

ANALYZING BIPOC REPRESENTATION IN YOUNG ADULT FICTION

By

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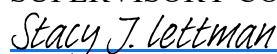
# ANALYZING BIPOC REPRESENTATION IN YOUNG ADULT FICTION

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Lettman, Department of English, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

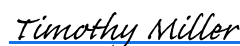
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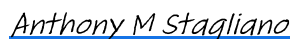
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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis uses an identity studies approach to look at the representation of BIPOC characters within three young adult speculative fiction: *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, *The Black Witch* by Laurie Forest, and *Cinder* by Marissa Meyer. By incorporating identity studies to explore and analyze examples of misrepresentation and unconscious bias throughout stories centered on oppressive world building, racial hierarchies, this thesis draws upon the works of various scholars including: Stuart Hall, Michel Foucault, Orlando Patterson, Toni Morrison, and Edward Said. A lack of diverse authors and Eurocentrically-framed ideologies cemented into the publishing industry has led to instances of unconscious racialized misrepresentations of BIPOC characters as shown in the of three works of popular young adult fiction demonstrating the constraints created when authors shape and perpetuate identities for others, subjecting them to constructed identities and narratives.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis takes an identity studies approach to distinguish the ways in which authors use language to represent Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) characters in three examples of popular young adult (YA) speculative fiction: *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, *The Black Witch* by Laurie Forest, and *Cinder* by Marissa Meyer. Previous research has analyzed issues of diversity and representation in children's picture books, elementary, and middle grade level literature, setting groundwork for contextual analysis necessary in other genres. While critics such as Ebony Elizabeth Thomas and Jewel Davis have examined race and ethnicity in children's speculative fiction, what remains to be explored is a narrowed focus on the language used to represent BIPOC characters in popular YA works and the connection to a lack of diversity within authors of the book publishing industry, which leads to misrepresentations that often result in racial biases. Drawing on the theoretical issues in *Representation* by Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon as well as Michel Foucault's *Knowledge and Power*, this thesis will analyze the language used by the authors in their fictional discourses. Discourse as a concept, offers a more complex understanding than the commonly held definition about the impact of the text on meaning to include derived meanings that can impact one's identity. Hall implements two systems of representation that explain how the language of a text can create meaning. By drawing upon Foucault's *Knowledge and Power*, Hall argues that narrative voice in discourse produces the objects of our knowledge and shapes the way that something is talked about

(cited in Hall 51-52). In this sense, narrative voice can influence the way that ideas are brought out through the language used in a literary text.

Based upon the language used within *The Hunger Games*, *The Black Witch*, and *Cinder*, I will then explore how language and meaning translate into the establishment of one's identity and the importance of understanding the power of discourse. When examined through this framework, what emerges is an understanding of what occurs with a lack of diversity in literary publishing. An additional consideration is the impact language in discourse has in shaping and perpetuating representation and identity of the characters within the stories and its impact on the reader. There has been a call to diversify publishing for over a century. Kinohi Nishikawa's chapter "From the Ground Up" from *Black Cultural Production after Civil Rights* discusses the Ebony Book Club, established around the 1960's to help raise Black authors in a white dominated literary publishing world. Nishikawa writes, "For a time, black-owned publishing operations had successfully contested the white literary establishment's hold on black writing. But now it seemed as though that tiny window of opportunity was being shut. The establishment was reasserting its control over who got published and how their books would be sold" (221). Toni Morrison, for instance, who was the first Black editor of Random House from 1967 to 1983, reflects on Black/White polarity in American Literature in her work, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Morrison creates a metaphor of a fishbowl to illustrate the idea of the construction of African American characters in American literature:

It is as if I had been looking at a fishbowl — the glide and flick of the golden scales, the green tip, the bolt of white careening back from the gills; the castles at



the bottom, surrounded by pebbles and tiny, intricate fronds of green; the barely disturbed water, the flecks of waste and food, the tranquil bubbles traveling to the surface — and suddenly I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world.

(Morrison 17)

Morrison realizes that the creation of characters and discourse comes from social constructions created through the influence of ideologies. She attributes the creation of an African persona to “an extraordinary mediation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious” (Morrison 17). This idea that ideologies and social construction play an important role in the creation of discourse. Ideologies are systems of representations, perceptions, and images that precisely encourage men and women to “see” their specific place (Kavanaugh 310). Through Morrison’s fishbowl analogy, there is this conception that ideologies and social constructions shape the writer’s viewpoint of the world. These biases created through ideology are ingrained in the society that constructs them. Stereotypes, superstitions, and ideologies about Blackness from ideological discourses promote misrepresentations. Given the lack of diversity in publishing, BIPOC are subject to be represented by white authors who do not necessarily understand the BIPOC experiences--that is, the white writer who is writing for a white reader and the lens they use when they create BIPOC characters is oftentimes problematic in their reinforcement of racial ideologies. What is important to note is who a vast majority of publishers provide their books for. In other words, various reports on diversity in publishing have shown the link to the dominance of white authors catering to a white readership. According to *Rethinking ‘Diversity’ in*

*Publishing*, Dr. Anamik Saha and Dr. Sandra van Lente find that, “the core publishing industry is set up essentially to cater for this one white reader. While this does not rule out opportunities for writers from minority backgrounds, until the publishing industry diversifies its audience, writers of colour will always be ‘othered’” (10).

Building upon Morrison and Kavanaugh, I will incorporate Edward Said who discusses the concept of othering and the creation of narrative perspective in his book *Orientalism*. Othering is the way members of one social group assert themselves over another by construing the latter as being fundamentally different assisted by hierarchal assumptions. Said explains that, “Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution of dealing with the Orient, dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring and have authority over” (3). There is an undeniable privilege of a narrative perspective that comes from the West as the problematic Orientalist gaze that comes from white writers. The non-western world is forced into particular representations. Traditionally, book publishing has othered BIPOC authors by not consistently publishing their works. White authors who are published then take on the role to tell stories for BIPOC characters and use their voice.

This thesis will show examples of white authors using narrative voice to display privilege of voice held through stories they share about BIPOC members of the population. When a non POC speaks on experiences of people of color, it can often lead to misrepresentation due to a difference in lived experience and unconscious bias. The authors turn BIPOC characters into subjects described in Said’s *Orientalism* by not giving them a voice, taking the narrative power away from them by telling their stories

for them. These are important postcolonial concerns about the ways in which representation can be hegemonic. As Robert J. C Young asserts: “colonial and imperial rule was legitimized by anthropological theories which increasingly portrayed the peoples of the colonized world as inferior (...) incapable of looking after themselves (2) The idea of the western gaze can be found within literary publishing that attempt to discuss racial issues, but often mis the mark, perpetuating the very concepts they hope to dismantle. This ties to which authors are traditionally published, as noted above, a vast majority of published authors are white. When institutions determine how a voice gets included in literary work, there is a tendency to “other” anything that does not fit what is in place and accepted.

By looking at popular YA speculative novels through an identity studies approach that incorporates postcolonial studies in relation to speculative fiction and rhetoric, this thesis offers insight through the authors’ language. Chosen publishing works determine how a voice gets included in discourse. Within the industry, there is a tendency to “other” literature that does not fit what is not deemed sellable to an audience. Historically, research on publishing houses show that they have catered to a predominately white audience, leaving stories about BIPOC to be told by white authors in a manner more palatable to their target readers. Researchers Dr. Anamik Saha and Dr. Sandra van Lente claim, “The whole industry is essentially set up to cater for this one audience. This affects how writers of colour and their books are treated, which are either whitewashed or exoticised in order to appeal to this segment” (2). Whitewashing or changing narrative voice can lead to misrepresentations as authors turn BIPOC characters into subjects, taking their point of view and shaping it in favor of a crafted perspective.

As powerful creators of discourse, authors have the responsibility to form language about characters appropriately when dealing with cultures that are represented as the “Other,” setting aside ideology and preconceived notions to convey a more accurate representation. The inclusion of speculative fiction within this thesis stems from the opportunities presented by the genre itself. Speculative fiction encompasses both realms of fantasy and science fiction and has increasing contemporary popularity among youthful readers. The genre allows for authors to create worlds of imaginative future ideas and endless possibilities and yet, the chosen novels incorporate world building that relies on racialized ideologies, stereotypes, and narratives created in reality. This demonstrates how preconceived notions shape the creation of authors of speculative fiction. All three authors include examples of oppressive world building, paralleling contemporary world views and racial hierarchies. The incorporation of oppression has a tendency to parallel Atlantic Slavery and notions of dehumanization against marginalized characters who are always people of color. Diversity in literary publishing is important to ensure equity in author’s voices, but most importantly when an author chooses to cultivate characters and works about BIPOC, they need to make sure they are doing so properly, without bias. In choosing works to look at, I found it important to see mainstream works popular among fans of young adult literature. Thus, looking at popular works of YA speculative fiction will allow for an analysis of the representation of BIPOC characters through the lens of a white author illuminating the need for more diversity within publishing to give voices to BIPOC. Throughout the chosen examples of YA speculative fiction, this thesis will analyze examples of misrepresentation of racial bias shown through the creation of oppressive world building, racial and social hierarchies,

dehumanization of BIPOC characters, the erasure of identity, and stereotypes. A lack of diverse authors and Eurocentrically-framed ideologies cemented into the publishing industry has led to instances of unconscious racialized misrepresentations of BIPOC characters as shown in of three works of popular young adult fiction demonstrating the constraints created when authors shape and perpetuate identities for others, subjecting them to manufactured identities.

## CHAPTER 1: RUE AND THRESH: ANIMALISTIC CHARACTERIZATIONS AND LOSS OF IDENTITY (ISSUES OF RACE)

*The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins reinforces racial ideology created by white voices. Collins consistently depicts two prominent BIPOC characters, Rue and Thresh, using animalistic characterization and erasing a part of Rue's identity. Representing the character as an animal erases humanity of the character. This is used to further misrepresentations of these BIPOC characters in a way that makes them seem dangerous through discourse. Michel Foucault believes that "discourse constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge; it governs the way that a topic can meaningfully be talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice" (44). Achille Mbembe in *Critique of Black Reason* defines, "altruicide: the constitution of the Other not as similar to oneself but as a menacing object from which one must be protected or escape, or which must simply be destroyed if it cannot be subdued" (10). The threat of violence is unconsciously tied to their racial identity and the act of altruicide tied to the hunger games forces the characters to take their places as a cleaning force, an involuntary weapon used against the other players to survive. Identity is taken from the BIPOC characters throughout the novel. Collins demonstrates erasure of the blackness in Rue's identity as a way to fit a more white idealized notion of innocence. Innocence historically and symbolically ties to whiteness in literature. Rue's development of identity intersects with an erasure when Collins continuously parallels the character with Katniss's white little sister, Prim. Through the

connection to Prim, the audience conveys Rue's innocence. Without that connection, Collins leaves Rue only with her animalistic descriptions. The animalistic characterizations of Rue and Thresh perpetuate white racial ideologies of dehumanization.

The audience's first introduction to Thresh comes when Katniss, the narrative perspective of *The Hunger Games*, describes him during an interview event within the novel. She immediately attributes his blackness to animalesque features, "The boy tribute from District 11, Thresh has the same dark features as Rue, but the resemblance stops there. He is one of the giants, probably six and a half feet tall and built like an ox" (126). Her description of Thresh includes an animal and a mythical creature, both of which dehumanize him straight away. Moore and Coleman discuss a later scene that shows the ways Thresh is compared to an animal perpetuating the conception of subhuman behavior. They write, "identification of Thresh as a wild animal is reinforced when he conceals himself in tall grasses during the Games, attacking and killing others who enter his territory" (Moore and Coleman 958). Katniss goes on to discuss his quiet, broody demeanor. Collins' descriptions give off the idea that Thresh is physically a threat and barely communicative. These animalistic characteristics perpetuate a legacy of racial discourse created through white ideologies. Thomas Jefferson's "Notes on the State of Virginia" provide insight into some early discourse on the characteristics of Black slaves. He describes the slaves with dehumanizing characteristics, insisting they are othered because of their differences from white people. Jefferson describes, "They seem to require less sleep. A black, after hard labour through the day, will be induced by the slightest amusements to sit up till midnight, or later (...) They are at least as brave, and

more adventuresome. But this may perhaps proceed from a want of forethought, which prevents their seeing a danger till it be present” (1), depicting the slaves as subhuman, machine and animal like creatures who lack intelligence.

These racially charged ideologies offered a subhuman look at Black slaves, reinforcing beliefs of inferiority in an attempt to justify their enslavement. The use of animalistic characteristics is not the only notion of slavery. In the descriptions of the district where Rue and Thresh represent, Collins consistently connects to the history of slavery in the United States. Within the dystopian country of Panem, there are 12 Districts, each responsible for a specific job they supply for the city. District Twelve, the home for the protagonist, Katniss, for example, is known for supplying coal to the capitol and other districts. Rue and Thresh are the tributes from District Eleven, which is responsible for supplying agricultural crops and goods to the country. Collins misrepresents Rue and Thresh through the obvious connections to US Slavery within District Eleven and the dehumanization often attributed to those enslaved. Being the only two Black tributes from a District known for crops does not deter Collins from continuing the narrative and connection to US Slavery. Depicted through a conversation between Rue and Katniss, the audience learns more about life within District Eleven. Katniss questions Rue about the availability of food for the District Eleven citizens:

Katniss: I'd have thought, in District Eleven, you'd have a bit more to eat than us.

You know since you grow the food.

Rue: Oh, no, we're not allowed to eat the crops.

Katniss: They arrest you or something?



Rue: They whip you and make everyone else watch. The mayor's very strict about it (Collins 202).

Katniss then inner monologues about the rarity of a whipping within her own District Twelve. As she and Rue continue to share stories, Katniss deems District Twelve to be “a safe haven” (203) in comparison, connotating notions of savage treatment in District Eleven, not dissimilar to the treatment of Black slaves in the United States. Sonya C. Brown's chapter on “*The Hunger Games* in Movies in the Age of Obama” discusses the many parallels between Collins' Panem and history in the United States. She writes, “Rue tells Katniss that workers in the fields sing work songs throughout the day, much as slaves in the antebellum South did” (Brown 194) demonstrating the connection between Collins' dystopic world and the readers'. These ties to African American cultural traditions remain a prominent part of Rue and Thresh's culture along with treatment of the citizens of their district show a direct connection to slavery, enforcing racial ideologies from an Antebellum era. Tied to Collins use of animalistic characteristics, it is hard to separate fiction from a white idealized ideologies held of “a racialized subject” (Anhuja 228). As Fanon depicts, the use of animalistic characterization, “when the colonist speaks of the colonized he uses zoological terms” (7) stems from a power structure, to show those Othered as subhuman, less than.

These ideologies are perpetuated within *The Hunger Games*, when Thresh and Rue are often related to some sort of animal. As a whole, the tributes are tools used by Panem to commit altruicide and eliminate other tributes as a cleansing force and reminder to the citizens of Panem what happens in a revolt. *The Hunger Games* began in response to a failed revolt by a no longer existing District Thirteen. This annual event serves as a

sacrificial atonement for that District's revolution. Tributes, all between ages of 12 and 18, must commit acts of altruicide in response to a revolt that happened before any of them were born, evolving into a transgenerational trauma not dissimilar to that of slavery. This notion of transgenerational trauma is more solidified towards the end of the novel when Collins writes that the gamekeepers, those in charge of the hunger games production, turn all the deceased tributes into mutated and animalistic versions of themselves solely to kill off the remaining living tributes. Mary Catherine Miller suggests that Collins unconsciously perpetuates these associations herself in her own narrative voice. Miller writes, "As Thresh particularly experiences animalization as a Black male in the arena, the transformation of tributes into animals echoes both the trauma of colonization and the trauma of slavery" (46-47). The use of animalistic characterizations reminds the audience of this othering of BIPOC characters, even under a category of other tributes as they are shown equal grounding only in their death.

While Thresh often gets described by his brute strength, twelve year old Rue, the other District Eleven tribute is described for her small stature, often related to birds and small woodland creatures. Katniss describes Rue as, "She has bright, dark brown eyes and satiny brown skin and stands tilted up on her toes with her arms slightly extended to her sides, as if ready to take wing at the slightest sound. It's impossible not to think of a bird" (Collins 99). Rue's constant animalistic descriptions as small, helpless, woodland creatures help to show the innocence Collins depicts. Rue's innocence is not linked to Blackness but is linked to whiteness with the constant comparisons between her and Katniss's little sister, Prim, who Katniss primarily volunteered to save. As Robin Bernstein writes, "Childhood was then understood not as innocent but as innocence itself;

not as a symbol of innocence but as its embodiment (...) This innocence was raced white” (4). Ebony Elizabeth Thomas’s *The Dark Fantastic* looks at the portrayal of innocence through Rue’s character. With the juxtaposition between Rue and Katniss’s little sister, Prim, Suzanne Collins erases parts of Rue’s Black identity, framing it into a more palatable depiction for the audience through the eyes of Katniss, a more believable role when tying her to Prim’s whiteness. Rue’s character represents the idea of innocence in *The Hunger Games*; by erasing her Blackness, Collins allows for that innocence to be portrayed with whiteness, continuing racial ideologies of whiteness equaling purity (Thomas 56). The use of “Rue’s characterization is key to Katniss’s success as a sympathetic heroine, within the world of the book and with readers” (Brown 194) caters to the sympathy of the reader to identify notions of innocence.

It is important to look at the role of discourse in shaping how something is represented to the reader. Stuart Hall discusses the idea of the subject and meaning by relying Michel Foucault’s arguments about constructionist meaning. Hall emphasizes, "it is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts (Hall 25). In this case of *The Hunger Games*, Collins’ use of Rue’s innocence and how it frames the audience’s sympathy for Katniss as the subject. The discourse, "produces a place for the subject from which its particular knowledge and meaning most makes sense (...) But they must locate themselves in the position from which the discourse makes most sense, and thus become its 'subjects' by 'subjecting' themselves to its meanings, power and regulation. All discourses, then, construct subject-positions, from which alone they make sense" (56).

The idea behind the subject-position is an acknowledgement of one's identity and seeing the meaning placed by the discourse. Part of the framework Collins uses relies on the comparison Katniss continually expresses between Rue and her little sister Prim. By connecting the two, Collins erases part of Rue's identity supplementing it for Prim. Anton Allahar describes the concept, writing, "Erasure is in large part the act of neglecting, looking past, minimizing, ignoring or rendering invisible an *other*" (125). While Collins does not entirely erase all aspects of Rue, she does minimize her identity through Katniss's eyes, affecting the reader's perspective. Katniss sees Rue as her little sister in moments, admitting to the reader that one of the main reasons she decides to team up with her in the arena is because "she reminds me of Prim" (201). Ebony Elizabeth Thomas discusses how Prim represents a more familiar character in children's literature, "the guileless, golden girl child often is the counterweight that balances the evil that the protagonist must overcome" (par. 18) and "we frequently see Prim used as an angelic and innocent figure spurring Katniss towards survival in the violent games" (Miller 82). Collins so effectively connects Rue and Prim together, that even when Rue is dying, Katniss mixes her up with her sister. Rue asks Katniss to sing to her as she dies and Katniss thinks about how the only time she sings is when Prim is sick, "Sing. My throat is tight with tears, hoarse from smoke and fatigue. But if this is Prim's, I mean, Rue's last request, I have to at least try" (Collins 234). As Rue dies, Katniss is seen as a savior for remaining loyal to Rue, shrouded in the innocence that has been taken away from Rue.

The trouble with misrepresentations of BIPOC characters stem from a reader's interpretation of the discourse. The creation of characters and discourse comes from

social constructions created through the influence of ideologies. Meanings derived on the page shift a narrative, despite an author's unconscious intentions. Through her treatment of discourse, Suzanne Collins perpetuates racial ideologies established by White narratives. Her depiction of Rue and Thresh using animalistic characterization aids in their dehumanization. The creation of discourse about District Eleven cheaply parallels that of Atlantic Slavery, including stereotypes and ignorance on the part of the protagonist, Katniss. To craft innocence within Rue, Collins ties her to Katniss's little sister, Prim. By connecting the two, Collins erases part of Rue's identity supplementing it for Prim. The discourse created is so strong that even as Rue dies, Katniss has a hard time separating her from her sister, making it difficult for the reader to do the same. Without the tie to innocence from Rue, BIPOC characters only receive animalistic dehumanization in *The Hunger Games* and discourse does not enable them to construct their own identities.

## CHAPTER 2: SINGLE NARRATIVE: RACIAL HIERARCHY AND WHITE SAVIOR

### ELLOREN

Laurie Forest's *The Black Witch* incorporates a single narrative point of view that centers around the dominant white perspective of the Gardnerians, a group of pure-blood mages who represent the highest race of magic and who have white physical features. Elloren is the magicless granddaughter of the last powerful Black Witch, an impressive role. After leaving home to attend a university with various magical and non-magical races, she is challenged to confront her race's prejudices. Examples of these prejudices throughout the novel show that to Elloren's people, any magic folk with tainted blood is Othered and considered less than. The single narrative perspective makes it so the reader learns about perspectives through Elloren, the protagonist of the novel. The reader sees the prejudices against the other races, and it is only through Elloren's enlightenment that the reader sees the truth. This is a dangerous way to have characters look at race as it is one sided and jaded with biases. By using a single narrative perspective, Forest removes any opportunity for BIPOC characters to voice themselves and creates the sole viewpoint framed as a White savior trope. This trope hinders perception of race as it is typically skewed to fit an idealized savior complex often found in literature. Within *The Black Witch*, Forest creates a world consisting of a strict racial hierarchy with the Gardnerians at the top and demonstrates racially charged ideologies leading to the misrepresentation of the BIPOC characters in other magic races.

Racialized ideology is extremely present within *The Black Witch* as Elloren goes from a living within a sheltered Gardnerian society into a university in the “real world” where these groups are integrated. Through her perspective, the reader learns about the ideology present as voiced by her Aunt Vyvian: “You’ve raised these children like they’re Keltic peasants,” she snipes, “and frankly, Edwin, it’s disgraceful. You’ve forgotten who we are. I have never heard of a Gardnerian girl, especially one of Elloren’s standing, from such a distinguished family, laboring in a kitchen. That’s work for Urisk, for Kelts, not for a girl such as Elloren” (Forest 21). Even without the knowledge of who the Kelts and Urisks are, the reader grasps that these groups are considered less than the Gardnerians and discriminated against. Forest describes the Gardnerians as having Black hair, green eyes, and pale complexion, while as Jewel Davis points out, “The remainder of the above races are described in either varying colors or as mixed-breeds or half-breeds. This led me to code Gardnerian Mages and Alfsigr Elves as representing whiteness and the other races as non-white due to their variance in skin colors and descriptors of perceived racial impurity” (8). There is no clear distinction of race, and the reader has to put it together themselves until they see more racial discourse through Elloren’s encounters. Helen Young’s *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* discusses how, “Habits of Whiteness in Fantasy, (...) influence who can be present, and what is seen, thought, and done, by creating patterns of bodies and spaces alike” (11). By giving a single narrator and piecing out timing of the information to the readers, Forest misrepresents the BIPOC characters by taking away their presence until it is given and keeping them voiceless. Elloren’s ignorance and bigotry is ultimately excused by Forest with naivete. As the *The Black Witch* continues, so does the expansion

of Elloren's perspective on the world. Because Forest's use of a single narrator, the audience must learn of these expansions solely through Elloren's frame of mind and interactions, forcing readers to fill in their own gaps of information.

The issues with requiring an audience to figure out information, especially when it comes to racial discourse, is the tendency for fantasy literature to perpetuate White framed notions of ideology. As Ebony Elizabeth Thomas writes, "rarely is the narrative focalized through [BIPOC] eyes," and the narrative violence and discrimination sanctioned against them is considered expected because "it mirrors the unending spectacle of violence against the endarkened and the Othered in our own world" (4). The Gardnerians' mantra of "dominate or be dominated" (Forest 220) and the vast examples of oppression and discrimination of other mixed blood and race groups demonstrates notions found in Orlando Patterson's *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*. Patterson describes three forms of freedom: personal, sovereign, and civil (Patterson 3-4). The creation of the racial hierarchy in Forest's *The Black Witch* demonstrates an example of sovereign freedom because the creation of their ideologies and prejudices with the intent to uplift their own race and oppress others, takes away their freedom. The Gardnerians take over their own narrative exhibiting a need for freedom as shown by Patterson who states, "while everyone desires freedom for the satisfaction of his own impulses, these impulses are often in conflict among individuals (...) This is so for two reasons: first, because people frequently desire more than their fair share and, second, because 'most human beings . . . desire to control not only their own lives but also the lives of others'" (4). The Gardnerians who coined their own ideologies preserve the



freedoms of their people by disseminating them into future generations, essentially brainwashing them by framing their perspectives and biases through falsified discourse.

The creation of this discourse and the use of the single narrative perspective allows for a White Savior trope demonstrated through Elloren's point of view. As Davis states, "Social hierarchies reign in fantasy worlds ranging in settings from magical medieval lands to paranormal worlds with supernatural beings. In many of these narratives, white characters are the chosen ones who save these troubled worlds and the non-dominant groups within them" (18). Elloren provides a singular view, and it is only through her that the reader learns what she had been originally taught and eventually gains a shift in perspective. She once believed the ideology in place by her people but through her experiences she begins to learn more about the world she lives in. Towards the start of the novel when she first attends the university and asks questions about the other races from her own race:

"And the Kelts?" I wonder, looking to Echo. "What are their men like?"

Fallon snorts derisively as Echo regards me somberly, her fist closed tight around her Erthia sphere. "Their blood is polluted with all types of filth—Fae blood, Urisk...even Icaral."

Echo waits to see if I'm appropriately horrified before continuing.

Sage's Icaral baby immediately leaps to mind, casting a pall over everything. I remember how troubled and terrified she was. A Kelt. The demon baby's father is a Kelt. And she met him at University (Forest 75-76).

The spreading of discourse within *The Black Witch* serves as a fear tactic to scare Elloren into believing stereotypical ideology about the Kelts, but it simultaneously misrepresents

them as the received point of view is that of her own kind. The dialogue between the three Gardnerian characters demonstrates the issues of a single narrative, no possibility to see another side. Later in the novel, Elloren begins to realize her predetermined judgements were falsified by the Gardnerians and only through this recognition does she begin to work for change, though it is not a linear journey. As Jewel Davis argues that Elloren's progression stems from the realization she too does not come from pure blood and if her actions are truly based on self-interest because, "Even with her new knowledge and understanding of the oppressive history and actions of her people, Elloren does not fully let go of her own prejudices and inclination to place blame on people outside her race" (Davis 15). The perspective gained from Elloren is an idea of the White Savior trope often found in fantasy literature where the racially white protagonist uplifts and does something nice for BIPOC characters. This sort of plot line deceives the reader as it appears progressive but perpetuates racist ideologies.

An important aspect of the beliefs absorbed by Elloren is the separation of the Gardnerians from the rest of the races through the creation of discourse. Because of the mistrust between the Gardnerians and the mixed blood breeds / races, the Gardnerians created a falsified historical record and religion, "minimizing their historical involvement in harming other races and marking them as the race chosen by their creator to rise and kill the infidel races" (Davis 12). This example of sovereign freedom oppresses other races to ensure the power of their own. To guarantee Gardenians remain pureblood, they created antimiscegenation marriage norms and "propose and laws dehumanizing, criminalizing, and imprisoning mixed blood and breed races" (Davis 12). These practices and the treatments of mixed blood races unconsciously exemplify subjugation and

oppression. These notions demonstrate ideas introduced by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, “The development and maintenance of every culture requires the existence of another different and competing alter ego. The construction of identity (...) whether Orient or Occident, France or Britain (...) involves establishing opposites and otherness whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of their differences from us” (Said 332). The construction of these ideologies and discourse attribute to the misrepresentations of the BIPOC characters. The racialized subjects are continuously interpreted and reinterpreted without the presence of their voice. By incorporating a single narrative point of view, Forest allows for the misrepresentation of these marginalized groups.

Within a fantasy realm, there is often unconscious racial biases that seep into the story as attributed by the author. In *Rhetoric of Character in Children’s Literature*, Maria Nikolajeva discusses how, “literary characters are deliberately constructed by the author, which means that elements that are inconsequential in real life are arranged in fiction to support (or occasionally subvert) our understanding of character” (Nikolajeva 158). Within an entirely fictional and fantastical realm there are still notions of the world we live in and the use of a single perspective perpetuates those unconscious biases that always seem to attach themselves to BIPOC characters. *The Black Witch* is no exception. The Gardnerians’ discourse contain ideas of White Supremacy with their anti-miscegenation views and ironic hatred toward those without “pure blood.” Views of the Kelts parallel contemporary perspectives some people in the United States have about interracial marriage: “The Kelts are not a pure race like us. They are more accepting of intermarriage and because of this, they’re hopelessly mixed” (Forest 163). This concept

shows how “Fantasy habitually constructs the Self through Whiteness and Otherness through an array of racist stereotypes, particularly but not exclusively those associated with Blackness” (Young 11). To the ideologies created by the Gardnerians, mixing blood and races is an atrocity, parallel to the white supremacist views evident in contemporary America. Though Elloren does eventually garner enough experiences with BIPOC characters to shift her perspective, it is notable that, “when confronted by others who challenge her worldview, she ranges in emotions from denial, defensiveness, blame, and anger to guilt, shame, and acceptance” (Davis 15). These qualities are not necessarily bad, as they can be considered part of a racial education, but they demonstrate just how powerful constructed ideologies are and remain in society.

The importance of the racial perspectives found in *The Black Witch* is that it only comes through the White protagonist who grew up a sheltered life, knowing she was inherently better than the other races because of sovereign freedom upheld. The inclusion of *The Black Witch* is necessary because of the treatment of racial hierarchy and discourse along with the immediate outrage by readers who participated in a viral Twitter campaign. Their goal was to have the book taken down by the publisher before it ever hit publication. That campaign failed and now, the novel has been praised with high star reviews. Critics claimed: “It was ultimately written for white people. It was written for the type of white person who considers themselves to be not-racist and thinks that they deserve recognition and praise for treating POC like they are actually human” (Rosenfield) and yet the publication’s criticisms are now difficult to find. The misrepresentations of BIPOC characters and the outrage surrounding the inclusion of racial narratives show put in perspective, “When we center issues of race around white

perspectives, we run the risk of silencing BIPOC voices and uplifting white savior narratives, white redemption arcs, and white supremacy culture” (Davis 17). To silence voices means to interpret and reinterpret their identities without giving them a chance to determine it for themselves.

### CHAPTER THREE: *CINDER*: RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND FORCED MEDICAL TESTING OF CYBORGS

*Cinder* by Marissa Meyer establishes a dystopic world build reminiscent of aspects of imperialist ideologies as discussed in Edward Said's *Orientalism* and issues of racial discrimination and dehumanization, unconsciously continuing racially oppressive narratives. With a dystopic science fictional retelling of the fairytale *Cinderella*, Meyer incorporates the metaphoric use of cyborgs to demonstrate racial and social class differences, unconsciously incorporating aspects of white Eurocentric ideologies found against people of color. The main character, Linh Cinder, who will just be referred to as Cinder, is a cyborg who faces discrimination and is considered a second-class citizen. Meyer characterizes systemic oppression of cyborgs with a direct connection to the way systemic racism and segregation functions within the United States. Cyborgs are considered objects of possession and may be subject to medical experimentation with only the consent of the owner needed as permission. Meyer's dystopic world is plagued by a deadly disease called Letumosis and governments have decided to create a cyborg draft, subjecting them to dangerous medical testing in hopes of finding a cure for "all" citizens. This incorporation of subjecting Othered citizens to scientific testing coincides with unethical practices that happened to Black slaves in the United States.

Meyer supplements notions of race with a metaphoric use of cyborgs. With doing so, she unfortunately lumps all cyborgs into one group, disregarding a need to establish any sort of cultural differences. In Meyer's world, cyborgs "have some percentage of

metal and wiring in their physical makeup that allows them to circumvent what would otherwise have been a physical disability” (Coste 65). The discriminatory treatment of cyborgs is evident immediately in the novel. In the first scene the audience encounters Cinder sitting at her table in a marketplace. She watches as a group of children play joyfully until one of the mother’s admonish their son for playing so close to a- “it’s not like wires are contagious” Cinder mumbles to herself as the children disperse and Cinder looks down at her steel hand (Meyer 5). The justification of the discrimination against cyborgs stems from this notion of a lack of humanity, causing the reader to think about what constitutes being “human enough”. During Cinder’s forced medical experimentation, the audience finds out that she is “32.68% not human” (Meyer 82). Meaning almost 70% of her is human. Other cyborgs have even more “human” to them and are still treated as less than their peers. Meyer’s treatment of cyborgs demonstrates white perceived racial ideology. James H. Kavanagh discusses the notion of subjugation, stating, “We now understand this process of subjection as working largely through an address to unconscious fears and desires as well as rational interests and we understand it as working through a multiplicity of disparate, complexly inter-connected social apparatuses” (310). Part of the power held has to do with maintaining control. Meyer allows for the dehumanization of cyborgs so that the humans can justify and maintain their power over them.

By metaphorizing cyborgs and not discussing the cultural, race, and ethnicities attached, Meyer deals with erasure of identities, misrepresenting BIPOC characters of the Eastern Commonwealth who encompasses a conglomerate of Asian ethnicities according to the amount of land it controls. In “Neoliberalism’s Erasure of Race in Young Adult

Fiction” Connors and Trites discuss the erasure of racial identity in *Cinder*, noting, “Young adult dystopias such as *Cinder* (...) demonstrate the erasure of racial and ethnic identities, as well as the elision of the global and local. In *Cinder*, Meyer privileges class distinction in ways that erase race” (84). Despite that, Meyer will still incorporate racially charged oppression and ideologies linked to the racially ambiguous Cinder and other cyborg citizens. At its core, the Eastern Commonwealth is comprised of most of the continent of Asia, with New Beijing being the home of the emperor’s palace. Edward Said discusses imperialist ideologies crafted by Western culture in *Orientalism*. Said writes, “the limitations of Orientalism are, as I said earlier, the limitations that follow upon disregarding, essentializing, denuding the humanity of another culture, people, or geographical region” (108). The misrepresentation Meyer commits stems from the world building she develops. Meyer commits the Western idea Said discusses when she fuses Asian communities without allowing for ethical, racial, and cultural differences to show. As Hale discusses, “In the future that Meyer envisions, all Asian countries are fused into one empire (...) Meyer’s ethnoscape clearly demonstrates a Western cultural bias that individualizes Western cultures while generalizing non-Western cultures” (121). This misrepresentation is essentially not addressed, all the discrimination comes through social purposes regarding cyborgs. By not connecting to racial discussions, Meyers unconsciously allows biased racial ideologies to seep into her story through the forced medical testing of cyborgs and how they are perceived in society.

The connections between the historic treatment of minority groups in the United States and parallel ideologies of treatment of Cyborgs in *Cinder*. Though they are tied to Asian heritage, the Cyborgs are treated in ways reminiscent of African slaves during



slavery. Meyer may have hoped to discuss issues of race in her novel through these parallels, but her connections deepen ideologies created. During chattel slavery in the Americas, slaves were deemed objects, subjected to decisions made by owners. Within *Cinder*, a deadly plague called Letumosis leaves governments scrambling to find a cure resulting in the allowance for a Cyborg Draft. The Cyborg draft works so:

Every morning, a new ID number was drawn from a pool of so many thousand cyborgs who resided in the Eastern Commonwealth. Subjects had been carted in (...) to act as guinea pigs for the antidote testing. It was made out to be some sort of honor, giving your life for the good of humanity but it was really just reminder that cyborgs were not like everyone else. Many of them had been given a second chance by the hand of generous scientists and therefore owed their very existence to those who created them (...) It's only right they should be the first to give up their lives in search for the cure  
(Meyer 29).

Right before the reader is introduced to the draft, one of Cinder's stepsisters jokes about sending her in as a volunteer, briefly showing the power they have over her. This foreshadowing of "volunteering" comes to fruition later in the novel as punishment for her stepsister, Peony contracting Letumosis. Her stepmother informs her that she will be leaving with the med drones, and Cinder responds, "You volunteered me for plague research (...) but no one survives the testing" (Meyer 66). Despite her protests, her stepmother is her legal guardian and has the authority to determine what happens to Cinder under the Cyborg Protection Act which, "purports to be about the safety of the marginalized groups: the act "protects" cyborgs under the guise of making them the

property of legal guardians” (Coste 67). This is proven meaningless when Cinder’s guardian subjects her to medical testing without consent and the system welcomes it. The med drone is programmed to say, “your voluntary sacrifice is admired and appreciated by all citizens of the Eastern commonwealth. A payment will be made to your loved ones as a show of gratitude” (Meyer 66). Not only are guardians allowed to subject their property to testing without consent, but they are also encouraged to do so with a monetary reward from the government. The idea of guardian control in *Cinder* parallels practices during the Atlantic slave trade and ideologies of treating “Othered” parties as objects of scientific inquiry, comparable to Dr. James Marion Sims experimented on enslaved Black women. Similar to the treatment of cyborgs in *Cinder*, “[Dr. Sims] caused untold suffering by operating under the racist notion that Black people did not feel pain” (Holland). This common white ideology was created to justify the white rule over slaves by dehumanizing them and attributing them to false characterizations. In Thomas Jefferson’s “Notes on the State of Virginia”, he scientifically discusses differences between Black slaves and whites, affirming narratives of dehumanization through the discussion of distinguishable characteristics and stereotypes. Though he claims it is through suspicion only and not fact, Jefferson’s words demonstrate and helped create systemic stereotypical Black ideology: “Their griefs are transient. Those numberless afflictions, which render it doubtful whether heaven has given life to us in mercy or in wrath, are less felt, and sooner forgotten with them. In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection” (Jefferson 2). These sentiments are shown similar treatment within Meyer’s *Cinder*, as cyborgs are seen as inferior to humans. Dr. Simm’s was known for “patch[ing] up enslaved workers so they could produce—and

reproduce—for their masters again. Otherwise, they were useless to their owners” (Holland).

Slaves were seen as a commodity, something an owner possesses and deems owed something in return, as a form of gratitude. This idea is parallel to the perception of cyborgs within *Cinder*. Because the cyborgs had been fixed by the hands of the scientists to have a renewed quality of life, the scientists and citizens feel entitled to use them for testing (Meyer 29). Hale discusses the use of cyborgs as a metaphor for race claiming, “The series establishes the cyborg as a stand-in for the person of color and then creates empathy for its protagonist” (119). The systemic racism, or classism as demonstrated within the novel, allows for the reader to view a wider political scale of racism and its function (Hale 115). The treatment of cyborgs reflects a form of freedom Orlando Patterson introduces in *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*. Patterson introduces the idea of sovereign freedom as, “The sovereignly free person has the power to restrict the freedom of others or to empower others with the capacity to do as they please with others beneath them” (4). In *Cinder*, the Eastern Commonwealth government is the true sovereign power who empowers their citizens to hold power over those considered beneath them, the cyborgs. “The power to act as one pleases, regardless of the feelings of others” (Patterson 3-4). Sovereign freedom requires oppression to be placed upon someone, seen as inferior. In this case, it is the cyborgs who are considered less than those with full human body parts and the inclusion of this ideology tied to historic parallels with Atlantic slavery shows Meyer’s inclusion of racially charged discrimination.

The misrepresentations of Marissa Meyer's *Cinder* perpetuate racial ideologies constructed in the United States and Western culture. The unconscious use of cyborgs as a metaphor for race without adding in cultural differences misrepresents cyborgs as a separate group from humans and shows a lack of regard for representing them. There is no clear implication for what makes one human within the story except for the inclusion of at least one mechanical part. Once considered a cyborg, the characters are Othered and dehumanized as human characters now have the ability to fully control their lives. The treatment of cyborgs parallels the treatment of Atlantic slaves, with tools of dehumanization, stereotypes of differences, and lack of regard or worth. The historical inclusion of medical testing shows just how strongly the cyborgs are tied to racial ideology. Meyers includes two forms of sovereign freedom as introduced through Orlando Patterson's theories. There is sovereign freedom controlled by the emperor of the Eastern Commonwealth. He then enables sovereign freedom for fully functioning humans, especially those who serve as guardians of cyborgs. These freedoms allow guardians to make decisions for the cyborgs and treat them as an object of possession, deciding what they can do and subjecting them to medical treatment. Meyer creates a world where the systemic oppression of cyborgs has a direct tie to the way systemic racism and segregation functions within the United States. What could have stemmed from a way to discuss racial issues inherently perpetuates the very same critiqued ideologies. The world building present in *Cinder* presents Western views of clumping together groups of ethnicities without regard for cultural differences as demonstrated in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. These misrepresentations of the BIPOC characters, disguised

by cyborgs, continue racially charged narratives of discrimination and show their treatment as objects of possession and commodity.

## CONCLUSION

When discussing the treatment of BIPOC characters in literature, it is crucial to look at one section of genre before applying these findings into a larger scope. Young Adult fiction has increased in popularity over recent years, as have the number of books being published in the genre. By choosing to look at the representations of characters of color within contemporary novels *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, *The Black Witch* by Laurie Forest, and *Cinder* by Marissa Meyer, I am able to analyze popular works being consumed presently by the YA audience. Systemically, publishing has been white author dominant writing for a white audience. Thus, looking at popular works of YA speculative fiction shows an analysis of the representation of BIPOC characters through the lens of a white author, illuminating the need for more diversity within publishing to give voices to BIPOC individuals. Because of the chosen speculative genre it is important to analyze how BIPOC characters have been historically portrayed in the fantastic. Helen Young writes, "Fantasy creates worlds structured by imperialist nostalgia. For much of its history, the Fantasy genre has avoided engaging with imperialism and colonialism in any critical way, as has most Western popular culture. Twenty-first century Fantasy has begun to critique colonialism, imperialism, and their legacies" (Young 12). The realm of the fantastic offers authors opportunities to explore endless ideas of how to structure their world building and yet, there is a tendency to perpetuate racial ideologies and stereotypes. Though there are examples of authors

representing BIPOC characters in an appropriate manner, often unconscious biases from perceived ideologies make their way into novels.

Within *The Hunger Games*, *The Black Witch*, and *Cinder*, I analyze examples of misrepresentation of racial bias shown through the creation of oppressive world building, racial and social hierarchies, dehumanization of BIPOC characters, the erasure of identity, and perpetuity of stereotypes. In *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins continues dehumanizing narratives with her animalistic representations of Rue and Thresh along with the erasure of Rue's identity in connection to Katniss's little sister Prim. Within the discourse, her use of language and creation of District Eleven parallels that of Atlantic Slavery, shown through narratives of crop working and the severe punishments in place to oppress the citizens. Through interactions with Rue, Katniss gains knowledge and realizes how less severe her own district is. The misrepresentations of BIPOC characters in *The Hunger Games* cater to a lack of voice and the ability to construct their own identities.

Laurie Forest's creation of a racial hierarchy within *The Black Witch* demonstrates White Supremacy and anti-miscegenation against groups of mixed blood and race. The use of single narrative perspective is detrimental to the representations of BIPOC groups because all interactions and knowledge comes through the lens of the sheltered, White characterized Elloren. The single narrative perspective makes it so through Elloren, the protagonist of the novel, that the reader sees the prejudices against the other races and only through her enlightenment, the reader sees the truth, a dangerous way to have characters look at race as it is one sided and jaded with biases. Forest creates a world consisting of a strict racial hierarchy with the Gardnerians at the top and

demonstrates racially charged ideologies leading to the misrepresentation of the BIPOC characters in other magic races. The discourse within the novel is abundant with prejudiced ideologies and demonstrations of changing a narrative to achieve sovereign freedom as discussed by Orlando Patterson. By having their narratives crafted for them and “giving exploited BIPOC the voice and agency to challenge and dismantle them, they work to justify, perpetuate, and reinforce the damaging popularity of the white savior narrative and the historical and current systems built on racial hierarchies” (Davis 14). Elloren’s role of the white savior shows a biased lens to perceive BIPOC characters and within the novel, she is woefully resistant at times to see the truth leaving her often stagnant as a guide for the reader to understand the racial discourse.

*Cinder* by Marissa Meyer contains world building consisting of Western crafted imperialist ideas within an Eastern setting and shown through Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. With a dystopic science fictional retelling of the fairytale *Cinderella*, Meyer incorporates the metaphoric use of cyborgs to demonstrate racial and social class differences, unconsciously incorporating aspects of white Eurocentric ideologies found against people of color. Meyer’s ties to historic experiences of slaves shows with the Cyborg draft occurring to help find a cure for Letumosis subjecting them to dangerous medical testing in hopes of finding a cure for “all” citizens. This incorporation of subjecting Othered citizens to scientific testing coincides with unethical practices that occurred to Black slaves in the United States under Dr. Simms. The main character, Cinder is subjected to this testing at the sole consent of her guardian and stepmother. Despite her protests, she is forced into medical testing. Cinder displays notions of sovereign freedom of the emperor of the Eastern Commonwealth who enables



sovereign freedom for humans, especially those who serve as guardians of cyborgs. These freedoms allow guardians to make decisions for the cyborgs and treat them as an object of possession. The treatment of cyborgs within *Cinder* parallels prejudices of BIPOC individuals and freedoms stripped away from those who are Othered.

These three novels were written by White authors who unconsciously include racialized ideologies into their discourse. With the creation of their discourses, they influence the meanings understood by their readers. None of these three examples of YA Speculative Literature allow for BIPOC characters to form their own identities and narrative. Each example strips away their voice and subjects BIPOC characters to racial mistreatment. The bigger picture calls for the inclusion of more diverse voices and/ or proper BIPOC representations within publishing. Charlemae Hill Rollins advocates for dignified representation in literature. Rollins discusses the need for “appropriate language, illustrations, theme and treatment of characters” (Salem 175). When discussing ethnic studies and representation in literature, it is imperative to think about how people of color have been represented in the past. Whether it is with racist stereotypes or publishers encouraged a whitewashed version to appeal to their audiences. Salem discusses that publishers began to push out more books about Black people, but most Black experience books were written by white authors, a common thread amongst books published about BIPOC individuals (175). Diversifying books at children’s and YA level encourages publishers to continue with more mature audiences. Their reading audience’s expectations will evolve, as should their books and authors published.

Linda Salem covers a publication called *The Bulletin*, who writes, “articles and book reviews [that] are ‘Own Voices’ resources, i.e., written by the people being written

about and meant to be a ‘consciousness-raising’ and ‘unique buying guide’ to bias-free children’s material” (178). True representation and voice means having authors and books written by people who understand what they are discussing. While the analyzed examples do not necessarily show deliberate biases and misrepresentations, it needs to be checked by authors and those who deal with the book in the publishing process. Many publishers and authors have been criticized in the past for telling a story about an ethnicity or situation they cannot relate to, an experience that many feel is not theirs to tell. In the past, diversity in publishing has shown to be effective in the books that get voiced. Richard Jean So and Gus Wezereck discuss when Toni Morrison worked as an editor at Random House. During her time, 3.3% of the 806 books published by Random House were written by Black authors. After she left, of the 512 books published between 1984 and 1990, only two were published by Black authors, one of which was Morrison’s own *Beloved* (6). The inclusion of BIPOC voices within publishing is necessary to ensure misrepresentations do not occur and other voices are shared. Discourse in a sense, offers a different understanding than the impact of the text on meaning as opposed to a simple textual representation to see the meanings derived along with the impact on one’s identity. Stuart Hall’s two systems of representation explain how the language in works creates meaning. Hall draws upon Foucault’s *Knowledge and Power* to convey the ideas that narrative voice in discourse can produce the objects of our knowledge and can shape the way that something is talked about. Thus, narrative voice is able to influence the way that ideas are brought out through the language used (Foucault 44). Narrative voice is influential in the shape of perception of the discourse. In the three examples, narrative perspective shapes the view of BIPOC characters, sometimes leaving out the BIPOC

perspective. The creation of characters and discourse comes from social constructions created through the influence of ideologies, but to continue the White crafted ideologies just encourages a cycle of the same narrative and the silencing of important diverse voices.

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