering the sharp pain and the vinegar stench of her last cosmetic concoction" (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 36). Because Amari has a "dark copper skin", she can hear whispers and gossip all over the palace where the others question Amari's nobility: "She is far too dark to be the kings" (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 32). The noblewomen go to extended lengths to make themselves conform to this standard, where the character's appearance change from "shar[ing] her mother's mahogany coloring" to then appearing with a "soft brown complexion" weeks later (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 36). Even in the fictional world colorism persists, and recognizing it as a structural problem, makes it easier to see how the dominant system in Orisha is oppressing certain groups.

## Systems of resistance

The first System of Resistance that makes itself clear is the way the text works as a counternarrative (Delgado, 1989, p. 2439). As discussed above, the system works to create a new storyline where the King saved the kingdom by destroying magic and continuously oppressing the "antagonists" of the story. This story is enforced and accepted by most *koshidans* (non-magical people). By oppressing the diviners in the different ways that they do, calling them maggots, enslaving, imprisoning, discriminating, and taxing them – the system is trying to change the story and the power structure. The benefits of counter-stories as mentioned in the theory chapter are the fact that they are creating spaces where resistance is possible, and the agency is given to the black heroine of the story (Andreassen, 2021, p. 3). Zelig and the others fighting alongside her fight to break out of this self-condemnation imposed upon them, and search for their own truth (Delgado, 1989, p. 2437). The road to self-discovery is a tough one where she must endure much pain, injustice, and loss. By resisting the system, staying true to who she is, and fighting for the freedom of those she loves, she can attack the complacency that has kept her people in shackles for so long (Delgado, 1989, p. 2438).

Even though Zelig and the other diviner children have been told the narrative created by the oppressive system since they could walk, they are trained by Mama Agba to think critically of what they see around them. She gives them hope and the knowledge that they need to fully understand how the system works against them. Because of this, she can challenge and confront the oppressive system, because she believes it can be just. She uses her education from Mama Agba to break the cycle of oppression, and become truly free (hooks, 1994, p.



149). Adeyemi has created space for Zelig to be herself with everything that entails, with a full range of emotions and as a “real” person “doing meaningful things” (Latimer, 1973, p. 22). Zelig’s life, her thoughts, feelings, and experience all become important. She is at the center of the story, where readers can see the world through her eyes (Delgado, 1989, p. 2438). Her story is an inspiration to others experiencing similar treatment as Zelig, and it speaks to the reality of what we can achieve through education, when it becomes a “practice of freedom”, as Mama Agba seems to be practicing (hooks, 1994, p. 159).

Another System of Resistance that this text is providing is within the representation of marginalized voices. Coming back to the metaphor of “Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors”, this story fulfills these roles that literature can have. Firstly, it works as a mirror for those who can see themselves represented as the heroes, the ones who save the world. Their traditions, language, and agency matter, and are valued as a part of popular culture. Secondly, the book is a window for the children and young adults who find themselves on the outside, given the opportunity to look into a new and exciting narrative with different languages, characters, and cultures. Adeyemi packs her book full of West African mythology, traditions, and language in her story, where her West African studies and background have been a great influence and inspiration to her (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 533). Some examples are all the Gods and Goddesses, which are based largely on African mythology. This mythology has for centuries now been diminished and attempted to be eradicated by European colonialists who were forcing Christianity upon the African continent (Shepherd, 2019, p. 93). Adeyemi brings it back, rewriting future history where this mythology now will be a part of popular literature. She resists this oppression that has been going on since colonial times and shows the beauty and intricate history of West Africa that has survived despite everything. Thirdly, the reader is given a unique opportunity to look through the “sliding glass door” by inviting them to interact with the text and its content, entering important conversations, as well as tackling some pretty heavy themes (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, xiii).

By dealing with topics like racism and sexism, Adeyemi comments on issues we see within our own society. A place of social justice, as the discrimination and oppression within the book has clear connotations to our own society. By showing the reader what types of systems keep certain groups oppressed, she is giving the reader a roadmap and knowledge on how the reader can recognize these systems for themselves. One of these methods is how the women of Orisha is working continuously against the limitations that exist within the patriarchal rule.

Women are shown as strong leaders, who fight for those who cannot fight for themselves. Both the King and Inan fight to keep the power, believing they will keep Orisha safe by eradicating all maji and diviners. The King lost his previous family to a maji uprising and has never been able to heal from the experience. He, therefore, believes it important for both of his children to be able to protect themselves against the threat of magic ever rising again. He forces his children to learn how to fight. Amari is because of it a great fighter, albeit traumatized from having to fight with real swords against her brother. “My heart lurches as I take in the gruesome scar carved along Amari’s spine. The mark ripples across her skin, so ghastly it makes my own skin tingle with pain” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 121). Despite this, Amari manages to use her skill in the fight against the system her father created. In secret, under the cover of a seamstress’s shop, Mama Agba – a mentor to the young diviner children in her village - teaches Zelig and the others to fight. “I teach the way of the staff to any girl who wants to learn because in this world there will always be men who wish you harm” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 16). She knows from experience that the “hatred and violence toward you remain”, and they need to know how to protect themselves because no one else will (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 16). The system punishes her for keeping company with diviners, and she must often pay everything she has to diviner-taxes. Yet she continues to fight the system with a fire burning so bright it ignites something lost within Zelig too.

Another system of Resistance that Adeyemi provides the reader with is where she centers her story around black girls who have largely been excluded from popular literature previously. Speaking to the young adult audience, she paints a picture of the current unjust position they are placed within today, where Black people in America live under the very real threat of police violence. “He doesn’t understand what it’s like to be me, to walk around in a diviner’s skin. To jump every time a guard appears, never knowing how a confrontation will end” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 48). The diviners are representational of the Black community in the way they are treated by the system. Several violent episodes erupt where they are beaten to death, sent into slavery, and treated like animals. Adeyemi herself comments in the Author’s note how “I kept turning on the news and seeing stories of unarmed black men, women, and children being shot by the police” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 526). In many cases, the police officers who kill them are “acquitted of all charges” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 527). The fear and helplessness she felt seeing how Black people are treated with systematic violence in America made her turn to this book, where she could engage the next generation into action. She urges the reader to continue the fight; “If you cried for Zulaikha and Salim, cry for

innocent children like Jordan Edwards, Tamir Rice, and Aiyana Stanley-Jones. They were fifteen, twelve, and seven when they were shot by the police” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 526). By saying naming real victims of police violence, she manages to make the fictional tale deeply real and personal.

## Conclusion

Adeyemi wrote *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) because she believed that the readers have the power, just like Zelig and Amari have – to “change the evils in the world” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 527). She has created a fictional System of Oppression that mirror real-world issues, showing through Zelig how women from marginalized groups are treated within the system. Writing from her perspective invites the reader into the intersectionality of her oppression and see clearly how discrimination changes based on gender, race, and class privileges. The book raises awareness of important topics, working as a counternarrative where the marginalized voice is heard and valued. Breaking out of any self-condemnation that the system is trying to enforce on them is offered as a System of Resistance, something that will also make itself relevant in the next book, as you will see in chapter 3.

# Chapter 3: The Gilded Ones

## Introduction

This chapter analyzes West African American writer Namina Forna's *The Gilded Ones* (2021). Her source of inspiration is largely from her own experiences as a Black woman in Sierra Leone and America. She found there to be no difference in the degree of sexism she was experiencing, only in the fact that America hides it better (Forna, 2021, p. 413). The fictional world she has created shares great similarities with our own. It becomes a commentary on the systems of dominance Black girls experience today, symbolized using fictional elements. As with Tomi Adeyemi, Namina Forna too found the literary world she loved to immerse herself in lacking characters looking like her. She wanted to write a book that "showed girls that they could be the heroes, that they could fight for what's right" (Forna, 2021, n.p.). The road to publishing was not a straightforward one for Namina Forna. When she wrote the book in 2012, people questioned the need for her main character to be a "person of color", and she decided not to publish it (Vreeken, 2021, 2). When she arrived in America after fleeing the war that had broken out in Sierra Leone, she was for the first time labeled "Black".

The American understanding of Blackness, I did not have it. It was only when I came to America that that title was put upon me, and it had a set of expectations along with that. (...) I started doubting myself. That's the gaslighting America does, especially as it relates to Blackness. (Puckett-Pope, 2021, 16)

As nearly a decade passed, productions featuring people of colour became increasingly more popular: "[m]ovies like Black Panther and books like Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* have ushered in a renaissance of Black art and culture" (Vreeken, 2021, 3). This chapter will provide a brief synopsis of *The Gilded Ones*, followed by an analysis of how the systems of dominance and oppression are represented, followed by the System of Resistance.

**First I will present a short synopsis of the book, followed by the literary analysis of the Systems of Oppression and Dominance, and the Strategies of Resistance.** 16-year-old

Deka lives within the Kingdom of Otera, a deeply religious and patriarchal society where women live to be of service to men. They are forced to cut themselves during the Ritual of Purity, to prove their red blood. Those who bleed golden are cast aside, deemed impure, and sentenced to death by the Death Mandate. These are the alaki, part gods and part humans with extraordinary gifts. As Deka is tortured and killed several times by the village priests, she is given a choice by “White Hands”: die or fight in the army of Impure Ones for 20 years and reach absolution in the eyes of the Infinite Father. The female alaki warriors are trained to protect the society that has cast them aside. They are to kill the “monstrous deathskhrieks”, who turn out to be the beings alaki girls turn into after their final death. Deka realizes how the Infinite Wisdom is oppressive towards all girls, and that they need to fight the racist and male-dominated system to be free.

## Systems of oppression and dominance

One of the main Systems of Oppression in Otera is the religious belief system that is given a judicial role in Otera. These religious laws are based on an ultra-patriarchal society in which women are expected to be submissive to men; “blessed are the meek and subservient, the humble and true daughters of man, for they are unsullied in the face of the infinite father” (Forna, 2021, p. 10). Otera is greatly dominated by this patriarchal culture in which women are subservient to men in all areas of their lives, only created to be “helpmeets to men”, tasked with serving their every “desire and command” (Forna, 2021, p. 10). There are several connotations between the fictive faith of “Infinite Wisdoms” and Christianity. One example is from the New Testament, Matthew 5:3–12 “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Augustyn, 2019, 3). The way the sentence is structured, as well as the wording, gives strong connotations to this passage from the Bible. It can be argued that the religion created in the book is somewhat based on as well as a critique of Christianity, in the way it can work as a tool to suppress women.

Looking at some of the specific ways in which this patriarchal-religious society oppresses the “true daughters of man”: No girl is allowed to receive an education, practically ensuring their submission to the men in power. They are also kept out of other areas of society, as they are not allowed to have a job, or even go outside the house without a male escort (Forna, 2021, p. 12). This is done to keep the woman dependent on the man, giving him all the power, and

limiting her freedom to choose. There are also other examples of situations where women are given “choices” that are so limited one can question if it even counts as a choice. The protagonist Deka stands between staying in the dungeon where they will harvest her blood and kill her until she reaches her final death, or she can join the emperor’s army of the impure ones and reach absolution within 20 years.

The Infinite Wisdoms caution women over the age of 16 to hide their faces behind masks in public: “Only the impure, blaspheming, and unchaste woman remains revealed under the eyes of Oyomo” (Forna, 2021, p. 9). The more shame a family relates to, the more the women will hide their body as to become purer in the eyes of Oyomo. Deka’s family bears the shame of having one of her father’s cousins bleed golden: “The villagers still whisper about the day she was dragged away by the priests, never to be seen again” (Forna, 2021, p. 9).

“That’s why they’re always acting so holy—always the first in temple, my aunts masked so even their mouths are hidden from view. (...) My aunts, however, even have little squares of sheer cloth covering their eyes” (Forna, 2021, p. 9). Shame and purity are used and held against women in society, to make them smaller and in need of continuously proving themselves and their worth. It is common practice for the girls to be sent away to be “resting in isolation” in preparation for the Ritual, as they are forbidden to cut themselves on anything sharp prior to the Ritual (Forna, 2021, p. 8). By implementing this rule, the priests can capture the impure ones, harvest their blood, and follow through with the Death Mandate. The laws are made by the men in power to keep women in their place and to make them complacent and subordinate to their every demand.

The use of the Death Mandate is symbolic of how the female body is commercialized and monetized, and how women are “so often marginalized and then told that it was for our own good (Penn, 2021, 1). This commercialization is shown in practice by the girls being economically exploited for their golden blood. Firstly, they are told that their blood is “cursed”, and that this marks them as “inhuman, demonic” in the eyes of the Infinite Father. The shame and stigma imposed on them for being alaki are so great, that they too start believing themselves to be an “abomination” (Forna, 2021, p. 39). They are told over and over how alaki are “worthless, unwanted. This is what they call your kind” (Forna, 2021, p. 41). When someone is told time and time again, that they are unworthy, they will start believing it themselves. After learning the truth about who she is, she asks the elder to kill her again: “All I have to do is submit, subject myself to the flames, and perhaps then Oyomo will

forgive me for my impurity” (Forna, 2021, p. 39). Even though Deka has done nothing wrong, and followed the rules all her life, she truly believes the lies she is told and begs for absolution and forgiveness. This system of making the girls feel unworthy of life is employed as a scheme to make them more compliable about the atrocities they will commit. Even though they tell her she is a demon, her pure golden blood has great economical value to them. They “enrich themselves off your suffering”, like “parasites, quite literally draining the blood from you” (Forna, 2021, p. 47). All they see her as is a “precious commodity” that they can reap the benefits from. When they have imprisoned and dismembered her, they bring buckets to “harvest the gold that flows in my veins”, and then they sell it (Forna, 2021, p. 41).

The societal structures are built in a way that benefits men and limits the protection of women, especially when it comes to sexual abuse. This is an important theme in the book, where Deka is attacked by a stranger on the street. The man’s actions seem justified because the system works by victim-blaming. As she walked outside unaccompanied by a man, the stranger immediately assumed she was his to take. “He grabs me before I can retreat, his fingers greedily reaching for the button fastening the top of my cloak” (Forna, 2021, p. 13). Deka’s first thoughts in this encounter are blaming herself for being “stupid”, apologizing to the man, and rationalizing the encounter with “[m]en from outside villages aren’t used to seeing unaccompanied women and can make awful assumptions”. Deka is blinded by the misogynistic messages of her culture and finds the only logical fault to be that of her own for walking without a male escort. When the offender is confronted, he justifies the encounter as a man that’s “only having a bit of fun” (Forna, 2021. P. 14). The second justification lies not with the male assaulter but is explained as “normal” male behavior around girls with her looks: “men can be animals, especially around girls as pretty as you” (Forna, 2021, p. 15). Thirdly, he bases his entitlement to her body on account of her (dark) skin color: “That one isn’t even a Northerner, for Oyomo’s sake” (Forna, 2021. P. 14). Because of her race, he sees her as a lesser person in which he can do whatever he likes to. Rape and sexual assault against women – but especially Black women - has a long and dark history that is brought out into the light in this book (hooks, 1982, p. 51). “Our whole lives, we’ve been taught to make ourselves smaller, weaker than men. That’s what the Infinite Wisdoms teach – that being a girl means perpetual submission” (Forna, 2021, p. 154). Women are suppressed, made to feel unworthy and insignificant. She comes to this realization, that the patriarchal structure, as well as the religious traditions created by men, are caging women in, rather than protecting them, as those in power want them to believe.

Deka is made an outsider on account of her skin colour: “No matter how quiet I am, how inoffensive I remain, my brown skin will always mark me as a southerner, a member of the hated tribes” (Forna, 2021, p. 14). She experiences direct racism daily, with people telling her that not even the mask she’ll start wearing after the ritual “will never be able to hide that ugly Southern skin of yours” (Forna, 2021, p. 17). They focus on what makes her “different” and refuse to include her as one of their own. Their “white default” and racist beauty standards are inflicted upon her and used to make her feel less worthy than them. Because of this, she feels that with her skin that is “dark enough to be a full southerner” (Forna, 2021, p. 9), she can “never be as pretty as the other girls in the village” (Forna, 2021, p. 16). When Deka travels to the capital to fight in the emperor’s army, she sees people of all different shades and colours. She finds beauty and strength within her, which had over the years been destroyed by the racist society she grew up in.

## Systems of resistance

*The Gilded Ones* (2021) present many Systems of Resistance, where the protagonist Deka fights back against the oppressive system she finds herself living within.

One of the feministic themes is the pureness and warmth one finds within the four goddesses of Otera, the ones called “The Gilded Ones”. Together they represent the four provinces of Otera, with distinct features, clothes, and personalities. The Southerner in “wise-looking Southerner in flowing robes, her face angular and shrewd; a gentle Northerner in her furs, body as round as her smiling face; a warlike Easterner, scaled armor covering her from head to toe and wings on her back; and a motherly Westerner, belly round and fertile, a welcoming look in her eyes” (Forna, 2021, p. 239). The Northerner’s skin has a “pale glow”, and the Southerner’s skin is known for its “darkness”. This resembles the real world where people from each corner of the world look different. When Deka, a dark-skinned Southerner ends up in the village of the North, her skin is noticeable, and they only manage to see her as “other”. Many children can relate to Deka’s feelings of being an outsider, being different. Her experiences are important, and as the reader grows closer to Deka, they too can feel the injustice of these encounters. Even though she is “born and raised, and I’m still treated like a stranger – still stared and pointed at, still excluded” (Forna, 2021, p. 9). It is clear from these encounters that people are often afraid of what is different from themselves, and therefore



distance themselves, making the other feel like an outsider. Dekka is cast away because of her dark skin because everyone else's skin is white. She is branded a demon because her blood is golden when the norm is to bleed red. She can heal herself and is therefore executed several times. Whenever she shows the world how extraordinary is, she is captured, tortured, and treated as an outcast, a monster. Because of Dekka's perseverance, she can subvert the system that has been created to keep her and others like her down.

Another System of Resistance is the way the book is a part of the resistance to changing the "dominant framework of whiteness" (Moore & Coleman, 2015, p. 964). The characters' skin tones range from snow white to dark mahogany, and they are all written as beautiful. They all find strength in numbers and create friendship beyond race, color, and gender.

Queercharacters also have a place within this diverse story, another important representation. Dekka does experience a lot of racism as a Black girl and eventually comes to understand that the racist and misogynistic society she lives in is the problem, not her. "The world is changing now. We're going to make it change – make it better. We're going to make sure what happened to us never happens to anyone else again" (Forna, 2021, p. 408). Dekka comes to realize that the restrictions she has faced based on her gender – were meant to contain and cage her in, rather than support and protect her. The discrimination towards the alaki is symbolic to that of Black women, written from a Black woman's perspective. As bell hooks comments, they have been taught from an early stage "to be silent, to submit and to accept sexual inferiority" (hooks, 1982, p. 2). Through the text, Forna is raising awareness and validating women's struggle against abuse and sexism, acknowledging that mistreatment and violence against women can be brutal, and that change needs to happen on a systematic level.

## Conclusion

This book takes issue with faith-based patriarchies that oppress girls and women and shows the reader how girls working together can fight these types of system and take their power back. Girls have for a long time been held back, receiving only a secondary place within a society who constantly subjecting them to judgements about their purity. They are given the opportunity to run, receive and education and train – things they are normally forbidden to do – they excel and can express their power. No human could have done what these alaki girls

are doing, deeming the men suddenly secondary. The message of female empowerment is strong, urging girls to take the position of power and see themselves as the heroes of the story. Deka and the other female alaki become ferocious soldiers, leading the army of impure ones. They are accepting who they are, coming to terms with it and embrace it, not hiding their differences away. This is a strong message to every Black girl out there, who has been made to feel a similar way from society. It shows how education and knowledge can free one from the boundaries and cages that try to break one down.

## Comparison

The self-condemnation factor is present in both *Children of Blood and Bone* and *The Gilded Ones*, as they as a group are treated horribly, and called maggots and alaki. Both books offer the solution of finding out the truth for oneself, not taking others' opinions about oneself as truth (Delgado, 1989, p. 2437). The other system presented is always to keep fighting against these systems, as they are fundamentally racist and sexist. Both protagonists learn how to harness and control their powers, something they have been deprived of earlier. They form deep connections with those around them, as they are fighting for the rights of others, not for their own gain to power. The sisterhood and friendships formed are essential to both Zelig and Deka reaching their goals, as they need to work as a team to take down their oppressors.

The world-building aspects of the two novels are quite different. Where Adeyemi creates an all-black fictional world, that is modeled on the African continent, and even more specifically, the Yoruba-speaking areas. Namina Forna on the other hand creates an alternative universe that is clearly modeled on the earth as a whole, with people of different colours and characteristics. What is similar, however, is the creation of a "race" of magical beings who are discriminated against and even tortured for their difference. Another similarity is that both books have created Systems that are patriarchal, examining the overt ways that such a system operates, how it is being upheld by those that benefit from it and the consequences it has on people that are different from the norm.

## Chapter 4: Legendborn

### Introduction

This chapter analyzes the Systems of Oppression and Dominance and Systems of Resistance in Tracy Deonn's novel, *Legendborn* (2020). This story differs from the other two by being set in America, not within a fictional place. With this American setting, the story is centered around the traditionally white myth of King Arthur and the Round Table, where magic can only be seen by those who possess the "The Sight" (Deonn, 2020, p. 83). Deonn uses this white legend as a frame of reference to explore the "lineage and power and who gets to have it" (Kirch, 2020, 3). Even though the story particularly relates to the systems within America, it has the possibility of translating to a wider audience as well (Kirch, 2020, 11). The story, which centers around a black girl, uses the legacy of slavery that is embedded in the South, making this history seen and relevant today. Deonn is a part of writers who are diversifying the fantasy and sci-fi scene, centering a marginalized voice within an area of history where they have not previously had access.

In *Legendborn*, the protagonist Bree enters an early college program at UNC-Chapel Hill in North Carolina, USA. Her mother is killed in a car accident, but Bree is determined there is more to the story and sets out to find out what happened to her. There she meets the secret society of King Arthur and his knights' descendants who call themselves "Legendborn", as opposed to "Onceborns" who do not have The Sight to see demons. The Legendborn descendants have magical powers called "aether" that they can wield into armor and weapons to hunt down and fight demons. The descendants are "awakened" by the knight they descend from, starting with the 13<sup>th</sup> descendant. Arthur is called upon last, a sign that *Camlann* has come, a war on the strengthened demons. The last time *Camlann* took place was the American Revolutionary War. As Bree becomes more involved in the dealings of the Legendborn, she learns more about who she is and where she comes from, connecting with her ancestors through rootcraft. Rootcraft is different magic than Bloodcraft (aether) which the Legendborn use, where the magic is tied to the bloodline. Bree can possess and use both, marking her as different from the others. In the end, Bree is the one called by Arthur as his descendant. Her ancestor Vera was enslaved and raped by Arthur's descendant, making her his true heir.

## Systems of oppression and dominance

The System of Oppression presented in *Legendborn* is a mixture of the fictional “Order”, and the real system in the South of America, North Carolina. Within this System, Bree experience discrimination based on her race and gender, as will be the focus of this analysis.

“The Order is a strict hierarchy, all titles and ranks (...) The Regents have all the functional control” (Deonn, 2020, p. 82). The Order is a secret society where the lineage is carefully watched and written down. Its members are white and usually wealthy children of the rich “Vassal” families that donate money to the cause in the hope their children will be chosen: “all of it is rigged. It’s a setup to favour certain families, certain kids” (Deonn, 2020, p. 83). The society symbolizes the inordinate value placed on whiteness in the society, where special treatment and money sometimes corrupt the system. The myth of Arthur has for centuries been romanticized and treasured, while at the same time excluding all non-white people. By having Bree join the tournaments to try out for the position of Arthur’s descendant Nick’s squire, the intersectional discrimination against her becomes apparent. Her experiences with this are inextricably linked to both her sex as well as her gender. Lord Davis, the highest-ranking man within the Southern Chapter tells Bree that she “sits at the crux of two faults”, her “faults” being her race and her gender (Deonn, 2020, p. 424). He wants the “sickness” and the “corruption” she as a black girl brings to the Order to be “rooted out and corrected”, just as white supremacists have been doing to black people for hundreds of years (Deonn, 2020, p. 424). To them, Bree is a thing to be removed, a stain that hinders their “pure” line.

As the story progresses and Bree turns out to be their King’s descendant, it comes to show how dark and twisted the history and legacy of slavery is, and how intertwined it is to the *Legendborn*. Deonn’s way of addressing slavery in modern times is largely through “intergenerational trauma” (Deonn, 2020, p. 496). Bree is a descendant of enslaved people and has been burdened by atrocities performed by a slaveowner decades ago. Deonn addresses the “legacies of racial trauma, oppression, and resilience”, and how this trauma can manifest itself through several generations (Deonn, 2020, p. 496). It also recognizes how the enslavement of African people on American soil will always be an integral part of American history, and one that should never be forgotten.

In the spirit of colonization, the Knights of the Round Table arrived on American shores and used their power to conquest, oppress abuse and torture people of African descent. Sexual assault against black enslaved women was one of the methods used to dehumanize them. Vera, Bree's ancestor was enslaved and raped by Arthur's descendant. Because of this, Bree is the true heiress and scion of Arthur's line. It is important to address these unspeakable evils that is a part of our history, to ensure it never happens again. Because of slavery, "Lots of black folks in the states don't know their people more than four, five generations back, don't know names before the late 1800s - and why would they? We didn't exactly inherit detailed family records when we were freed" (Deonn, 2020, p. 222). The contrast between the Order's wall of Ages, where they have recorded thirteen bloodlines and their scions, whereas Bree has no idea who her grandmother is – is a true testament to how much has been lost because of slavery. It also shows how much death and violence that has been forced on black people throughout history, and the "resistance we had to grow to survive" (Deonn, 2020, p. 479). The reminder of slavery is everywhere around campus, as well as the very school building. Upon this awareness, she can sense her descendants and "all the hands that built Carolina and suffered on its grounds pushing through my palms too" (Deonn, 2020, p. 241). The fact that the school is going on as if nothing happens makes the reader feel the lack of any reparations. The harsh knowledge of having ancestors enslaved by the school you attend is a reality for the Black community.

For me and many other Black people in the south, it feels as if the very soil that helped grow this country is soaked with the acknowledgement and unacknowledged blood, sweat, and tears of enslaved Africans and their descendants. And, in truth, it is. (Deonn, 2020, p. 497)

These reflections and travels back in time to when her ancestors lived to give the reader insight and a better understanding of the life of enslaved people and the hardship that they lived under. It emotionally involves the reader as a "sliding glass door" where they are encouraged to participate, reflect, and feel, in a way that "history tends not to do" (Essed et.al, 2018 p. 8-10).

The System of Oppression and Dominance is built upon a racist history that still dominates society. As the only Black person in the Order, Bree is made to feel like an outsider. “And then there's the fact that no one else here looks like me (...) A room full of white kids, not a person of colour in sight” (Deonn, 2020, p. 91). Bree receives several “stabs” of racial comments, such as how this is the Order’s most “diverse Paige’s class” (Deonn, 2020, p. 100). She is constantly made to feel like the “other” like she has no right to be there. The “white default” is active, especially in the older generations (Moore & Coleman, 2015, p. 961). The expectation upon seeing her dark skin is that she is the “servant”, someone who will cater to their needs. At the celebratory ball, she notices how every single server and waiter, “all of them – are Black and brown people. Another reminder that this isn’t my world (Deonn, 2020, p. 404). She reflects on the fact that the entire institution was “founded by men who could have legally owned me, and wanted to” (Deonn, 2020, p. 92).

After Arthur awakens her, she is met with resistance and anger by some of the Legendborn: “Bree is what? Our King? By Accident? This is a mistake!” (Deonn, 2020, p. 483). The disbelief that a black girl could be their King was more than some of the Legendborn could take. This exposes the casual racism that is often found in elite circles, that they purposefully fuel to ensure white privilege. She could be allowed to try out as a Paige, but she has no place being at the top of the power, even after it is revealed that she is the true descendant of Arthur and that he speaks directly through her. This outrage does not go unanswered as Bree’s best friend Alice confronts this

Is that what you're calling chattel slavery? Three hundred years of accidents? What that man did was not an accident. He knew exactly what he was doing. He liked owning her life. Her body. And he wasn't the only one. She wasn't the only one” (Deonn, 2020, p. 483-484).

## Systems of resistance

This book offers a System of Resistance of challenging the status quo misogynoir of the white and wealthy party of the Order. The only Black woman in the Order turns out to be the descendant to the highest-ranking persona – King Arthur – giving the ultimate power to a marginalized voice within the legend. This rewriting and diversifying open doors to several

similar stories where there has traditionally been exclusion. She creates a lot of Southern #BlackGirlMagic in a setting where this has not been possible historically (Whitney, 2018, p.110).

Within this System of Oppression that is the patriarchal American setting, Bree finds her Black womanhood to be greatly devalued and underrepresented. While she tries to navigate through racist and sexist comments and treatment from those around her, the reader is presented with a window into the extent of resistance Bree is met with by her society at times. In the very end of the book, it is revealed that Bree is the King of the Legendborn, the only one who can save them from Camlann – the apocalypse of the Order. Even in the light of this, there are those who still oppose her right to the title. They would not have done this if her male and white counterpart had taken the throne, which leads us to believe it is because of her race and gender. With this, Deonn gives black women back their place in history, and show the resilience and strength it takes to bear this burden. “Growing up Black in the South, it’s pretty common to find yourself in old places that just...weren’t made for you” (Deonn, 2020, p. 75). Young readers can resonate with this, both to understand what others are going through, or to relate to the feelings themselves. Bree is given space to feel, which gives the reader insight into how it feels to receive racist comments. She is not an indestructible warrior, but a woman who carries with her all her experiences and encounters. Bree is given space to have all her emotions, to be herself, and to be angry at what she is witnessing.

Deonn reclaims the history of slavery and writes about what many black enslaved women went through during this period. “Rape in slavery was more than a chance tool of violence (...) It was an institutionalized crime, part, and parcel of the white man’s subjugation of people for economic and psychological gain” (hooks, 1982, p. 51). Deonn opens the conversation about violence and sexual abuse against black women during the African enslavement, as well as how purposeful and systematic damage this did to black women. The men that raped women knew what they were doing, and they abused them to gain more control and power, showing they could inflict their will at any time. They stripped them of any agency and protection they had and is a very dark and important part of history that is often glossed over in the history books, or void of the true brutality of slave culture (Coleman-King & Groenke, 2019, p. 124-127). It brings forth a long history that people today are still living with, as descendants of enslaved people, and works as a way of healing and coming to terms with the truth.

Deonn introduces the reader to the African American folk magic called rootcraft; “Our people. We are the descendants of those who developed the craft, and we do not call the invisible energy of the world ‘aerther’. We call it ‘root’” (Deonn, 2020, p. 168). This cultural tradition, also known as “conjuring”, has existed for hundreds of years, first “developed by West African slaves brought across the Middle Passage and their descendants” (Shephard, 2019, p. 11). It became a big part of many enslaved people’s lives, as their lived-in reality became an “unbearable hardship, (and) a retreat into the counterfactual can become an important coping mechanism” (Shephard, 2019, p. 14). Rootcraft and its meaning became more than just a coping mechanism. It transformed into a means of “reaffirming one’s heritage through a kind of racialized performance” (Shephard, 2019, p. 16). It became a way of fighting the colonists, who wanted nothing more than for them to give up all remnants and traditions from their African heritage (Shephard, 2019, p. 16).

The continuation of the Rootcraft is in *Legendborn* deployed as a means of “cultural self-defence” (Shephard, 2019, p. 29), where one can as needed tap into the source of ancestral power that has been passed on to the descendants of the enslavement. This becomes a powerful tool in reclaiming one’s ancestral past and honoring its traditions and culture. (Shephard, 2019, p. 39). Rootcraft as described in *Legendborn* borrows four elements from West African tradition: “ancestor reverence and communion, the ritual of organic materials, naturopathic medicine and healing, and themes of protection”. (Deonn, 2020, p. 496). Bree is a Medium, which means she can both communicate with and be possessed by the dead. Her mother was a Wildcrafter who could manipulate growing things to use for healing. The power to wield Rootcraft typically flows from mother to daughter, with a few exceptions. One integral difference between the two kinds of magic is that rootcraft is always borrowed. The one seeking it, bring offerings to their ancestor, asking to borrow their power. To reach out to one’s ancestors, “focus on your love for your mother, to start. (...) Now imagine the love stretching to your grandmother, and stretching back again” (Deonn, 2020, p. 394). Rootcraft is less dangerous to use, as magic is given voluntarily, where payment is received by their offerings, allowing them to live long, happy lives. The word “root” carries much significance to many Black people in the south, as well as honors all of the “unacknowledged blood, sweat and tears of enslaved Africans and their descendants” (Deonn, 2020, p. 496).

Bree’s mother line has been deeply affected by the violence of slavery. Vera, the ancestor tying her to Arthur had in a time of great need used Bloodcraft to save her child from the rage



of the slaveowner. This type of magic is dangerous and comes at great expense to whoever wields it.

The reason they call Bloodcraft a curse is because the universe will come calling for its payment one way or another. And for our family, the cost is that the power can only live in one daughter at a time. Maybe it's because all that power burns us out, I don't know, but none of us get very long with our mothers. (Deonn, 2020, p. 390)

Bloodcraft differs from Rootcraft in several ways, the main difference being how the power is obtained: "this power was done through Bloodcraft – where power was forever taken, not borrowed" (Deonn, 2020, p. 390). This type of magic manifests itself in metal weapons of destruction, such as swords and daggers, and armor. The descendants of the "Line of Sir Gawain, twelfth ranked" can accelerate healing (Deonn, 2020, p. 137). Bloodcraft demands sacrifice and payment and is the reason the women in her family have died so early. Rootcraft on the other hand is a borrowed gift that is granted to the user by their ancestors to whom they give offerings. The different types of magic are symbolic of the way power has been distributed in the world. During the colonialization, power was forcefully taken without any form of payment, as is the magic of Bloodcraft. Consequently, nature shorten the lifespan of both the Awakened knights and their boned Squires as payment. Bree can tap into both types of magic, as she is a mix of her ancestor Vera and the slaveowner who raped her. Coming to terms with this reality is difficult, but Bree does not have much of a choice in the matter. "Unspeakable evil gave me Arthur. Vera's resistance gave me power, but I earned my will. (Deonn, 2020, p. 489). Although her story is filled with violence, she is strengthened by her ancestors, and chooses to embrace her heritage: "I am a Medium, born from the earth. I am Bloodcrafted, born from resilience. I am Arthur, Awakened!" (Deonn, 2020, p. 476). Her whole life has been affected by the rape of her enslaved ancestor, where the price of "one daughter at a time, for all time" was paid to ensure her daughter's safety (Deonn, 2020, p. 468). The loss of Bree's mother and the generational curse the book presents are based on Tracy Deonn's real life. She wrote this book as she wanted to "understand and honour her mother and ancestors" (Deonn, 2020, p. 494). The story is meant to be a testament to Black motherhood and Black daughterhood.

## Conclusion

*Legendborn* base its System of Oppression and Dominance on the American society, and the legacy of slavery that taints American racial history. Tracy Deonn brings a Black woman into the center of a story that has been traditionally excluding Black people. The legend of King Arthur and The Round Table has been romanticized for decades, and with *Legendborn*; it has finally been diversified as well. The reality of Bree's existence is dark and heavy, but also extremely important to acknowledge and recognize that this is how Black women have been treated. Slavery is often glossed over in history books, and literature like this can open conversations and make history alive in ways that can otherwise be hard to do within a classroom.

## Comparison

In the books' presentation of the intersectional experience of being both female and Black, they have created Systems of Oppression and Dominance that mirror our own world, and that readers can relate to. In this section, the focus will be on how these approaches are similar and different from one another.

These systems are set in place to create a fictional yet very real frame of reference and recognition of what black girls experience. In *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) the setting is fictional, placed within Africa. Within the book, one finds many references to Nigerian and West African traditions, and culture, where the spell language is Yoruba. In *The Gilded Ones* (2021), the world is also a fictional one, broken into the South and the North. In the South, people are dark-skinned, and, in the North, they are white-skinned. The four Gilded Ones goddesses had children with many humans until their sons locked them up and changed the storyline – making them out to be demons that should be feared. The story resembles *Children of Blood and Bone* considering they are both greatly inspired by West African culture in the way they deal with racism. Both Sierra Leone, Namina Forna's birthplace, and later when she moved to America - have been inspirational to her in the way she framed her story. The setting of the story and the deeply patriarchal society where women need to be proven pure, relates to the common practice of Female Gender Mutilation in Sierra Leone. This notion of "otherness" can be seen in all three books. Dekka because of her golden blood which symbolizes her heritage from the Gilded Ones. Zelig is an outcast because she belongs to the magical heritage diviners who are enslaved and treated as maggots. Bree is "othered"

on account of her Black heritage. With characters that belong to a marginalized group, all three books have the same foundation. The fact that all three authors use their experiences as African American women to develop their stories, gives them even more common ground. The three Systems of Oppression and Dominance are also all patriarchal in the way that power is structured and available, with *The Gilded Ones* also basing religion as a tool to oppress women.

*Legendborn* is the only book establishing its system in an already existing setting that is well known to the reader. This separates the book from the other two as the setting is most likely already somewhat known to the reader. Although the Arthurian legend is an existing one, Deonn also created a magical system within the world of *Legendborn*, *Onceborn*, and *Shadowborn*. This magical frame makes it more similar again to the other two. *Legendborn* and *Children of Blood and Bone* have more of this magical element with incantations and magic that can be made visible. Aether can be seen as a ribbon of mage flame, ranging from yellow to deep crimson in color (Deonn, 2020, p. 160). Zelig's Reaper Magic is in the form of animations, an army of the dead made from the earth. In *The Gilded Ones*, the alaki cannot use magic in the same way as in the other books. Alaki is a "race", born from a human and a Goddesses. They have many abilities beyond what humans do, but there seems to be rather an implied use of magic in their entire being. The exception to this is Deka, who is the only alaki able to control the deathshrieks with her mind and her will. While magic is visible for some in *Legendborn*, it is not incorporated as a reality of life, as with the other books where everyone knows of its existence. As the book is in a real-world context, magic is something that is kept secret from the *Onceborn*, like from the Muggles in the *Harry Potter* books (Rowling, 1997). Only those with The Sight know it exists.

## Conclusion

“So, stories - stories about oppression, about victimization, about one's own brutalization - far from deepening the despair of the oppressed, lead to healing, liberation, mental health. They also promote group solidarity. Storytelling emboldens the hearer” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2437). Storytelling originates from our basic needs to “create [our] own bonds, represent cohesion, shared understandings, and meanings” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2412). Reading stories that originate from a society’s dominant group, has the possibility of creating a shared reality in which “its own superior position is seen as natural” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2412). These stories aim to subvert the dominant group’s reality and ideology, making current social arrangements and systems seem natural and fair. The marginalized group, on the other hand, receives these messages and mindsets as well. The problems arise when the dominant group’s justifications of a racist society with “whites on top and browns and black at the bottom” are seen as justified (Delgado, 1989, p. 2413). This mindset is then only enforced more, as the marginalized groups continue to see themselves as underrepresented and often falsely portrayed. To avoid heightened suspicion of others and a state of intellectual apartheid, counterstories can create balance by giving a voice to the marginalized groups within society (Delgado, 1989, p. 2440).

*Children of Blood and Bone*, *The Gilded Ones*, and *Legendborn* all create such spaces of resistance and narratives that build worlds rich with diverse characters, and cultural perspectives representing West African culture, language, and scenery. By centering their stories around the marginalized group of Black women, Adeyemi, Forna, and Deonn put forward stories that convey positive messages for children in a multicultural world. They bring #BlackGirlMagic to a society where their worthiness has been questioned, and their stories have gone untold or been directly excluded (Mason, 2021, p. 707; hooks, 1982).

All three authors make the structural issues faced by the protagonists more personal in their Author’s Note, by speaking directly to the reader, urging them to see real-world connections to the injustices in their stories. Tracy Deonn (2020) focuses on the ever-present legacy of slavery that makes itself evident through intergenerational trauma in America: “Black students live and learn on a campus built by enslaved people held in bondage by celebrated men who would have wanted to enslave us, too” (p.498). Tomi Adeyemi (2018) also makes comments on the Black situation in America, connecting several of the deaths in the book to

real lives lost in police shootings. She is making the story personal and real, something to spark their engagement within the social justice causes:

[A]ll the pain, fear, sorrow, and loss in this book is real. (p.526)

If this story affected you in any way, all I ask is that you don't let it stop within the pages of this text. (p.526)

Let this book be proof to you that we can always do *something* to fight back. (p 527)

We've been knocked down for far too long.

Now let's rise" (p.527)

Namina Forna (2021) urges her readers into action as well, albeit in a more general way:

[T]he world we live in right now is not so different from the world in my book. These are dire times – times that call for heroes. In *The Gilded Ones*, I hope I've created heroes that can be all of us. (n.p.)

It is interesting how the authors have chosen to spend their last few pages interacting with the reader, making it clear to them that these structural issues based on racism and sexism exist in their own lives too, and that they can start resisting them by being a feminist anti-racist who stand up for other people. They urge them to be “the hero of your own story. You can make things happen, and you can change the world. Choose to change the world for good” (Forna, 2021, n.p). Positive changes can happen when young people are inspired, which is why young readers need diverse literature that gives them these different perspectives and opens their minds to what is different from theirs. When children meet literature that sparks their interest, reading too will become an appealing and enjoyable activity and might create lifelong intercultural readers (Heflin and Barksdale-Ladd 2001, p. 818).

The literary works are promoting justice and activism in the fight against oppressive systems. They make themselves culturally relevant by addressing topics that fit under the important and timely banners of #WeNeedDiverseBooks, #BlackGirlsMagic, #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, and #MeToo (Mason, 2021). Within the Norwegian English classroom, the metaphor of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors remains relevant and useful for

advocating for inclusive classroom practice (Hughes-Hassel, 2013, p. 214). Firstly, they hold up a mirror to children everywhere, seeing themselves as the heroines of the story. They can relate to the book's messages about them, their past and their future, something African American children have been deprived of (Heflin and Barksdale-Ladd 2001, p. 810). Secondly, the stories are windows to a new world with diverse characters who experience new and exciting adventures in a different setting and culture than what they are used to. The protagonist's lives are being seen, acknowledged, and appreciated by many young readers. The stories make the dominant groups listen to the marginalized voices, enriching their realities with shared secrets and new ideas (Delgado, 1989, p. 2437). Lastly, the stories invite interaction through the sliding glass door, opening conversations about structural issues they see in their own lives (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. xiii).

By actively using multiculturally diverse literature, students will be used to reading stories of outgroups, and they get the ability to see the world through others' eyes (Delgado, 1989, p. 2439). This way, multicultural literature becomes a tool that "helps children to identify with their own culture, exposes children to other cultures, and opens the dialogue on issues regarding diversity" (Colby & Lyon, 2004, p. 24). *Children of Blood and Bone*, *The Gilded Ones* and *Legendborn* construct fantasy worlds that mirror our own in terms of racism and sexism through their Systems of Oppression and Dominance. Within the systems, they are able to critique, question and challenge the dominant group's justifications of a racist and sexist society. They create spaces for the Black heroines to build Strategies of Resistance toward the dominant mindset and stand up against oppressive structures.

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