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Abstract

This master's thesis analyzes and discusses the potential of three contemporary fantasy novels, *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), *Skin of the Sea* (2021), and *Nevermoor* (2017), for promoting critical literacy through the use of literature in EFL classrooms in Norway. The thesis argues for the importance of diverse, contemporary literature in classrooms to supplement the existing dominant perspectives. By introducing modern voices that represent different racial, cultural, and societal backgrounds, this research argues for more diverse, inclusive, and balanced representation in Norwegian classrooms.

The fantasy genre serves as a starting point for this project because of its popularity with young readers and its potential as an avenue for exploring sociopolitical issues in the real world. The aim of this project is two-fold: first, to identify central themes and elements in the selected texts from a critical literacy perspective, and second, to examine how these texts can be used to nurture critical literacy among EFL learners.

The thesis is based on the ideas of critical literacy theory, particularly Lewison et al.'s model of the four dimensions of critical literacy and Borsheim-Black et al.'s Critical Literature Pedagogy framework. The methodology involves a thematic literary analysis using elements from close reading and the CLP framework to unearth themes relevant to teaching critical literacy. The discussion chapter delves into analyzing the novels in regard to the dimensions in the CLP framework into the practical implications of integrating these novels into EFL instruction.

The main findings of the thesis reveal that the texts deeply explore themes of power structures, systemic inequality and prejudice, and the implications of dominant versus marginalized narratives. These are integral aspects to both critical literacy and important topics to cover in the classroom in relation to the values of the LK20 curriculum, particularly in its aims of promoting inclusivity and diversity, counteracting prejudice, and encouraging critical thinking. This implies that these novels could have great potential both for teaching language skills and encouraging critical literacy in the Norwegian EFL classroom.

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1. Introduction

Lloyd Alexander said that "Fantasy is hardly an escape from reality. It's a way of understanding it (Savatteri, 1994)." The essence of this thesis boils down to the same thought. Although the fantasy genre features strange, magical worlds, mystical powers, and unfamiliar people and creatures, those ideas originate in the real world, in the minds of real people. A work of fantasy literature, like any other text, is created in a context, and whether consciously or subconsciously, it reflects the context in which it was created. More often than not, too, it has something to say about that world, and by engaging with these texts, readers can gain insight not only about a world of fiction, but also about the world that surrounds us in our daily lives.

With that in mind, the overarching aim of this thesis is to consider how we can merge these different worlds in order to encourage critical literacy in the classroom. In this case, I have selected three fantasy novels for exploration of how fantasy texts can be used for this purpose: *Nevermoor* by Jessica Townsend, *Skin of the Sea* by Natasha Bowen, and *Children of Blood and Bone,* written by Tomi Adeyemi. In this thesis, I analyze these texts through close reading and thematic analysis from a critical literacy perspective, focusing on how their themes relate to issues of power, ideology, and language, then discuss classroom implications using the framework of Critical Literature Pedagogy (CLP). Through this analysis and discussion, I attempt to answer the following research questions:

a. What are the central themes and elements in selected fantasy novels when viewed from a critical literacy perspective?
b. What potential do the three selected texts hold for encouraging critical literacy with EFL learners and what are the implications of using these texts in the classroom?

1.1. Context of the thesis

During my time teaching in Norwegian classrooms, I noticed two things: first, there is an abundance of fantasy literature in the classroom, and second, the selection of fantasy literature in the classroom is largely the same across different schools and groups of learners. *Harry Potter* and Rick Riordan's *Magnus Chase* and *Percy Jackson* series seemed to feature in just about

every classroom, and many learners read them with excitement. This is wonderful! The fact that these books encourage children and teenagers to read is undoubtedly positive. It also demonstrates the popularity of the fantasy genre, which, again, I –subjectively, as an avid fantasy reader – consider a good thing. On the other hand, the lack of diversity caused some concern. From such a vast and varied genre, why are young readers across the board presented with the same books, written from similar white, Eurocentric perspectives?

I grew up reading *Harry Potter.* The books were and remain, more than two decades later, a global phenomenon. Thousands of words have been dedicated to the series and its cultural impact. Still, in modern classrooms, most learners were not yet born in 2007, when the last installment in the series was published. Surely, there must be a greater variety of fantasy books written during their lifetimes that might be worth introducing into the classroom – not to replace the literature they currently read and enjoy, but to supplement and broaden their literary horizons. By focusing on a narrow selection of books written from similar perspectives, certain norms and values can be reinforced in unfortunate ways. Additionally, in an increasingly diverse and multicultural world, seeing other perspectives and experiences represented in books is becoming more important. Literature serves as both windows and mirrors; they allow us as readers to peer through a window into another world, but also reflect the real-world human experience back at us (Bishop, 1990). When certain people's experiences are emphasized and prioritized above others, those who see themselves represented come to see their own perspectives and experiences as normative, while those who do not are left feeling alienated and excluded.

1.2. The teacher's role as text selector

Educators have a unique power in making decisions about which texts learners encounter throughout their education. In the LK20 curriculum, there is a great deal of methodological freedom in deciding how to work with competence aims and interdisciplinary topics. The English curriculum states that "by reflecting on, interpreting and critically assessing different types of texts in English, the pupils shall acquire language and knowledge of culture and society" (MER, 2019, p. 3), emphasizing the importance of texts in the English classroom, but does not provide guidelines as to what those texts should be. This gives teachers the opportunity to select

texts that are relevant and engaging based on their learners' needs, and provides near endless options for working with literature and other texts. On the other hand, this freedom also comes with a great deal of responsibility. The teacher's decisions about texts guides which narratives and perspectives the learners encounter, and, by extension, which values, experiences, and voices the learners come to perceive as important.

In an ideal world, educators would have the time and resources to make well-informed decisions about the questions that arise when selecting texts. In reality, on the other hand, it would be unreasonable to expect teachers to have an encyclopedic knowledge of all available texts and sufficient understanding of them to be able to teach them. In multiple studies, teachers cite time constraints and other practical concerns as one of the main challenges they face when selecting texts (e.g. Duncan & Paran, 2018; Watkins & Ostenson, 2015). One of the aims of this thesis, therefore, is to explore a selection of texts in-depth, and provide some insights about them for potential use in the classroom. The opportunity to extensively analyze and consider new texts is a luxury, and the discussion of these texts may provide some ideas for alternative texts to incorporate into the English literature classroom.

1.3. Curricular relevance of the thesis

One of the core values outlined in the LK20 curriculum is that of *human dignity*. Under this value, it is stated: "School must consider the diversity of pupils and facilitate for each pupil to experience belonging in school and society" (Ministry of Education and Research (MER), 2017, p. 4). In the section concerning another core value, *identity and cultural diversity*, the following is stated:

> "A good society is founded on the ideals of inclusiveness and diversity. [...] In a time when the population is more diversified than ever before, and where the world is coming closer together, language skills and cultural understanding are growing in importance". (MER, 2017, p. 5-6)

The idea that learners of all demographic groups and backgrounds have a right to feel included and valued in the classroom, then, is repeatedly emphasized. One way of ensuring

inclusiveness and modeling the value of diversity is to ensure that the texts learners encounter in the classroom represent a broad range of perspectives and experiences. This is also closely linked to the core value of *democracy and participation*, which, as stated in the curriculum, entails the idea that "the participants in the school environment must develop awareness of minority and majority perspectives" (MER, 2017, p. 9). One of the central ideas of critical literacy is the interrogation of dominant and marginalized perspectives – why are some voices heard, while others are not, and which voices are those (Vasquez, 2013, p. 11)? I would argue that it is impossible to develop the desired awareness of these perspectives without actually encountering them, and the diversification of literature in the English classroom is one way of engaging with this concept and encouraging learners to consider issues of dominant and marginalized perspectives.

The curriculum's core values further emphasize the importance of *critical thinking and ethical awareness.* In summary: "school shall help pupils to be inquisitive and ask questions, develop scientific and critical thinking and act with ethical awareness" (MER, 2017, p. 6). Throughout their education, learners are expected to develop the ability to scrutinize and criticize established ideas, as well as "be able to understand that their own experiences, points of views and convictions may be incomplete or erroneous" (MER, 2017, p. 6). A critical literacy approach to teaching texts emphasizes these exact points. By approaching texts critically, learners are encouraged to interrogate existing systems of power and privilege, and to consider how their own identity shapes their understanding of both texts and the world around them. The ideas of critical literacy, then, are highly relevant to working towards the overarching aims and values of the LK20 curriculum.

In the English curriculum specifically, under the sub-heading "Relevance and central values," the role of the English subject in developing intercultural competence and preventing prejudice is emphasized (MER, 2019, p. 2). In the English classroom, in other words, learning English on a linguistic level is not the only goal. The language is a means to communicate with people of different backgrounds and understand the world from different perspectives. This is discussed further in the subject's core elements, one of which is *working with texts*. According to the curriculum, this "helps develop the pupils' knowledge and experience of linguistic and cultural diversity" (MER, 2019, p. 3), and involves the critical assessment of different English texts. Literature in the English classroom, then, is explicitly linked to understanding of the real

world. Through texts, English learners become better equipped to understand themselves and their identities as individuals, as well as become more aware of other cultures and identities. When viewing the subject through this lens, it is clear that text selection for the English classroom is not just about teaching language, but also about promoting intercultural competence and critical thinking skills. As such, the aims of this thesis – to explore how fantasy texts can be used to encourage critical literacy – is highly relevant to both the overarching curriculum and the English subject specifically.

1.3. Text selection

As previously mentioned, three novels have been selected for analysis: *Nevermoor* (Townsend, 2017)*, Skin of the Sea* (Bowen, 2021)*,* and *Children of Blood and Bone* (Adeyemi, 2018). Before addressing the selection of these specific texts, however, an explanation of why the fantasy genre as a whole was chosen for this thesis is warranted.

The fantasy genre is comprised of highly diverse and varied stories. The primary distinction between fiction in general and the fantasy genre in particular is that, while both concern events that *have not* occurred, fantasy tells stories thar *could not* have occurred. The fantasy genre often draws on fables, myths and/or fairy tales, stories that have survived through oral traditions over many centuries. Thus, they represent a continuation of the global tradition of telling fantastic stories (Stokke & Tønnessen, 2022, pp. 106–110). The worlds of fantasy concern impossible events, and this impossibility requires readers to engage with the text more closely in order to make sense of these unknown elements (Fabrizi, 2016, p. 2). The fantastic can also serve as an entryway to understanding the real world, as suggested by Lloyd Alexander's quote in the introduction, as fantasy texts are often ripe with metaphor and social commentary, often dealing with topics of religion, history, and social issues (Thomas, 2003).

Additionally, and importantly, many young readers very much *enjoy* fantasy texts. This understanding is based on personal experiences with learners and the indisputable enduring popularity of many fantasy texts, from the aforementioned *Harry Potter* series to C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia,* J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and the more adult-oriented *A Song of Ice and Fire* series by George R.R. Martin. Studies carried out on using fantasy literature in classrooms also generally support this. As Fabrizi found, for instance, fantasy literature can

help motivate learners because they find the texts engaging – partly helped by popular film and TV adaptations – and can also challenge readers with their depth and complexity (Fabrizi, 2012). Of course, I do not argue that *all* learners enjoy fantasy texts; this would be objectively false. Undeniably, there are those who find it neither engaging nor motivating. That being said, the fantasy genre is rich and diverse, and although it should not take up the entirety of the curriculum (nor should any other genre), it can serve as a vehicle for exploring complex ideas and issues in a way that appeals to many young learners.

The three texts chosen for this thesis specifically were selected based on a few criteria, as well as individual considerations for the content and context of each of them. The first criterion was that they should belong to the fantasy genre, for aforementioned reasons, and that they be targeted at children or young adults. Secondly, they needed to be published within the last decade. I believe it is important to keep classroom content up-to-date, and wanted to provide texts that were created in a context that is contemporary to the learners' lives and experiences. Thirdly, although encouraging extensive reading is not a primary aim of this thesis, I selected novels that mark the first installment in a series. This means that, should learners find the books and their worlds engaging, they have the opportunity to continue reading and engaging with the characters, worlds, and themes. Finally, I wanted the texts to represent a range of perspectives and experiences that I have found to be underrepresented in fantasy literature in general. The author of *Skin of the Sea (SotS),* Natasha Bowen, is a Black Nigerian-Welsh woman; Tomi Adeyemi, author of *Children of Blood and Bone (CoBB),* is a Nigerian-American second-generation immigrant; and Jessica Townsend, author of *Nevermoor*, is a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Although their individual identities are less important to my analysis than the content of their texts, I believe it is valuable that learners encounter texts written from perspectives other than the heteronormative and white points of view that often dominate classroom literature.

Because the focus of the thesis is on the critical literacy perspective, I selected texts that deal explicitly with issues of social justice, power, and privilege. It should be noted that this is not absolutely necessary – a text does not have to be overtly political or socially conscious to provide opportunities for critical reflection about real-world issues. However, their explicit engagement with social justice issues was perceived as helpful in finding avenues for exploring critical literacy with learners. One common theme that is explored in different ways in all three

novels concerns dominant and marginalized narratives. The novels explore power in relation to how texts and political messages are constructed, and grapple with the issue of who does or does not have the ability to influence such texts. Additionally, they deal with issues of social inequality, oppression, and discrimination from different angles. *Skin of the Sea* deals heavily with the historical injustice of the slave trade, *Nevermoor* addresses sociopolitical issues of class and privilege, while *Children of Blood and Bone* explores both interracial and intra-racial issues as they intersect with class. Overall, then, the three novels selected offer a diverse range of topics and perspectives that are highly relevant to promoting critical literacy.

1.4. Structure of the thesis

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 provides an outline of the theoretical background of the study. Here, the core concepts of critical literacy in general are presented, as well as the details of relevant frameworks and perspectives. Chapter 3, the literature review, includes an overview of some of the most relevant research done on the field of critical literacy education in relation to teaching fantasy literature. Chapter 4 discusses the study's methodology and the ethical considerations taken into account when carrying out these methods. In Chapter 5, I present a summary of the three texts, followed by a thematic literary analysis of the texts. In Chapter 6, I use Critical Literature Pedagogy to discuss how these texts can be used and their implications in the classroom. Finally, conclusions and final remarks are presented in Chapter 7.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Critical Literacy

2.1.1. Literacy

'Literacy' is a complex term that encompasses more than the ability to read and write on a mechanical level. In languages that do not have an equivalent term, it is sometimes translated to mean 'communicative competence' (Janks, 2010, p. 1). Literacy refers to more than linguistic decoding; it includes the active construction of meaning by engaging one's "knowledge of culture, content, context, text-use and text-structure into an encounter with those of the writer" (Janks, 2010, p. 21) when engaging with texts. The term 'text' is understood in this thesis to refer to a broad definition of text as outlined in the Norwegian curriculum. A text is not only a combination of written letters and linguistic symbols, but involves all combinations of written text, sound, video, images and other forms of expression that serve as methods of communication (MER, 2021). Because literacy encompasses more than the ability to read and decode, many argue that 'literacy' is not universal, nor limited to written texts; we talk about concepts such as 'cultural literacy', 'computer literacy' or 'moral literacy', indicating that there are different types of knowledge and skills required to achieve literacy within different fields (Herman, 2007, pp. 313–314). Words have specific meanings in specific types of discourse, and can be combined in different ways to create different meanings in specialized fields (Janks, 2010, p. 2).

There is no undisputed definition of exactly what level of competence, understanding or ability to make use of and interpret knowledge is required to constitute literacy, but it is generally agreed to encompass both an ability to perform 'reading' and 'writing' on a mechanical level, and the ability to understand and consider contextual and cultural factors when encountering texts. Literacy, therefore, can be understood as a political and social phenomenon in which readers are active participants (Van Sluys et al., 2006, p. 199). The definition of literacy used in this thesis consists of (1) the ability to decode a text, (2) the ability to construct meaning from a text by interpreting and engaging with the writer's meaning, and (3) the ability to interrogate a text and examine its positions, values and underlying assumptions (Janks, 2010, p. 21).

2.1.2. Critical Literacy

The term 'critical literacy' is difficult to define concretely. Some refer to 'critical literacies' in plural, indicating a multiplicity of approaches, frameworks and perspectives that fall within the realm of critical literacy (e.g. Lewison et al., 2002; Yoon et al., 2018). Generally speaking, however, the aim of critical literacy is to promote awareness of the relationships between power, ideology and language (Fabrizi, 2016, p. 3). The relationship between literacy and power is central, as is the examination of the politics within and surrounding the text (Fajardo, 2015, pp. 30–31). This involves a critical approach to texts and literature that encourages the idea that *texts are not neutral*, because they are created and exist in a greater social and cultural context (Janks et al., 2014, p. 2).

All texts are created with a specific purpose: to convey a particular message – from one particular perspective (Vasquez et al., 2019, p. 306). No text in itself tells the whole story or presents an objective 'truth' – issues should be viewed through a critical view of multiple perspectives (Fajardo, 2015, p. 32). In the field of critical literacy, readers are positioned to question texts' underlying assumptions and ideologies, as well as whose interests are being served and whose voices are being heard and whose are excluded (Van Sluys et al., 2006, p. 199).

2.1.3. Critical literacy in a historical perspective

Critical literacy practices can be traced back to Rosenblatt's (1988) transactional theory of reading, in which the reading process is understood as a transaction between text and reader. In this process, readers activate their prior knowledge and experience, allowing them to discern and develop meaning from the text. 'Meaning,' in Rosenblatt's view, is not a definite, objective truth, but something that is created and continues to develop and grow. Rosenblatt argues that the reader's contribution to a text's meaning is instrumental. By engaging with the text, the reader adopts a stance, whether consciously or unconsciously, which determines how they approach and understand the text. The two primary stances are either *efferent* – an analytical stance focused on structuring ideas or information to be used *after* reading the text – or *aesthetic*, in which the focus is on the experiences that are evoked *while* reading the text. A core aspect of Rosenblatt's theory is that there is no absolutely 'correct' reading of a text, and although one is often

interested in discerning an author's intention, the reader's transaction is with the text itself (Rosenblatt, 1988, pp. 4–7). This understanding of the reader as an active creator of meaning is essential to understanding critical approaches to texts.

In Freire's critical pedagogy, the interaction or transaction between text and reader is referred to as '*praxis*'. Freire, similarly to Rosenblatt, argued that knowledge evolves from *praxis*. The goal of Freire's pedagogical approach is to allow for and encourage critical thinking in order to lead learners to an understanding of how sociopolitical forces impact them and their worlds, thus allowing people to liberate themselves from the systems that subjugate and oppress them (Fabrizi, 2016, p. 3). Freire believed education to be instrumental in achieving awareness of these systems and how to transform them, and resisted the idea that 'the teacher teaches and the students are taught.' Instead, the interests, concerns and experiences of the learners are of utmost concern in the process of education. (McInerney, 2009, p. 27).

Furthermore, Freire's theory presented the idea that education is not neutral (Fabrizi, 2016, p. 3) and that teaching is a political act, because teachers have the power to make pedagogical choices that impact learners and how they understand the world (McInerney, 2009, p. 27). "Reading the word precedes reading the world" (Freire & Slover, 1983, p. 5) is a quote that summarizes the central element of Freire's critical pedagogical approach well. The 'word' – the text – reflects the world, filtered through our own understanding of it. By examining and considering the many meanings that can emerge from 'words,' we re-discover and re-interpret the 'world.' 'Reading the word,' therefore, implies a continuous and developing reading of the 'world', and the act of writing and re-writing – to transform the word and the world – is essential in a critical perspective (Freire & Slover, 1983, p. 10). In a critical literacy perspective, the world itself is a socially constructed text or a 'word' to be read, and by critically approaching 'words', we learn to make sense of and question the sociopolitical systems that surround us (Vasquez et al., 2019, p. 307).

2.2. Critical literacy models and frameworks

Several perspectives, frameworks and models have been developed that both concretize and expand on Rosenblatt and Freire's works, and 'critical literacy' has emerged as the unifying

term among various theorists and researchers. This section introduces the perspectives that are most applicable to the further analysis and discussion in this thesis.

2.2.1. Language, access, and power

Literacy, at is most basic level, requires the ability to decode and communicate through reading and writing. Even these technical abilities are not universal. According to research, as per 2021, 99.8% of Polish adults over the age of 15 were literate in the sense that they have the skills required to read or write a short, simple statement about day-to-day matters; in Chad, only 26.8% of the population possessed this level of literacy (UNA Norway, n.d.). On the whole, literacy levels in wealthy developed countries are significantly higher than those in poorer, underdeveloped countries (Janks, 2010, p. 5). The ability to communicate using written words, then, is in itself a privilege, and provides access to both further knowledge and power.

Different societies have values and norms that, consciously or subconsciously, are considered 'good.' This is made explicit through laws and formal regulations, such as national curricula, and are often taken for granted by those who exist within the 'truth' of a particular society. However, when encountering a new type of society or community, one might discover that this 'truth' is not as self-evident as previously believed (Janks, 2010, p. 56). The types of language one already speaks might not be dominant in this new society, and to participate in the community, it is necessary to acquire new languages. Both on smaller and greater scales, those who have access to the dominant language hold greater power, because they are able to participate and effect change in the dominant discourse. The language of power grants access to other types of power, and makes it easier to achieve literacy in other fields.

Language is constructed to convey meaning, and when one uses language, one makes decisions about how that meaning is intended to be understood. The speaker intends for the reader to understand them in a certain way, and the message portrays a certain specific representation of the world (Janks, 2010, p. 61). Texts have a creator, a recipient, and a purpose. The choices made to achieve this purpose are made based on previous knowledge of language within the discourse communities inhabited by the creator, and the underlying ideologies and understandings that influence those communities. The conventions and social rules of these communities guide behavior and language choice, such as which words are appropriate, polite

and impolite forms of speech, and even determine who has the right to speak, for how long, and to whom (Janks et al., 2014, p. 3). The way language is used is reflective of systems of power; language use reflects the values of those with the ability to impact discourse and guide societal perceptions of 'truth.' Such power is wielded by dominant groups in society.

As Janks et al. point out, "people move outside of the communities into which they were born and encounter different ways of being in the world" (2014, p. 6). Some people view these differences as valuable and productive, and acquire new languages and reconsider their beliefs, while others come to view these differences as divisive or even threatening. Either way, difference can lead to the creation of hierarchical systems, in which differences are arranged in terms of their value. In countries in which more than one language is spoken, one language might be considered more valuable or prestigious than others. Certain types of knowledge are also valued more greatly than others, and in a critical perspective, it is essential to consider whose knowledge this is. Those who possess the 'correct' types of knowledge and speak the language of power have greater access, which means they have greater opportunities for more power (Janks et al., 2014, p. 7). Since neither texts nor education are neutral, there are choices made about which versions of 'truth' are taught in schools: which types of literature are considered particularly valuable, and which languages should be taught and how. A critically literate perspective interrogates the 'truths' of society to uncover the underlying assumptions and ideologies that are taken for granted.

2.2.2. The four dimensions of critical literacy

Through their research, Lewison et al. have summarized four central dimensions to critical literacy discourse pertaining to pedagogical use in their instructional model of critical literacy (Lewison et al., 2015, p. xxviii): (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 382).

As illustrated in Figure 1, Lewison et al.'s model focuses on the interactions between personal and cultural resources, critical social practices, critical stance, the movement between the personal and the social, and the context in which the model is situated. The outer ring, personal and cultural resources, concerns the individual resources that educators and learners possess, such as personal experiences, languages and cultures, media and popular culture, personal interests, amongst others. According to Lewison et al., these are fundamental in curricular organization
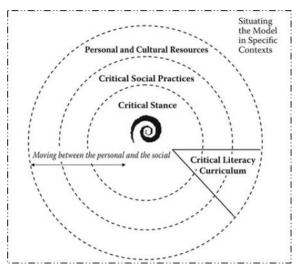

Figure 1: Four dimensions of critical. literacy. From Lewison et al., 2015, p. xxviii.

and pedagogy because they are fundamental to identity and language-learning (Lewison et al., 2015, p. xxix).

The second ring, critical social practices, concerns the specific practices that are used and encouraged in the classroom. Teachers have the power to decide to create spaces that encourage learners' critical development through the implementation of such practices (Lewison et al., 2015, p. xxx). The inner circle, critical stance, encompasses "the attitudes and dispositions that enable us to become critically literate beings" (Lewison et al., 2015, p. xxxi) through conscious engagement, inquiry, and reflection. As illustrated in the model, a critical curriculum moves between personal and social dimensions by building on learners' personal and cultural resources and connecting them to sociopolitical events and issues. According to Lewison et al., it is generally easier to start with the social dimension when dealing with difficult issues (e.g. racism) and gradually encourage the learners to make connections to their personal lives (Lewison et al., 2015, p. xxxi).

The model is built on four critical social practices. In the first dimension, *disrupting the commonplace*, critical literacy focuses on challenging perspectives and assumptions about the world, and examining these ideas through a critical lens. This is done by problematizing objects of study, i.e. texts and other forms of media, and interrogating them by questioning factors such as their intent, how they aim to position their audience, and how they participate in or construct cultural discourse and either support or disrupt the status quo (Lewison et al., 2015, pp. 7–9).

In the second dimension, *interrogating multiple viewpoints* (or multiple perspectives), a critical literacy approach aims to examine and interrogate knowledge and information by viewing it through different lenses. Learners should be encouraged to question their beliefs and be willing to consider alternate or even opposing viewpoints. Interrogating multiple perspectives involves reflecting on contradictory perspectives, questioning dominant and marginalized voices in texts, and examining competing narratives (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383). As Vasquez notes, the aim of such an approach is not to model the idea that all perspectives are created equal. The notion that some perspectives are dominant while others are marginalized is central to critical literacy, but it is important to keep in mind that all perspectives are not equally valid, even though they should be examined (Vasquez, 2013, pp. 11–12).

The dimension of *focusing on sociopolitical* issues is perhaps self-explanatory, as it concerns placing clear and explicit emphasis on social, political, and economic issues and systems. This dimension is perhaps the clearest example of moving between the realm of the personal and into the social to draw connections between texts and societal structures and systems of power (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383). Approaching sociopolitical issues through texts requires conscious awareness of language and how it interacts with power. In order to accomplish this, learners and educators need to interrogate and re-examine social structures, privilege, and power systems, both on smaller scales in our daily lives and on national and global levels. A critically literate curriculum should question the status quo and what is perceived as 'normal' – and why (Vasquez, 2013, p. 13).

The fourth dimension concerns *taking action to promote social justice*, which is the attempt to move the curriculum into greater society and make it tangible and relevant to the real lives of learners (Vasquez, 2013, p. 15). The act of taking action, or engaging in *praxis*, requires informed understanding that can be gleaned from the other three dimensions (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 384). There are many ways for learners to engage in social action, both in reflecting on and identifying sociopolitical systems and in undertaking acts of social justice outside of the classroom. For example, learners can create counternarratives to dominant perspectives or write stories about injustice that are then shared with an audience (Bishop, 2014, p. 55).

The perspectives presented in Lewison et al.'s model form a basis for understanding what the term 'critical literacy' means in the classroom and what it means to become critically literate. By actively considering and engaging in these four dimensions and considering learners' own

resources and how they connect to social issues, educators are enabled to create classroom spaces that promote critical literacy.

2.2.3. Critical Literature Pedagogy

Critical Literature Pedagogy (CLP) is a pedagogical framework constructed by Borsheim-Black et al. with the aim of merging the teaching of canonical literature with a critical literacy approach. A canonical text is a work commonly considered to hold some exemplary value within a field – because it represents a historical period particularly well, because it has had a particularly significant cultural impact, or because it is seen to hold great literary or linguistic value. In a critical literacy perspective, such texts often perpetuate dominant ideologies and voices, potentially resulting in the marginalization of others, and their underlying ideologies may not be closely examined. This contrasts with the ideals of critical literacy, in which uncovering implicit ideologies and promoting marginalized perspectives are core aims (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 123). Although this thesis does not concern the use of canonical literature, CLP still provides a useful framework for examining and interrogating texts in general and can serve as an analytical tool when selecting texts for classroom use.

At its core, CLP concerns two stances readers can adopt while engaging with a text: reading *with* the text and reading *against* the text. These stances are not contradictory, but supplement each other: reading *with* the text may be a prerequisite for reading *against* the text, and both are important in constructing a full understanding of a text. The former is perhaps the most familiar approach. It concerns thematic interpretation, analyzing literary devices, considering historical and authorial context, and understanding what the text may have *intended* to communicate. Borsheim-Black et al. argue that this approach is insufficient because it fails to question underlying ideologies, values and beliefs that are not made explicit, or to consider the messages that are communicated subconsciously. Reading *against* the text encompasses reading between the lines. When examining historical context, for instance, one should take into consideration the power structures and societal values and norms both espoused by and hidden in the text (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, pp. 124–125).

The CLP framework consists of five dimensions of literary study: (1) canonicity, (2) contexts, (3) literary elements, (4) reader, and (5) assessments. These dimensions sometimes

overlap and tie in to each other, and although each distinct dimension can serve as a useful entry point to approaching texts, they should not be considered entirely separate from each other in working with literature (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 125). Because the texts analyzed in this thesis are non-canonical texts, the first dimension is not directly relevant. This dimension focuses on questioning the concept of canonicity and why some texts are considered canonical instead of others, which is largely inapplicable to this thesis. The latter four dimensions, however, provide valuable perspectives that create a foundation for the textual analysis in later chapters.

The *contexts* dimension concerns the historical and cultural context in which a text was created. Reading *with* a text, this can involve asking questions about the author's life experiences and historical factors that surrounded the creation of the text. In reading *against* the text, one should also consider how the text is positioned in terms of the dominant values of the time, as well as interrogate how this text might have looked from the perspective of someone with different life experiences. The reader is encouraged to question which version of a historical context is presented in a text and which other versions might have existed, but not been included in the dominant narratives of the time (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 126). Texts are situated at a moment in time and written for a purpose in a specific context, and by asking such questions, readers can become more aware of the non-neutrality and partiality of texts.

The *literary elements* dimension in a non-critical approach (reading *with* the text) often includes recognizing plot points and narrative structure, identifying protagonists and antagonists in character analyses, finding and interpreting symbols as they are perceived to be intended, defining and interpreting major themes, and other familiar literary devices. When one attempts to read *against* a text with this dimension in mind, the focus is on questioning the text's embedded ideologies and values. For instance, one might question which characters' stories are emphasized and whose are downplayed, or consider the portrayals of characters from historically marginalized populations in terms of whether they are nuanced or stereotypical. Readers might question how the text's major themes support or challenge particular ideals or belief systems, and examine how chosen symbols reflect cultural knowledge and what types of knowledge are required to understand these symbols (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 127). In 'traditional' literary analysis, readers engage with the text on its own merits and attempt to identify and recognize familiar devices and tropes, thereby perpetuating an inherent 'correctness' to understanding these elements. While such an analysis does hold value, a CLP approach to

literary elements also encourages awareness that the 'correct' interpretation of a text is not the *only* interpretation. An understanding of symbols and metaphors is not inherent, but builds on certain sets of cultural knowledge. This can lead to questioning where that cultural knowledge comes from and why it is considered valuable while other types of knowledge are not.

The *reader* dimension emphasizes exactly this: texts do not have inherent, objective meaning. Echoing Rosenblatt's transactional theory, CLP posits that meaning is created and negotiated in the interaction between text and reader. In focusing on the reader dimension when reading *with* the text, learners might be encouraged to draw connections between themes of the text and their own personal lives by describing situations from their own lives that they associate with the theme (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 130). This can activate learners' pre-existing knowledge and help them draw connections to the text. On the other hand, attempts at 'relating' to a text can come at the expense of considering other aspects of the text. Being unable to relate to a text can be a meaningful phenomenon in itself: it encourages the exploration of a perspective entirely different from one's own, and reading *against* the text in the reader-focused dimension can lead to excellent critical reflection on how identity shapes one's reading of a text. Learners might question *why* they do or do not relate with dominant or marginalized characters, thus creating an opportunity to examine privilege and power (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 127). In other words, both making connections and recognizing the aspects of a text one does not feel connected to are valuable in a critical literacy perspective.

The final dimension of CLP concerns *assessment*. Literature teaching is often assessed in the form of written literary analyses that emphasize reading *with* the text; the learners write summaries of plot points, identify structure, themes, characters and recurring symbols, and potentially find examples of how the book relates to their own life experiences (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 131). The aim, it might seem, is to re-emphasize the value of the text as written and perpetuate the notion that it holds an inherent, 'correct' interpretation and intrinsic value that exists independently of the reader and should not be questioned. In an assessment that encourages reading *against* the text to encourage critical reflection, textual analysis should be taken a step further and positioned in terms of sociopolitical implications in the learners' lives. Learners can be encouraged to consider how interpretations of texts can be used to interrupt and question problematic perspectives, and how the meanings developed by reading with and against

the texts can be used to "inform […] others about oppression and injustice" (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 127) and enact social change.

A core tenet of CLP is that what texts do *not* say holds as much value as what they *do* say. No text is neutral, and in text interpretation and analysis, critical examination of both the text itself and how it reflects the world around it – and in which areas it does not reflect the world – is important. By considering the dimensions presented in the CLP framework, readers are encouraged to question dominant narratives, power, and privilege, and to gain greater awareness of both the intended and unintended messages conveyed through the text by interrogating its underlying ideologies.

2. 3. Representation in literature

Bishop uses the metaphor of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors to describe books. Seeing literature as a window means that it provides a view of another world, and sometimes, books can serve as sliding glass doors that readers can step through to become part of that world through imagination. Books as mirrors means that texts reflect the human experience, allowing readers to see themselves as parts of a greater human experience (Bishop, 1990, p. 1). The point Bishop makes with this metaphor is that many readers have historically been unable to see themselves mirrored in the books they read because they are not part of the dominant social groups that are most often represented in literature. Predominantly, literature in classrooms is made up of representations of white middle class perspectives (Tschida et al., 2014, p. 28).

Because of this, the dominant perspective becomes the default; readers who grow up seeing reflections of themselves in all the literature they encounter may become increasingly ethnocentric and believe their own experiences to be more important than others, while readers who are part of marginalized groups become 'othered' and feel estranged from both the world of fiction and the world around them (Bishop, 1990; Tschida et al., 2014). A critical literacy approach encourages considering dominant narratives and interrogating why texts tell certain stories from certain perspectives, but to do so without also expanding the perspectives that are brought into the classroom is insufficient. Learners need to encounter and experience literature that serves as both mirrors and windows in order to develop a more nuanced and critical view of themselves and the world around them (Tschida et al., 2014, pp. 29–30).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie described the lack of representation she experienced as a Black Nigerian woman and how it impacted her understanding of the world in a TED Talk. Because she predominantly encountered British and American literature at home and in her education, she developed an understanding of books as a 'single story.' People like her and the communities she knew did not belong in these stories. Her eventual discovery of African literature led her to consider the relationship between stories and power: "Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person" (2009, para. 19). The single story is created when people or groups of people are repeatedly portrayed in limited ways, until this narrative becomes dominant enough to form a kind of definite understanding of these people (Tschida et al., 2014, p. 31). This can lead to the development of harmful stereotypes or prejudices, as well as reinforce the idea that only members of dominant groups are nuanced, complex, or valuable as individuals. As Tschida et al. put it: "*one* story can never be the *only* story" (2014, p. 31). Literature has the power to both humanize and ostracize individuals or groups, so bringing literature that disrupts the 'single story' in some way into the classroom counteracts the harmful effects of limited narratives, and instead encourages appreciation for multiculturality and empathy and understanding for marginalized groups.

A lack of representation can result in young readers, like Adichie, feeling detached from literature. One study on eighth grade girls of color found that lack of representation of their lived experiences in school literature and conversations about literature in the classroom made them feel like their perspectives were less valuable than others, and they did not identify with many of the 'universal' themes of canonical literature (DeBlase, 2003). For learners like these girls, a lack of diversity in literature can lead to devaluation of their own identities, further reinforcing the power privileged groups have to dominate the narrative.

3. Literature review

This chapter provides an overview of some of the most relevant research done on the field of critical literacy education in relation to teaching fantasy literature.

In a review article, Al Alami (2016) documents several studies carried out within the field of teaching literature in EFL classrooms, arguing that a literature-based approach is essential in teaching 'the four Cs': collaboration, creativity, communication and critical thinking. The article presents multiple arguments for this: using narrative stories in the classroom promotes reading skills, positively impacts the learners' desire to read for pleasure, enhances analytical skills and encourages becoming informed about different global issues through making real-world connections and inquiring about real-world issues. Several of the studies discussed in Al Alami's article also found an increase in language skill levels and language-learning strategies through literature teaching. Al Alami concluded that the primary goal of literature teaching "should be teaching learners how to be flexible as readers; […] to comprehend and appreciate the particular qualities of the passage being discussed" (Al Alami, 2016, p. 150), and that literature teaching needs to build on a learner-centered pedagogy. In general, the findings support the original point that teaching literature is useful in enhancing 'the four Cs' in the EFL classroom, but that doing so effectively requires selecting appropriate texts and using appropriate and relevant instructional methods and activities (Al Alami, 2016, p. 151).

There has been limited research carried out regarding the use of fantasy literature in relation to critical literacy, although a few studies do exist. Some of these do not refer to the term 'critical literacy,' but the focus can be inferred from context. One example of this is Dashiell (1995), which used fantasy literature as a tool to allow adolescent girls to explore gender issues and identity. This was based on the belief that "if girls are given the opportunity to read stories with strong female protagonists, they might become more empowered themselves" (Dashiell, 1995, p. 3), indicating a need for representation in classroom texts. The participants identified and focused on the protagonists without prompting from the researchers, and their responses to these characters continued to develop beyond the reading of these texts. Although some of the characters were initially judged harshly, the participants came to understand and relate to their complexity through a process of identification. In discussions, interviews and journal entries, the participants were passionate and reflective. In school, they would often feel stifled and refrained

from honest discussions about thoughts and feelings because they felt their experiences were not valued, but they were able to counter this through discussing the characters in the text because they identified with them (Dashiell, 1995, pp. 167–169). The primary focus of Dashiell's study was on personal identification and understanding oneself through literature, but in a broader perspective, the study's findings point to the possibility of using fantasy literature to explore sociopolitical issues through real-world parallels in fantastical texts. It also demonstrates the importance of introducing texts that allow readers to feel represented.

Cruz and Pollock (2004) organized a genre study of fantasy with young learners in which they focused on studying the genre's form and structure, and characteristics through reading workshops that included independent reading, discussions and instruction. They introduced various texts to meet the learners' different needs, and also encouraged the learners to find their own examples of fantasy texts. Throughout the project, the learners were encouraged to reflect and inquire about the genre, and Cruz and Pollock provide a list of inquiries that students investigated that includes topics such as societal norms, ethnocentrism, feminism and the roles of men and woman, environmentalism, and identity (2004, p. 193). The implication of this is that, through fantasy literature, learners can explore complex ideas both within the text and in the world around them. The genre offers them "another tool for exploring and understanding their lives outside of school" (Cruz & Pollock, 2004, p. 194).

Another small-scale qualitative study on the impact of working with fantasy with young learners was carried out by Bowles (2010). The study consisted of a project working with fantasy texts in a fifth-grade class over a three-week period. The data consisted of recorded learner discussions, student writing samples, and journal notes. The research aimed to explore how fantasy literature can be helpful in encouraging learners to process, discuss and explore real-world issues and topics. The study found that the learners' tendency to make connections between their real lives and the texts increased throughout the study, and that these connections were qualitatively deep and meaningful. The learners showed increased comprehension of themes compared to previous literary work, and there were more discussions among the learners about real-world issues such as inequality, change, and conformity. Additionally, the researcher noted the learners becoming more autonomous and enthusiastic about academic areas of interest outside the classroom, and they were interested in reading more fantasy texts in school (Bowles, 2010, pp. 52–53). These findings point to the use of fantasy literature leading to an increased

understanding of and interest in sociopolitical issues, an important focal point of critical literacy education.

Fabrizi (2012) examined how fantasy literature can be used to encourage critical literacy skills in the classroom and to what extent this approach is useful. This research consisted of three case studies in Connecticut schools, each consisting of interviews with teachers and learners, classroom observations, and analysis of learner-produced written works. The target classes varied in size and composition, the teachers' methods were notably different from one another, and there was a broad range of learners with varied academic abilities involved (Fabrizi, 2012, pp. 271–273). An important finding from this study is that, although there was great evidence of the *potential* of fantasy texts in critical literacy education, the teachers' pedagogical approach and understanding of critical literacy were considered to be paramount (Fabrizi, 2012, p. 279). In the first case study, the lessons were heavily teacher-driven and the teacher "bore the burden of carrying the discussion" (Fabrizi, 2012, p. 277), which resulted in the learners' tendency to address key questions of critical literacy with underdeveloped answers. The teacher in the second case study relied on a more dialogic and Socratic approach, and learners worked together in small groups without direct teacher guidance. These learners' answers were more developed and their ideas were better supported. In the third class, the learners carried out a larger independent project by using skills they had developed, and their final written and oral projects addressed "the key questions of critical literacy in an exemplary way" (Fabrizi, 2012, p. 278). In other words, the learners showed more growth in their understanding of critical literacy when they were given more individual responsibility. Fabrizi concluded that, in each case study, at least some learners "were able to demonstrate the development of critical literacy skills through fantasy literature to an exemplary level" (Fabrizi, 2012, p. 288).

Based on the findings of the study, Fabrizi noted several academic benefits and potential challenges to using fantasy literature to teach critical literacy. The first benefit is simply that many learners enjoy reading fantasy literature. Many learners have positive experiences with the fantasy genre. Therefore, using fantasy literature can be a way of capitalizing on learner interests to encourage language and critical development. Secondly, fantasy literature challenges the learners because it requires them to make use of their imagination and creativity. There is great depth and complexity to be found in the fantasy genre, as evidenced by the interpretations presented by the learners in Fabrizi's case studies. Additionally, the popularity of movie

adaptations and fantasy films can help motivate learners to engage with fantasy literature. On the other hand, the study notes that fantasy is sometimes confusing to those who are unfamiliar with the genre conventions or find it difficult to immerse themselves in these worlds of imagination, resulting in a frustrating and demotivating reading experience if the learners are not properly prepared. A practical challenge is the length of many fantasy novels and series, which makes it difficult to make time for these texts in the classroom. Finally, an important note is that although many learners enjoy fantasy texts, this is not universal. Some learners do not find the fantasy genre inherently engaging or motivating, which Fabrizi suggests may undermine the most important reasons for using these texts (Fabrizi, 2012, pp. 280–285).

4. Methodology

The research method in this thesis consists of a qualitative thematic analysis of the three selected texts using guiding principles from close reading and Critical Literature Pedagogy. I carried out the analysis through an inductive approach, looking for themes that emerged in my readings of the texts. This involved multiple readings of the texts while taking notes on initial impressions and observations, then using these notes to structure the analysis thematically.

4.1. Close reading and the CLP framework

The analysis of the selected texts draws on principles of close reading. Close reading, like CLP, builds on the idea that there is no meaning without context. In order to facilitate the most rewarding reading experience, one must understand the broadest range of plausible contexts (Greenham, 2018, p. 6). The six dimensions of context presented by Greenham are:

1. The semantic: the meanings and connotations of individual words
2. The syntactic: the meanings and connotations of words when they are put together
3. The thematic: how themes emerge and affect meanings when we read
4. The iterative: the ways that repetition and patterning affect textual meanings
5. The generic: how the kind of work we are reading (e.g. genre, knowledge of literary conventions) changes our approach to its meanings
6. The adversarial: how historical, political, and theoretical concerns reshape meanings (Greenham, 2018, p. 7)

Due to the limited scope of this thesis, it would be unfeasible to discuss all of these dimensions in detail. Therefore, the two core dimensions of focus in my analysis are the thematic and the adversarial contexts. The thematic context focuses on the understanding of texts as explorations of certain ideas, and how understanding the core themes of a text allows a reader to re-interpret a text and understand its individual parts in a wider context (Greenham, 2018, pp. 48–49). The adversarial context is important for understanding how the text relates to the real world, and is therefore perhaps especially important in a critical analysis. Greenham emphasizes the importance of considering real historical events that impacted the creation of the text, and how these events inform current readers' understandings of it. Greenham challenges the reader to

consider in what ways biography or history can help us with our interpretation of the text's contexts of close reading (Greenham, 2018, p. 144-146).

This is closely linked to the *contexts* dimension of CLP (see Section 2.2.3), which leads to the point that the central elements of close reading are perhaps most obviously important when reading for a text's *intended meaning*, but when viewed through a critical literacy perspective, they may be somewhat insufficient. A core tenet of CLP is the concept of reading *with* and *against* the text. When reading *with* the text, for the purposes of understanding the text on its own terms, the questions asked from a close reading perspective are essential. When reading *against* the text, however, it is just as essential to understand what else might contribute to the text; how it aligns – or does not align – with dominant values and ideologies, for instance, or whose language, words, voices or historical context are *not* visible in the text (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 128).

In my analysis, I have attempted to merge the guiding principles of close reading with the critical lens of CLP in order to gain a deeper understanding of themes and ideas explored in the texts and their real-world implications. This approach involved examining the texts on their own merits, attempting to glean both what they *intend* to say and what they might imply, as well as considering the historical, cultural, and societal contexts that may have influenced their creation and how they are received and understood by readers.

4.2. Limitations and ethical considerations

The first and most practical limitation of my study concerns the scope of the thesis. I have chosen to analyze three novels that explore complex themes and topics, and they could be explored from many angles. A full exploration of all possible themes, interpretations, and ways of working with these texts would be unfeasible within the given timeframe and length of the thesis. Therefore, the thesis is necessarily limited and focused on specific aspects of these texts. This allows for focused, in-depth explorations of these aspects of the texts, but it also means that other possible interpretations, perspectives, or themes may not be considered or given the weight they deserve. There are many other potential avenues for exploration of these texts that could be valuable and interesting, but due to practical limitations, they have not been discussed in this thesis.

In any study, there are ethical issues to consider, even when there are no human participants involved in the research. Perhaps the most important point to address is the inherent subjectivity involved in engaging with and analyzing literary works. Following Rosenblatt's transactional theory, my belief is that the 'meaning' of a text is created in the interaction between a text and a reader (1988). This means that, for the purposes of this thesis, concerns of validity, reliability, and verification are not relevant in the same way as they might be in a study involving empirical research, because the interpretation of the selected texts is subjective and inherently dependent on individual perspectives. To ensure the credibility of the research, I have been careful not to misrepresent the content of the texts or the authors' intentions, and unless otherwise stated, all interpretations are my own. I have also striven to be conscious of my own biases and pre-existing notions and perspectives and attempted to approach the texts with an open mind and considered multiple possible interpretations, and have sought feedback on whether my own implicit biases may have impacted my reading of the texts I do not claim to have produced a definitive or objective analysis of the texts. Instead, the analyses presented in this thesis represent one possible interpretation, undoubtedly impacted by my own views and experiences, and I would encourage readers to engage critically with my findings and draw their own conclusions.

I am particularly conscious of the fact that I am addressing complex topics of social justice from a position of privilege. As a white, educated, native Norwegian woman, I have not experienced many of the forms of discrimination and oppression discussed in these texts, particularly in regard to issues related to race in *SotS* and *CoBB* and the topic of immigration in *Nevermoor*. Although I have attempted to educate myself about these issues by engaging with diverse perspectives and relevant literature, I recognize that my perspective on these topics may still be limited.

5. Thematic analysis

5.1. Summaries of the selected texts

5.1.1. *Skin of the Sea*

Skin of the Sea (SotS) was published in 2021 and authored by Nigerian-Welsh writer Natasha Bowen, and is the first installment in a planned trilogy. Bowen has explained that she wanted to write the story she wanted to read, specifically one that included "Black mermaids, magic, and West African history," partly inspired by her own love of H.C. Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. In the same interview, it is noted that "every culture contains a mermaid story" (American Booksellers Association, 2021). The juxtaposition between the specific cultural West African elements such as legendary creatures and the perceived universality of the mermaid story serves as an interesting starting point for considering the book in a critical literacy perspective.

The book is told through a close first-person narrative from the perspective of Simidele, a Mami Wata. The Mami Wata originate in Nigerian tradition and mythology, and although details vary in various tales, in this novel, they are water spirits that resemble mermaids. They have the torso of a human and a fish-like tail, and are tasked with collecting the souls of those who die at sea. The Mami Wata were created by Yemoja, an 'orisa' – a spirit revered as a deity in Yoruba mythology – and as long as they stay in the water, they have no memories of their mortal lives. When on land, however, Simidele's memories gradually return, showing her glimpses of her life with her mother and father. Simidele's flashes of memory often center on her mother and the stories she would tell, always prefaced by the phrase "Here is a story. Story it be…." There are several of these flashbacks throughout the story, and Simidele's ability to recall the stories passed down from her mother are crucial to the narrative.

The catalyst for the novel's plot happens when Simidele finds a young man, Kola, who is drowning at sea, and decides to save his life. This goes against the mission Yemoja has assigned to her, which is to guide the souls of the dead and nothing else. The creation of the Mami Wata, Yemoja explains, went against the wishes of Olodumare, the supreme creator. Yemoja was punished for it, but the Mami Wata were allowed to remain, provided they did not act outside of their assigned purpose. Because Simidele has now stepped out of line to save a life, she, Yemoja and the other Mami Wata risk facing punishment from Olodumare through his messenger, Esu.

This sets in motion the core narrative: Simidele, accompanied by Kola, must find a way to summon Olodumare to ask his forgiveness. This leads them onto a long and dangerous journey, during which they encounter several fantastic creatures before eventually facing off against Esu.

During their travels, they meet several companions. The first is Issa, a small, pixie-like spirit of death from West African mythology known as a 'yumbo'. In Kola's home village, they meet his childhood friends Bem, Yinka and Ifedayo, who accompany them on their journey. Here, they also discover that Kola's younger siblings, the twins Taiwo and Kehinde, are missing. In addition to being Kola's siblings and therefore of personal importance to the characters, the twins have in their possession two rings which are required to contact Olodumare. The twins are an incarnation of the orisa Ibeji and therefore have mystical powers, and the rings are magical as well. If the rings fall into Esu's hands, he will be granted power over Olodumare and all of creation. The protagonists set out to Esu's island, determined to stop him. Along the way, Simidele enlists the help of Olokun, an orisa who has been imprisoned at the bottom of the sea for thousands of years for inflicting his wrath on humanity. She makes a bargain with him, the terms of which are not revealed until the very end of the book: in exchange for his help, once her mission is completed, she will return to the sea and serve him.

They face several trials on their way to Esu's island, including encounters with other orisa under Esu's command. Throughout the novel, Esu is believed to be acting on behalf of Olodumare, although his desire to overthrow the supreme creator is well known. It becomes clear, however, that although his role is that of a messenger, he uses this power to keep information from Olodumare and often acts entirely of his own accord. For instance, it is revealed that Yemoja's harsh punishment for creating the Mami Wata was not done at Olodumare's behest at all. Esu is a trickster and has used his power to serve his own ambitions. With this understanding, Simidele manages to appeal to his pride and get him to answer a riddle rather than strike against her and her companions. While he is distracted, Simidele lunges at him and throws them both into the ocean, where he is imprisoned by Olokun. Finally, the protagonists manage to summon Olodumare, and the supreme creator grants them forgiveness. Simidele then dives into the ocean to fulfill her bargain with Olokun.

SotS is "a blend of history, myth, and fiction" (Bowen, 2021, p. 306). Many elements, such as orisa, yumboes, and unicorn-like creatures known as abada, are inspired directly by Yoruba mythology and traditions. Simultaneously, the real-world tragedy of the African slave

trade is an important aspect of the novel's setting. The 'òyìnbó' (light-skinned Europeans) are frequently referred to throughout the book, and one of the reasons for Simidele's initial dislike of the limitations of her role as a Mami Wata is her desire to destroy the ships to save those who have been captured. Although the slavers are not the story's primary antagonists, the real-world history of the African slave trade runs as an undercurrent throughout the story.

5.1.2. *Children of Blood and Bone*

Children of Blood and Bone (CoBB), published in 2018, is the first novel in a planned trilogy written by Nigerian-American writer Tomi Adeyemi. *CoBB* draws inspiration from West African mythology and Yoruba traditions to craft its fantasy setting. The kingdom of Orïsha gets its name from the orisa/Orïsha, the same deities featured in *SotS*, as does Ibeji, a desert town the protagonists visit during the story, which is named for the twin orisa in Yoruba mythology.

The narrative is told from the first-person perspective of its three central characters: Zélie, a divîner (someone born with the potential to become mages known as 'maji'), Amari, youngest child of King Saran of Orïsha, and Inan, Amari's older brother and heir to the throne. Prior to the events of the novel, all adult maji, including Zélie's mother, were killed by King Saran's forces and the world's connection to magic has been severed. According to the king, the maji used their powers to cause death and destruction and therefore needed to be destroyed. Divîner children such as Zélie were left alive, believed to no longer be a threat, but they are oppressed and face discrimination and harassment. Their distinctive straight, white hair and dark skin marks Zélie and her kind as divîners. They are frequently unfairly blamed for wrongdoings and generally distrusted.

The plot kicks off when Zélie goes to the market and encounters Amari, who has fled the palace with a magical scroll following the execution of her divîner friend, Binta. Binta touched the scroll and it awakened her latent magical powers, making the king realize that magic can still return to the world. The same chain of events restores Zélie's power as a Reaper, which allows her to guide and command the spirits of the dead. The two girls are pursued by guards and flee the city alongside Zélie's older brother, Tzain, determined to restore magic. In order to do so, they need two more magical items: a bone dagger and a sunstone, combined with the scroll in a magical ritual that only Zélie can complete.

One of their pursuers is Prince Inan. Inan is fiercely loyal to his father and believes magic to be an inherent threat, and he is determined to track down and kill Zélie. He is faced with an internal struggle when he discovers that he himself has magical powers, leading him to question the righteousness of his quest and the narrative his father has constructed about the maji. He accidentally kills his father's most loyal guard and mistress, Admiral Kaea, using his magic. When he catches up to Zélie and Amari, he comes to think that his father is the true evil, not the maji, and becomes an ally to the divîners. The three eventually find a settlement of divîners and use the scroll to awaken the others' powers. They are found by Saran's forces, and the settlement is destroyed. During the ensuing combat, the maji use their powers to defend themselves, resulting in the deaths of several guards. This causes Inan to question his loyalty once more as he comes to see just how dangerous magic can be. Zélie is captured by Saran and brutally tortured to get her to reveal how to destroy the scroll, and in the process, her connection to magic is severed once more. Inan betrays Zélie and rejoins his father on his mission to destroy magic permanently.

Amari and Tzain rescue Zélie, and with the help of a band of mercenaries, they find the ritual site, but are ambushed by Saran and Inan, who have captured Zélie's father and demand she surrender the three magical artifacts in exchange for his life. After she complies, however, Saran has her father executed anyway, reawakening Zélie's magic. She fights the king's forces, and Inan manages to lure her into destroying the scroll. However, he instinctively uses his own magic to shield his father from an attack, and Saran's hatred of maji overpowers any affection he might have for his son as he tries to kill him, but is stopped by Amari. Zélie finally completes the ritual using her own blood magic instead of the scroll, which kills her, but she is brought back by the spirit of her mother and discovers that magic has indeed returned and Amari, too, has developed magical powers.

5.1.3. *Nevermoor*

Nevermoor is a 2017 novel authored by Australian writer Jessica Townsend. It is the first novel in an ongoing book series that follows a young girl, Morrigan Crow, who is cast into the magical world of Nevermoor. The story is told from a limited third-person perspective that closely follows Morrigan. At the beginning of the story, Morrigan lives with her father, Corvus,

and stepmother, Ivy, in a low-magic setting. Morrigan is a so-called Cursed Child, which means she was born on Eventide, the final day of an age, and like all children born on this day, she is thought to bring bad luck and misfortune to those she encounters. Cursed Children are fated to die on the next Eventide, which means Morrigan is destined to die on her eleventh birthday.

Morrigan's father is a local politician. He shows little affection for his daughter, but is perfectly happy to play up the tragedy of her cursed life for sympathy from the public. Morrigan spends her days writing apology notes for misfortunes that have supposedly occurred because of her. So much as speaking to a Cursed Child is supposedly enough to bring terrible ills, and therefore, Morrigan is held responsible for just about any minor or major tragedy that occurs around her, such as her family's gardener suffering a heart attack a year after she told him the flowerbeds looked nice.

Two days before her eleventh birthday, Morrigan accompanies her father to an event known as Bid Day, where patrons place their educational bids for children who have completed their initial schooling, offering them a chance to study at the patron's chosen educational institution. Morrigan herself is not expected to receive any bids; many children do not, and in the case of Cursed Children, fated to die only two days later, such a thing is unheard of. Surprisingly, however, Morrigan is inundated with bids from several mysterious benefactors, suggesting that something is amiss. This is proven true on the somber day of the Eventide, when moments before midnight, when she is expected to die, the enigmatic Jupiter North, one of her prospective patrons, appears at the Crow residence and whisks her away. Thus, Morrigan is taken to the Free State, to the titular city of Nevermoor. Here, she is given a home at Jupiter's Hotel Deucalion, and introduced to several strange and magical people, such as Fenestra, the giant talking cat who is head of housekeeping, and Dame Chanda Kali, a singer with the power to control animals with her voice.

It is revealed that Jupiter has taken Morrigan to Nevermoor in order to have her inducted into the Wundrous Society, an elite educational institution. Acceptance into the Society is highly competitive, however. Hundreds of children have to compete with each other through several trials for only a small number of available spots. The majority of the novel details Morrigan's journey through these trials alongside her new friend Hawthorne and their rivals Noelle and Cadence. The first trial is the Book Trial, in which the applicants must answer questions in a two-part exam. In the first section, they are presented with questions about themselves and must

answer them honestly. In the second, they answer questions about Nevermoor itself before a panel of judges. This is followed by the Chase Trial, a race in which the competitors ride various magical beasts with the goal of collecting rings that will allow them to move onto the next trial, then the Fright Trial, in which the candidates are faced with their worst fears and are judged on their courage and resourcefulness.

Finally, the few who complete all three initial trials compete in a talent show known as the Show Trial. Here, they must display their 'knack': a special talent or unique skill that makes a candidate stand out. Hawthorne, for instance, is a dragon rider with the ability to tame and control dragons, while Jupiter North has the power to see things others cannot by touching objects or people. An underlying concern of Morrigan's throughout the book is that she does not seem to have a knack at all, and it is only during the Show Trial itself that Jupiter reveals to the judges what her knack truly is. Morrigan is a Wundersmith, someone with the ability to control the magical energy known as Wunder. This is an exceptionally rare and powerful power, and Wundersmiths have near-mythical status in Nevermoor's history.

However, the most recent example of a Wundersmith is Ezra Squall, the series' overarching villain. Ezra Squall was banished from Nevermoor over a century ago because he used his powers to commit atrocities during the Great War, killing hundreds of innocent people in the process. Throughout *Nevermoor,* Ezra is mostly alluded to, and only makes a direct appearance at the very end. His actions were so atrocious that they have been stricken from most history books, although his deeds appear to be common knowledge. As it turns out, all children born on the Eventide have the potential to become Wundersmith, and 'Cursed Children' are not cursed at all. Ezra Squall has been systematically hunting and killing them so they do not grow up to threaten his unique power over Wunder. In Morrigan's case, though, Squall takes a particular interest. He is one of the patrons who make a bid for her on Bid Day under a pseudonym, offering her an apprenticeship. The reasons for this are not made clear in the initial installment of the series, but it is suggested towards the end that Squall sees similarities between himself and Morrigan.

5.2. The power of stories

Stories shape our understanding of the world and influence how we perceive ourselves and others, and the relationship between each other. However, no story is neutral – every story has a storyteller, and every storyteller is influenced by their own understanding and underlying ideologies. The power to control and shape narratives is therefore significant, and when left unquestioned, the dominant narratives shaped by those with the power to tell stories can perpetuate harmful stereotypes or reinforce systemic inequality. In different ways, these three novels reckon with the power of stories and how stories are told. They challenge the notion that the things we think we know can be left unquestioned. This is closely linked to the critical literacy dimension of disrupting the commonplace. Understanding and interpreting is as important, if not more important, than simply remembering or 'knowing,' and by critically examining the narratives that are presented, we can uncover ideologies and power structures that may otherwise be taken for granted.

By exploring the power of stories, the three novels pose the question of how the narratives that influence our lives are created and our relationship to these narratives. They can be used to encourage a critical examination of which narratives we accept as truth and how this impacts our greater understanding. They invite us to consider the impact of the stories we choose to believe and why we believe them. By highlighting the importance of diverse perspectives, reading these books with an eye for the theme of storytelling invites readers to challenge dominant narratives and, by extension, encourage an awareness of the importance of amplifying marginalized voices.

5.2.1. *Skin of the Sea*

In *SotS*, a central, recurring theme is that of cultural knowledge and stories that have been passed down from generation to generation. As a Mami Wata, Simidele's memories of her mortal life have been erased, and only when she steps out of the water does she experience flashbacks of her past. Many of these center around her parents, especially her mother, who would tell stories about the orisa. Each of these stories is prefaced by the phrase "Here is a story. Story it is." The Mami Wata serve a singular, sacred purpose: to guide the souls of those who die at sea to rest. In carrying out this duty, memories of their lives as humans might become a

hindrance. Simidele, however, yearns to remember, and this is significant to the narrative. When she saves Kola from drowning, the scene is interspersed with images from Simidele's memories, demonstrating how her connection to her background and humanity is a driving force for her actions (Bowen, 2021, Chapter 3). From the very start, both the plot and the character of Simidele are driven by a longing for knowledge and understanding of her identity.

Near the novel's climax, too, it is the recollection of her mother and the stories she told that allow Simidele to solve the antagonist's puzzle. Standing at the edge of a bridge that has receded when she stepped on a stone slab, Simidele sees images along the side and realizes that these images are telling a story. She recognizes the symbols in the images from religious stories about the orisa, and realizes that she is faced with a puzzle in which she must step on the stone slabs in the same order in which the images appear in the story. However, it is not immediately clear which story the images show. The images could potentially point to several different cultural stories, and the characters discuss the symbols and their relation to different stories. Simidele settles on the story of how Esu became Olodumare's messenger and recounts the story, introducing it with her mother's phrase "Here is a story. Story it is." At one point, she is presented with three different images that are not explicitly detailed in the story: which type of shoe Olodumare wore. She must use logic and reason to discern the correct answer based on her knowledge of the orisa even beyond the context of the story (Bowen, 2021, p. 23). In so doing, she demonstrates the importance of critical awareness; reading and remembering the text is insufficient. She must also engage with it carefully and analytically, viewing it in a larger context and considering how it relates to other aspects of culture in order to solve the conundrum.

The story of *SotS* is set in an alternate version of Nigeria and has many parallels to real-world history. The most obvious of these, perhaps, is to the slave trade. Kola, the deuteragonist and Simidele's eventual love interest, was captured by slavers before being rescued from drowning by Simidele. Simidele herself, as revealed late in the story, chose to drown herself after being captured by a slave ship, and her death in the sea is what allowed her to become a Mami Wata. The juxtaposition of the looming threat of the slave trade with the exploration of storytelling and the importance of remembering and understanding one's cultural background and history – the importance of which is very real and tangible in the story – can be understood as a reminder of how people have been stripped of their cultural identities and history as a result of systemic oppression. Simidele herself can be viewed as a symbol of this; as a Mami Wata, as

long as she remains in the sea, she has no memory of her mortal life or the stories her mother told her. She has to actively challenge herself and work to restore her memories in order to attain the knowledge required for her to overcome the challenges she faces. Her cultural identity and the voices of those she has forgotten are essential to her, but have been stripped away by an external force. Her arc, thus, can be read as a metaphor for the importance of seeking and preserving the stories of marginalized voices and stories that have been left untold by those who have historically had the power to control the narrative.

Another example of how dominant narratives shape people's understanding – and, by extension, their reality – is the character of Esu. Esu is the messenger of Olodumare, the Supreme Creator in Yoruba mythology, and serves as an intermediary between Olodumare and the mortal world, including the other orisa. Esu is responsible for conveying messages and resolving conflicts that concern the orisa, and is responsible, for instance, for enacting punishment on Yemoja after she created the Mami Wata without permission. Throughout the story, although Esu is an antagonistic force and generally perceived as a self-serving manipulator, his role as messenger remains unquestioned. He is understood to be a representative of a higher force, and as much as he abuses this power, most of his actions are seen as beyond reproach for this reason. Esu controls the narrative, and his words are the truth.

The plot twist, then, is that Esu has used this power to do as he pleases without Olodumare's knowledge or blessing. Olodumare did not sanction Yemoja's harsh punishment; Esu acted of his own accord, presumably because he saw an opportunity to limit the powers and ambitions of the other orisa in his bid to usurp the Supreme Creator. Still, hidden behind the cloak of representing Olodumare, Esu is free to do as he wishes. No one else has access to Olodumare to confirm that the messages Esu conveys are truthful; he is in absolute control of the flow of information, and this allows him to wield tremendous unchecked power. Olodumare's will is the ultimate authority, but Esu is the only one with direct access to that authority, and thus holds the unique power to control how it is presented and understood.

The villainous Esu is not the only character shown to use knowledge and the power that comes with it for its own gains, however. Near the beginning of the novel, Simidele and Yemoja have a confrontation in which Yemoja explains why the Mami Wata cannot interfere with human lives. Simidele is angry that this knowledge has been kept from her for so long and questions why they were not told, to which Yemoja replies: "I should not have had to! […] You forget

your place and your proper tone, Simidele. You are my daughter, my creation. All you had to do was listen to me and complete your task (Bowen, 2021, p. 53)!" This initially angers Simidele and she internally questions how she can be expected to do the right thing if she is prevented from understanding what that is or why she should do it.

This exchange is interesting in a critical literacy perspective. Simidele is subject to powers that she does not fully understand and at times explicitly disagrees with, but is expected to comply unquestioningly nonetheless, and the consequences of not doing so are grave – but she is not given this information until it is too late. Yemoja is also the force that has both created the Mami Wata and stripped them of their human identities, the latter of which Simidele is shown to disagree with and struggle against throughout the book. Although Yemoja is presented as a benevolent figure and much of the plot hinges on Simidele's desire to make amends, the plot of the novel seems to indicate that the orisa's initial decision to keep Simidele and the others in the dark was wrong. If Simidele had not acted against the orisa's instructions, she would not have saved Kola. Without this event, they would not have set out on their journey and ultimately uncovered Esu's plot to usurp Olodumare. Blind obedience to power, then, would have led to disastrous consequences. In this case, Yemoja controlled the flow of information and was responsible for conveying or suppressing knowledge, showing that such power is not only dangerous when in the hands of clearly villainous figures such as Esu. Suppressing knowledge and cultural identity (i.e. the Mami Wata being stripped of their memories) is dangerous even when those responsible are otherwise 'good.'

In reading *with* the text, as discussed in section 2.2.3, the themes and messages of *SotS* align with many ideals of critical literacy. The novel poses questions of access and power, and positions the reader to question accepted truths, thus encouraging a disruption of the commonplace. Through the metaphor of Simidele's fractured memories of her human life, it also draws attention to the importance of cultural knowledge and the importance of preserving stories and other cultural artifacts that have been suppressed in some way. Dominant narratives should be questioned, and those who seek to suppress opposing voices or use power to oppress others should be challenged.

Simultaneously, even within the text, there are powers and narratives that remain unchallenged. Although Simidele initially disagrees with Yemoja, her desire to make amends is what drives her to seek out Olodumare's forgiveness. Simidele has been wronged, but beyond

their initial argument, she continues to follow Yemoja's instructions and views her as a benevolent figure and an ally. Olodumare, too, appears to be above criticism. Their role as Supreme God is taken for granted, and Esu is held solely responsible for abusing his station, while Olodumare remains unchallenged. The power dynamics between the orisas and Olodumare appear unchangeable and immutable, and this system of power is taken for granted both within the text and in the metatextual narrative. Not addressing this directly is not a failure on the part of the text, but could lead to interesting discussions. As a critical reader, no power structure should be held immune for scrutiny, and one might question if it was negligent of Olodumare to not recognize or act on Esu's abuse of power, or if there can be true justice in a system in which one figure – even an omnipotent deity – holds unabated power.

Another point worth mentioning is the novel's metatextual parallels to H.C. Andersen's *The Little Mermaid,* which, as mentioned, Bowen has described as a source of inspiration (2021, p. 304). Simidele, like the mermaid from Andersen's tale, longs for life out of the ocean. Like in the fairy tale, the protagonist rescues a drowning man at sea and falls in love with him, which serves as a catalyst for the plot. In the original fairy tale, the mermaid must marry the man, or she will die and turn to foam. In *SotS,* the opposite is true. If Simidele kisses Kola, it will kill her. In regard to exploring the construction of narratives, these parallells can be used to explore how the same narrative beats can be used to create different stories. It also allows for examination of how existing texts can be reshaped to convey different messages, and how this reconstruction can be used to convey different values and ideologies.

5.2.2. *Children of Blood and Bone*

Children of Blood and Bone, both within the narrative and on a metatextual level, emphasizes how the 'truth' is not objective. The story is told from three different perspectives: the maji Zélie, the rebel princess Amari, and Amari's older brother, Inan, who is heir to the throne. On a metatextual level, the reader is provided with different understandings and interpretations of the events that occur through the use of multiple perspectives. The three characters each understand and interpret the events that occur around them differently, based on their own backgrounds and understandings and the knowledge they possess, demonstrating how 'truth' is subjective and dependent on one's perspective. This challenges the notion of a single,

objective understanding of the world, highlighting the importance of questioning dominant voices and considering alternate perspectives.

Zélie's narrative is that of someone who has been oppressed and marginalized and rightfully fears for her life as a result of the dominant narrative. She is a divîner, someone with magical potential, and her understanding of the maji – those with fully developed magical power – is introduced in the first chapter, in a story told by Mama Agba. The maji were once plentiful and beloved, but over time, they became feared, and they were struck down and killed by King Saran in an unprovoked massacre eleven years prior to the story. Only the maji's children remained, and although these children cannot wield magic, they are reviled and feared for the physical characteristics that mark them as maji, such as their stark white hair. Mama Agba's retelling of this story empowers the young divîners to hold pride in their heritage, demonstrating the importance of passing on and listening to stories. Zélie, because of her own lived experience as an oppressed minority and the version of the story she has been told, sees the maji as oppressed and in need of liberation. Through Zélie, the reader is positioned to consider marginalized or suppressed voices.

Zélie's understanding of the story contrasts with the story told by King Saran in Inan's later chapters, in which the maji are painted as a destructive force who posed a great threat to the kingdom's well-being. The king, as the ultimate authority in Orïsha, controls the narrative, and so the version of the story he tells is the foundation of society's understanding of the maji. The king sees magic as a great threat to the land, a force of destruction that needed to be squashed to ensure the kingdom's safety and prosperity. His late wife and children were murdered by a maji, and he believes magic to be inherently dangerous and destructive as a result of this event. Through Inan's chapters and meetings with Zélie and other children of maji, the reader sees him struggle to reconcile his father's narrative – the dominant story – with what he is seeing and experiencing when interacting with a group of people he has been taught to fear and hate. Still, his initial perspective is that of someone who firmly believes in the dominant narrative and seeks to uphold existing systems of power. Gradually, he begins to grapple with what he has been taught and consider alternate perspectives. However, when he witnesses the destructive actions of a single maji, Kwame, who uses his fire magic to incinerate the king's forces, Inan once again becomes convinced that all magic is dangerous and must be eradicated. Despite his new experiences and the ways in which his worldview has been challenged, Inan ultimately remains

loyal to the dominant narrative he has been raised to believe. Even when confronted with conflicting information and experiences, fully dismantling one's underlying assumptions is difficult, perhaps especially for someone who has benefited from a position of privilege all their life.

The novel's third perspective is that of Amari, the privileged princess who has never truly grappled much with the plight of the maji or their place in the world. When her beloved servant and friend, Binta – another maji – is killed, Amari immediately understands this event to be unfair and flees the palace with a magical scroll, setting in motion much of the novel's plot. Although Amari is enraged by the cruel treatment of Binta, however, she does not seem to take into consideration the danger she puts Zélie in by enlisting her aid, demonstrating that Amari's perspective is limited to injustices that directly impact her. The wider implications of this – the oppression of the maji in general – are seemingly lost on Amari, and her gradual awakening to the truth of the world around her, from her own position of ignorance and privilege is explored throughout the novel. Amari, like Inan, must learn to question her own narrative and her place in the world, and to open her eyes to what the world looks like to those less privileged than herself.

The multiple perspectives in *CoBB* highlight how the dominant narrative, told by those in positions of power, can lead to oppression and marginalization. The novel explores how stories shape our understandings of the world and encourages questioning the stories we are told and our interpretations of them. The idea that we must consider alternate perspectives and challenge our own biases and underlying assumptions is essential because this allows us to see the world more fully and empathetically. By challenging authority and 'common knowledge,' space can be created for marginalized groups to be heard and thus gain agency and autonomy.

5.2.3. *Nevermoor*

Jessica Townsend's *Nevermoor* spins a magical tale of adventure and self-discovery, and at its core is a message about the power of storytelling. Throughout the novels, stories are used to both reinforce and challenge the status quo.

In the city of Nevermoor, the story of the Wundersmith, an infamous figure in the city's history, is of central importance. The history of the Wundersmith is described as being "so bound up in myth and nonsense, for most people it's hard to tell the difference" (Townsend, 2017, p.

365). Morrigan is initially led to believe that the story is nothing but a fairy tale, and when the story of the Wundersmith is told in full, it is mentioned that, although the Wundersmith was responsible for some of the darkest parts of Nevermoor's history, he is not mentioned in any history books (Townsend, 2017, p. 325). Still, his role in these events is infamous and considered common knowledge, implying that the story has been passed on even though some have tried to suppress it. Even history, in other words, is not neutral; 'everyone' knows what happened, but official and supposedly trustworthy sources refuse to acknowledge it. The Wundersmith is akin to a creature of folklore, even as the characters surrounding Morrigan seem entirely aware of his existence and his profound impact on events that have preceded the story. The dominant narrative, then, disagrees with the truth. This challenges the readers to think critically about their own sources of information and how our own understanding of 'truth' is derived from stories that have been created with certain agendas.

The way those who hold power shape narratives is introduced into the narrative of *Nevermoor* long before Morrigan sets foot in the titular magical city, however. Morrigan is introduced as a so-called Cursed Child. Such children are believed to bring misfortune to those they encounter, and so much as making eye contact with them is thought to have disastrous consequences. The list of supposed crimes Morrigan is held responsible for range from spoiled fish to heart attacks (Townsend, 2017, p. 5), and the young girl is expected to write individual letters of apology to those impacted by her curse. Morrigan points out the absurdity of some of the things she is blamed for. For instance, the headmaster of a local school demands compensation for fire damage caused to the building, and although the news reports that the stovetop was left on overnight by a member of staff, Morrigan is blamed simply because said staff member had spotted her the previous day (Townsend, 2017, p. 8). At this point in the story, it is unclear whether the curse is real, but it seems apparent that at least some of the events blamed on these children are unjust and irrational. However, blaming misfortune on this group fits with the dominant narrative of Morrigan's world, and allows those in power to shift responsibility away from themselves. These young children are made scapegoats in their society, leading to further stigmatization for an already vulnerable, marginalized group.

In the very first chapter, Morrigan is introduced alongside her father, the rather unpleasant politician Corvus Crow. With his associates, he discusses which newspapers they ought to contact to cover the eventful Bid Day, whether they ought to invite less privileged

children for the sake of publicity, and how Corvus' appearance with these underprivileged students will portray him as charitable and likeable. The idea of crafting a narrative is essential; Corvus is openly disdainful towards those he perceives as lesser than him in private, but it benefits him to be perceived as generous and inclusive. When Morrigan asks to attend Bid Day with him, he initially dismisses her outright, but an assistant points out that bringing her along might help 'soften his image.' Public perception is paramount to Corvus Crow, and so he agrees, appearing at the event like a loving, grieving father (Townsend, 2017, Chapters 1 & 2). Already from the earliest chapters, *Nevermoor* beckons the reader to consider that narratives are constructed, and the novel draws attention to how powerful figures use this to influence and manipulate public understanding.

Throughout the novel, Morrigan faces several trials that she must overcome to become a member of the Wundrous Society. One of these is the Book Trials, in which examinee is tested on their knowledge. The trial is divided into two sections. In the first, Morrigan must answer questions on a piece of paper. The questions themselves appear as if by magic, and if Morrigan's answer is deemed unsatisfactory, the test paper crumbles. At first, Morrigan tries to answer the questions with what she believes to be correct and proper answers. The test asks her why she wants to become a member of the Wundrous Society; she replies that she wants to be a useful and important member of society (p. 156). This causes the paper to crumble, and she eventually realizes that it is not a test of knowledge, but of self-reflection. It is only when she answers with absolute honesty – she wants to join because she wants people to like her – that she manages to pass the test. These questions require her to critically examine her perception of herself and her place in the world. When asked about her greatest fear, she immediately responds 'That dolphins will learn to walk on land and shoot acid out of their blowholes' (p. 158), believing this to be the true and honest answer. However, the test demands Morrigan examine herself more deeply, digging beneath the surface to realize that, if she allows herself to feel it, her deepest fear is being forgotten. Morrigan must examine and question her own identity and the stories she tells herself to understand her own truth. Our own biases and backgrounds, then, influence our understanding, and without critical awareness, we may not even realize the limitations of our knowledge.

The second section of the Book Trial is a history test of sorts. Morrigan is asked questions about Nevermoor's history by a panel of judges. First, she is asked who the leader of

the Free State is, and she confidently answers with the name of the prime minister. This is deemed incorrect, because "[t]he leaders of the Free State are innovation, industry and thirst for knowledge" (p. 162), indicating that reciting facts is insufficient. Then she is asked how one tells a true incendiary botanical – a magical plant – from a tree that has been set on fire, and she replies that incendiary botanicals do not produce smoke, as she has been taught. The correct answer, however, is that incendiary botanicals are extinct, and therefore "any tree that appears to be an incendiary botanical *is* a tree that has merely been set on fire" (p. 163). The answer Morrigan gives, according to the texts she has studied, is factually correct, but it shows a lack of consideration for the wider context. This demonstrates the limitations of rote memorization and recall; it is technically accurate, but the judges are looking for deeper comprehension and critical thinking. Finally, after failing to deduce the desired answer to another question, Morrigan understands that the examiners are not asking her to recite facts, but to explain how she understands these objective facts and their wider implications. Her final question is about when the Courage Square Massacre occurred. After some consideration, Morrigan responds that it occurred on 'a dark day', "a day when fiendishness triumphed over goodness […]" (Townsend, 2017, p. 164). This answer is deemed acceptable, and Morrigan passes the trial.

The Book Trial is not designed to investigate the examinee's recollection of objective facts. While knowledge of the facts are necessary, in the grand scheme of things, that knowledge is secondary to comprehension. While knowing what defines an incendiary botanical is necessary to be able to make any kind of judgment about it, knowing that such plants are extinct – the wider context – is what is truly important if one is faced with a burning tree and needs to decide whether to put out the fire. One must know what the Courage Square Massacre was and when it occurred to understand its implications in the greater scheme of things, but recalling an exact date or recounting the events of the day is only surface-level knowledge. It is necessary to examine and consider these facts critically to understand their implications in order for the knowledge to be useful. Facts are important, the novel suggests, but it is crucial to have awareness of how they relate to the larger contexts.

While this notion of understanding the world beyond the text is significant in a critical literacy perspective, however, the events of the Book Trial simultaneously demonstrate how facts are interpreted and used to convey certain underlying ideologies. Knowledge and history are not neutral, and the questions posed in the Book Trial reveal the biases and beliefs of the society.

The correct answer to the judges' initial question about the leader of the Free State clearly reveals that Morrigan is expected to understand the Free State in a certain way, and to agree with its core values of innovation, industry, and knowledge. The trialists must reflect on the facts and use them to construct a larger narrative, yes, but the narrative must align with a certain ideology. The judges simultaneously value critical thinking and suppress ideas that are *too* critical; they expect Morrigan to understand the facts deeply and think critically about them, but only within the limits of the dominant ideology. Facts should be challenged – the underlying values should not. This highlights the paradoxical power dynamics at play in a state that both emphasizes the importance of 'a thirst for knowledge' and seeks to control the ways in which that knowledge shapes assumptions and beliefs.

5.3. Inequality, outsidership and oppression

A central theme in all three novels is that of systemic inequality. These novels all feature oppression and unjust systems of power in some form, centering on the inequality that stems from discrimination based on race or class. They illuminate ways in which some groups are systemically marginalized while others maintain positions of power and privilege in different ways, and pose the question of who defines what is 'normal' or acceptable and who is excluded from these definitions. The novels center on those who are 'othered' or exist in some way on the outside of a society, and by focusing on these definitions, readers are encouraged to consider their own relationship to systems of power and how they fit – or do not fit – into existing power structures. In different ways, these texts challenge the systems that exist within their magical worlds and explore the effects of oppression.

5.3.1. *Skin of the Sea*

Simidele's world, according to Natasha Bowen, is "a blend of history, myth, and fiction" (Bowen, 2021, p. 306). The setting resembles the real world and is inspired by 15th century West Africa. Perhaps the most significant consequence of this is the inclusion of the slave trade as a narrative element. The *òyìnbó*'s role as an antagonistic force is secondary to that of Esu, but the slavers' work is both an ultimate catalyst for the story and an underlying component of the setting that runs throughout the text and influences the characters, their views and values, and

their actions. All the major characters in *SotS* are Black Africans, and the novel does not shy away from the horrific reality of European slavers' actions on the African continent. The novel explores the devastating effects of the slave trade on individuals and communities. The ongoing fight for freedom from slavery is not the primary focus of the novel's plot, but in many ways, it is essential.

As early as the first chapter, Yemoja and Simidele explicitly discuss slavery. The Mami Wata were created with the singular purpose of providing comfort to those who have died at sea, largely referring to those who have been captured by the *òyìnbó* and died as a result. Simidele silently questions why they do not simply destroy the ships and drag the slavers down into the depths, showing great anger and desire for justice (Bowen, 2021, p. 14). This drive to correct this grievous injustice is what leads Simidele to rescue the chained and bleeding Kola from drowning, thus setting into motion the rest of the story.

Although the details are not revealed until late in the novel when Simidele has a flashback during her final confrontation with Esu, it was her being captured and taken onto a slave ship that led to her death before she was awakened by Yemoja as a Mami Wata. It is not detailed how Simidele came to be captured, but the slavers are "marked with the bleeding red gouges [she] scored in their skin" (Bowen, 2021, p. 287) as she stands on the outside of the slave ship's railing, ready to jump into the sea, indicating a violent confrontation. She describes seeing others being thrown overboard and dragged to the bottom of the sea in chains, emphasizing the brutality and cruelty of the slavers. Even knowing it will kill her, Simidele chooses to jump into the sea rather than remain aboard the slave ship. This can be read as a final act of defiance, a refusal to submit to the oppressive system that seeks to strip her of her freedom and identity. Through this, she becomes a Mami Wata, a revered figure in West African mythology, which can be interpreted as a reclamation of identity and agency from those who have sought to strip it from her.

The inclusion of the slave trade in *SotS* is significant because it highlights the historical and ongoing oppression of Black people and draws attention to the atrocities committed by European slavers. By touching on topics of racism and colonialism, the novel provides an opportunity to discuss the lasting impact of these issues. It also humanizes and personalizes them by making their consequences integral to the main characters, showing their effects on an individual level.

Beyond the overarching idea of structural oppression, the novel engages with themes of outsidership and xenophobia in more subtle ways. Simidele, while on land, appears entirely human, and she does not initially reveal her status as a Mami Wata to her and Kola's travelling companions, having been warned against appearing as a mermaid to humans "because of the greed and violence appearing as Mami Wata can bring" (Bowen, 2021, p. 208). By the time this is revealed to them, Simidele has regained significant amounts of her memories and has begun to identify more strongly with her former life as a human.

Throughout this process, she forms strong bonds with her companions. A particular moment of intimacy occurs between her and Yinka, a female warrior whose mother came from a tribe with a long tradition of women warriors. The people of Yinka's tribe have a tradition of using hair to convey messages, including creating patterns in hair to create maps. Yinka herself is bald because of a cultural tradition from her mother's tribe, but has learned enough about hair to braid and weave Simidele's hair into an intricate map to Esu's island (Bowen, 2021, Chapter 17). This harkens back to the real-world traditional importance of African women's hair, and with this in mind, the emphasis on hair in this chapter can be read as an analogy for Simidele embracing and reclaiming her former identity. The cultural traditions connected to hairstyles have been stripped from Simidele as a Mami Wata, but through developing bonds with Yinka, who greatly values her heritage, Simidele takes another step towards reclaiming her own cultural roots.

Yinka is the first of the companions to see Simidele as a Mami Wata, and Simidele is immediately shameful of her own 'inhumanity' and fears rejection, fear, and even revulsion from her friends. In spite of this, however, she is quickly accepted by her companions, particularly Yinka, who says that they are blessed to have her (Bowen, 2021, p. 214). This acceptance highlights the significance of belonging, and sends a positive message suggesting that common ground and close friendships can be found across seemingly insurmountable differences. It can also be read as a metaphor for how marginalized people can internalize dominant perspectives and come to see themselves as 'others', thus leading to self-censorship rather than embracing the full scope of their identity. Simidele has been warned against showing her true self, and therefore does not do so; she tries to conform in order to avoid negative attention. However, because those around her see her as a complex, nuanced individual rather than a one-dimensional representative

of the group she belongs to, she is able to shed her shame and stigma and embrace the power of her identity instead.

5.3.2. *Children of Blood and Bone*

Inequality and systemic oppression are central and explicit themes in *CoBB*. The novel's core conflict concerns the marginalization and oppression of the maji, and the characters grapple with the question of whether this type of discrimination can be justified. Divîner children, eleven years after the adult maji were killed, face daily discrimination and abuse despite not possessing active magical powers of their own. Those who house them, such as Zélie's father and brother, are forced to pay a 'divîner tax' in addition to regular taxes. If this tax is not paid, the divîner risks being sent to the 'stocks,' which are labor camps spread throughout the kingdom. In these camps, the divîners are "forced to work until [their] bodies break" (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 28). Although their service in these camps is supposed to be temporary until they have provided sufficient labor to pay off their initial debts, the reality is that being sent to the stocks is functionally a death sentence. There are, of course, multiple examples of such forced labor camps throughout real-world history, perhaps most infamously the camps constructed by Nazi Germany or the Soviet Gulags, as well as the Xinjiang internment camps run by the current Chinese government. This aspect of *CoBB,* then, provides many avenues for addressing real-world issues and systems of power.

The 'divîner tax' mentioned above is noted to unfairly target those who are already most marginalized. The divîners are children who have already lost at least one parent due to the culling of the maji, and many of them are orphans. They and their families are shunned and feared and often live in poverty, yet they are targeted by ever-increasing taxes for the crime of existing (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 28) Furthermore, the kingdom's royal guards are shown to frequently abuse their power. When entering the city to sell fish at the market, Zélie is referred to as a 'maggot' by one of the guards – a derogatory term used to refer to divîners and maji in the setting – and is then groped by him before she is allowed to pass through the gate (Adeyemi, 2018, pp. 50–51). Zélie, although angered by these events, is not surprised; clearly, such treatment by public officials is expected. Divîners are looked down upon and treated as sub-

human in both big and small ways, from being forced into labor camps to being verbally and physically assaulted.

Another point worth noting is that while all the characters in the book are Black, divîners are noticeably darker-skinned than people belonging to wealthier, more privileged societal groups. They are also marked by other distinctive physical features such as their white hair, but the matter of skin color in relation to privilege is particularly interesting as it mirrors real-world issues of colorism. Colorism is a form of discrimination that can be prevalent within Black communities that privileges those with lighter skin tones over those with darker skin tones within the same racial group. Generally, the idea is that those with lighter skin are more likely to be given opportunities, and therefore hold more privilege than those with darker skin. In *CoBB*, interracial discrimination is not a factor, but the text still addresses racial issues through its implicit exploration of colorism. Within the narrative, the reason given for the oppression of the maji is the potential threat posed by their magical powers. Viewing the text in a larger, metatextual scope, however, it is likely no accident that the most marginalized members of society are explicitly stated to be those with the darkest skin tones.

Related to this point, divîners without magic have straight, white hair, while a full-blown majis' hair is tightly curled. This distinction between hair textures can also be read as a metaphor for the way in which Black people's natural hair textures have been stigmatized or perceived as undesirable or unprofessional by Eurocentric standards. Divîners, severed from their magical ancestry, have lost a facet of themselves, and with the restoration of magic, they reclaim their heritage and a part of their identity that has been stripped from them, visualized through their hair texture returning to its natural form. The implication is that natural hair, like the return of the maji's powers, is something to embrace and celebrate. This is a way of 'disrupting the commonplace' (Lewison et al.,, 2015) by drawing into question existing Eurocentric beauty standards and viewing these standards in light of how they impact oppressive or racist systems of power.

Although the chapters from Zélie's point of view provide the most clear-cut examples of mistreatment of marginalized groups, this theme is no less prevalent in Inan and Amari's chapters. Inan begins the novel as the loyal, obedient son of King Saran, someone whose life is marked by immense power and privilege. He and Amari have grown up under their father's mantra: "Magic is the source of all evil" (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 43). The maji are a threat, and if

their magical powers were restored, they would come after the throne. Although Inan considers it gruesome that the maji had to die, he fully accepts the belief that this was necessary, and believes that being king means having the strength to make such decisions (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 85). He does not question his own privilege, or the assumptions and beliefs that stem from the dominant narrative, and he is willing to do what he must in order to prevent the return of magic, despite never having interacted with maji other than divîner servants.

The catalyst for Inan's changing perspective is the discovery that he himself has magical powers. His position of privilege means he does not have to question existing power systems until he is directly negatively impacted by them. Inan's eventual betrayal of the divîners can be interpreted as a parallel to the real-world phenomenon of holding all members of a marginalized group accountable for the actions of a single individual. The maji Kwame uses his magic to incinerate both himself and the king's forces, which is undeniably destructive and dangerous, but it is still the desperate action of a single individual. Inan's pre-existing underlying biases likely lead him to extrapolate this act of violence, however, and acts as confirmation for the beliefs he already grappled with. His initial understanding of the world is that the maji are an inherent threat, and Kwame's actions confirm that understanding. This kind of generalization and holding a collective group responsible for the actions of a few, both in the real world and in the text, can lead to further marginalization and discrimination. After all, the murder of King Saran's family at the hands of only a few has resulted in the oppression of all maji, and any destructive action performed by a maji is used to uphold the narrative that all maji are dangerous.

In the end, Inan betrays the maji; his loyalty to his father and perceived reinforcement of the dominant narrative ultimately overrides the empathy he develops for the divîners. Ultimately, however, even his loyalty and dedication to his father and their cause are not enough to spare him from Saran's wrath when Inan uses his own magic to save the king. Even though Inan is his son, and his act was one of desperation committed only to save the father he idolizes, Saran immediately turns on him. This can be understood as a parallel to real-world situations in which members of marginalized groups support ideologies or figures of power that ultimately seek to oppress them, perhaps believing that aligning with a dominant group will afford them some level of protection. As seen in Inan's case, however, this is not true. King Saran hates magic more than he cares for his own son, and Inan's love and loyalty do not ultimately spare him from his father's hatred.

Like Inan, the catalyst for Amari's arc is selfish in that it is motivated primarily by an unjust abuse of power that directly impacts her. However, it is not entirely egocentric because it focuses on her friend, Binta. Amari herself, unlike Inan, was in no danger. She could have chosen to remain safely within the walls of the palace, willfully ignorant to the systemic inequality that surrounds her, but instead chooses to take action and risks her own safety to seek justice for Binta. Amari's journey is one of recognizing and unravelling privilege, and this leads her to seek out and advocate for the rights of a marginalized group of minorities. By challenging her own underlying ideologies and truly reckoning with their implications, Amari becomes a steadfast ally to the oppressed divîners, even though it means jeopardizing her own comfort and safety. She has grown up with privilege and been sheltered from the realities of the unjust systems of power around her, but through actively challenging these systems and listening to the voices of marginalized groups, she develops a more nuanced understanding of the world.

Through the multiple perspectives of its narrative, *CoBB* weaves a story of systemic inequality and unjust power structures. The text explores how privilege can blind people to the struggles of others and the importance of challenging one's own underlying assumptions and ideologies in order to correct injustices. The novel explores issues of racism, colorism, classism and discrimination and their complexities through multiple perspectives, demonstrating how our understanding of the world is shaped by our own experiences.

5.3.3. *Nevermoor*

Nevermoor is targeted towards a younger age group than the other two novels, but still finds ways to address themes of discrimination and systemic inequality. One example of this is Morrigan's status as a Cursed Child. Cursed children are marked on a registry, and most people believe they should be avoided at all costs. The curse, as discussed, is not real; the Wundersmith is responsible for murdering these children because they pose a potential threat to his unique power. Instead of seeking to uncover the truth or protect the children, however, politicians and public authorities promote belief in the curse and perpetuate discrimination against this already vulnerable, stigmatized group. The status quo allows this injustice to continue unquestioned. As a real-world parallel to this, certain minority groups are sometimes considered 'more dangerous' or 'more violent' than others, which has been used to justify acts of harassment or violence

committed against them. Reading the plight of Morrigan and other cursed children through this lens highlights the dangers of blind acceptance of dominant ideologies. When systems of power are left unchallenged, those who are most marginalized and vulnerable suffer the worst consequences.

Throughout the story, there are several instances that comment on the intersection of class, privilege, and access. The chapters concerning the Crow family are particularly full of commentary on class and education. Morrigan's family, the Crows, are wealthy and well-educated. Her father holds the position of chancellor of Great Wolfacre, their home state. This means they live a life of wealth and high status, but Morrigan, as a purported cursed child, does not benefit from the privilege that comes with this. For instance, because she is fated to die on her eleventh birthday, her family deems it pointless for her to receive an education. Her status as a marginalized identity overrides her proximity to power. An example is this exchange between Morrigan and Ivy, her stepmother:

> 'Bid Day,' began Ivy, drawing herself up importantly, 'is the day when children who've completed preparatory school will receive their educational bid, should they be lucky enough.'
> 'Or rich enough,' added Grandmother.
> 'Yes,' Ivy continued, looking mildly put out by the interruption. 'If they are very bright, or talented, or if their parents are wealthy enough to bribe someone, then some respectable person from a fine scholarly institution will come to bid on them.'
> 'Does everyone get a bid?' Morrigan asked.
> 'Heavens, no!' Ivy laughed, glancing at the maid who'd come to place a tureen of gravy on the table. She added in an exaggerated whisper, 'If everyone were educated, where would servants come from?'
> (Townsend, 2017, p. 20)

This exchange encapsulates both the Crow family's status, the upper class's elitist views on those of lower social class, and the idea that education is a luxury reserved only for the wealthy or especially gifted. Additionally, Ivy's comment about the role of servants shows how

deeply ingrained and normalized classism is in their society. Education is a tool for social mobility, and in Ivy's perspective, such opportunities should be reserved for a select few. The system in place reinforces current systemic inequalities, ensuring that advantages and privileges are granted only to those who already have them. This mirrors how systemic barriers in the real world are put in place to prohibit equal access to education and other opportunities, which makes it more likely for dominant groups to access these opportunities, and, by extension, to access the language of power and the ability to influence or change the system (Janks et al., 2014, p. 7).

Nevermoor's commentary on class does not end with the antagonistic Crow family, however. Even in the titular city itself, access to education is a privilege reserved for a privileged few. The core plot of the novel concerns admission to the Wundrous Society (WunSoc), Nevermoor's most prestigious and well-respected educational institution. As pointed out by Jupiter North, WunSoc members have what he calls 'pin privilege' granted by the gold badges they carry: "The old gold spikes certainly open doors. Respect, adventure, fame. Reserved seats on the Wunderground (Townsend, 2017, p. 113)." This quote demonstrates how education provides access to privilege in ways both big and small. Those who are deemed worthy of joining WunSoc are considered inherently more valuable than those who are not, and are treated accordingly on all levels of society.

Hundreds of candidates go through challenging and competitive trials to secure a place at WunSoc, with only nine spots available. In theory, this is a meritocratic process in which those who prove themselves most capable are offered admittance. In practice, however, this process favors those with resources and connections that put them in a position of privilege. First, candidates must be chosen by a patron who is already a member of WunSoc. It is theoretically possible for anyone to be chosen, but it seems reasonable to assume that candidates from well-connected families have an easier time finding a patron based solely on proximity. The candidates are further expected to prepare for the trials on their own. This includes, for instance, accessing relevant knowledge for the Book Trials, or acquiring a magical steed to ride for the Chase Trial. Perhaps most egregiously, however, WunSoc admittance requires a 'knack,' a magical talent of skill of some sort that is almost entirely innate and cannot be attained through training or education. Anyone who does not have a 'knack,' then, is inherently disqualified from even being considered for admission, regardless of how hard they work or how much effort they put in. The upper echelons of Nevermoor society, in other words, automatically and systemically

exclude those who do not possess certain innate traits, reinforcing an unfair system of class and power.

Furthermore, *Nevermoor* offers at times pointed commentary on immigration. Morrigan is an illegal immigrant in the Free State, having been taken there suddenly to escape death, without the proper paperwork. Her status as a WunSoc candidate offers her protection, but from their first meeting, Inspector Flintlock – an officer in the Nevermoor Police Force – is suspicious of her and seeks to have her banished from the Free State. This leads to the following exchange between Flintlock and Jupiter North:

Inspector Flintlock slapped his notebook in the palm of his hand. 'Now, listen here, North. The Free State has strict border laws, and if you're harbouring an illegal refugee you're breaking about twenty-eight of them. You're in a lot of trouble here, sonny. Illegals are a plague, and it's my solemn duty to guard the borders of Nevermoor and protect its true citizens from Republic scum trying to weasel their way into the Free State.'

Jupiter turned serious. 'A noble and valiant cause, I'm sure,' he said quietly. 'Protecting the Free State from those most in need of its help.'

(Townsend, 2017, p. 147)

This confrontation establishes several things about *Nevermoor*'s world. First, there are strict border laws in place, meaning access to the state is limited. Second, illegal immigrants are considered second-rate citizens and are viewed with contempt and suspicion. Flintlock's derogatory language about 'Republic scum' can be read as echoing real-world xenophobic rhetoric about refugees and immigrants. Jupiter's remark, too, reflects the reality of many immigrants needing help, yet being met with hostility and discrimination. In Morrigan's case, staying in the Republic would have meant her death, but this is of no concern to Inspector Flintlock. The fact that Morrigan's status as a WunSoc candidate is what ultimately protects her from being deported again demonstrates the privilege that comes with social status and education.

On the whole, even though the novel is targeted towards children, *Nevermoor* frequently engages with complex societal issues like systemic inequality and discrimination, particularly

regarding classism and access to education. The story portrays the unjust marginalization of cursed children, an incredibly vulnerable group of people who are blamed for events beyond their control by nature of their birth, and conversely engages with the idea that certain privileges are reserved for those with innate talents.

6. Classroom implications in a CLP perspective

The framework of Critical Literature Pedagogy (CLP), described in detail in Chapter 2, focuses on two main perspectives on engaging with a text: reading *with* the text and reading *against* the text (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014). In this chapter, I first discuss these perspectives as they pertain to three core dimensions of CLP: context, literary elements, and the reader dimension. Considering the three selected texts in relation to the CLP framework provides an opportunity to discuss their relevance in promoting critical literacy among learners in a general sense. Discussing these texts' relevance with regard to the assessment dimension of CLP, however, requires a more concrete consideration of how the texts can be used in a critical literacy classroom. Therefore, in the final section of this chapter, I discuss the texts' general suitability for teaching literature in the EFL classroom and suggest some activities and types of assessment that can be used to teach critical literacy with these texts.

6.1. Context and literary elements

The *context* dimension of CLP concerns the historical and cultural context of a text's creation, whereas the *literary elements* dimension involves identifying and interrogating literary devices, themes, and how characters are portrayed. My decision to work with the fantasy genre in particular was partly rooted in the belief that this is a genre of text that often appeals to children and teenagers. Even if it does not appeal to them, learners are likely to be at least somewhat familiar with the genre, whether from literature or other types of media. This decision, then, is based on knowledge of the learners' contexts. The aim is to elicit interest or engagement for the text based on prior experiences with the genre, as well as to challenge preconceived notions about what the genre is or should be. The fantasy genre provides a unique space for exploring sociopolitical issues. Fantastical new worlds and strange systems of power can be used to reflect on and challenge real-world systems of oppression while also allowing readers to view these systems 'at a distance,' removing preconceived notions they might have about them. Essentially, these texts make use of familiar literary elements and genre conventions and place them in new contexts, which can then create opportunities for critical reflection and discussion about real-world issues.

The selected texts were all written within the last five years (2017 or later), which means the historical context of their writing falls within a time span that current learners have experienced. Learners are likely to have some familiarity with major sociopolitical and cultural events that transpired around the time of writing, such as the Brexit referendum or the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. None of the texts take place in a familiar, modern world, but, in line with one of the tenets of critical literacy, texts are not neutral. No matter their content, they have been created at a specific time, in specific places, by specific people, for at least one specific purpose (Janks et al., 2014, p. 2). In other words, even though the worlds in these three texts are fictional and fantastical, they still reflect the value and ideologies of the society they exist within, whether explicitly or implicitly.

Reading *with* the text in the contextual dimension means questioning the author's life experiences and historical and cultural factors that surround the creation of the text. When engaging with this perspective, learners might, for example, investigate major events that occurred around the time the text was written and consider how they might have impacted the author's decisions about the text. One possible starting point is in the novels' authors' notes or acknowledgements chapters, which can provide insight into the authors' own thoughts on the text creation process and how they see it in relation to current political or cultural events.

In her author's note in *CoBB,* for instance, Tomi Adeyemi explicitly states that "[the book] was written during a time where I kept turning on the news and seeing stories of unarmed black men, women, and children being shot by the police" (2018, p. 526). This, along with knowledge of Adeyemi's background as a Nigerian-American woman living in the United States, clearly situates the book in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement and the many tragic instances of police brutality against Black people that occurred in the U.S. at that time. With this knowledge in mind, the real-world parallels in *CoBB* become apparent. Zélie's continued harassment by the royal guards, for instance, reflects a harsh reality of the unjust treatment many Black people face from public officials. In the classroom, then, reading *with CoBB* in the contextual dimension can help facilitate reflection and discussion about real-world racial issues and how they are represented in the text.

SotS and its context, as conveyed by the author, can also be used to interpret the text in a critical literacy perspective. Although the text was written in a modern 21st century context, it draws on real-world history, particularly the early 15th century slave trade (Bowen, 2021, p. 304).

Viewed through this lens, Bowen's text conveys a message about the harm caused by colonization and racism in the real world. Simidele's struggle to retain her memories can be interpreted as a metaphor for how slavery stripped African people of their heritage and identity, and the importance of restoring and reclaiming this. By considering this perspective, readers are encouraged to consider historical injustices and how they impact the world today. Additionally, *SotS* can be seen as a counternarrative to or reconstructed version of *The Little Mermaid,* as discussed in Section 5.2.1. This is interesting in regard to the literary elements dimension of CLP because comparing these texts to each other demonstrates how similar narrative beats and tropes can be used to construct different narratives. Many learners in Norwegian classrooms are likely familiar with *The Little Mermaid* or the Disney movie adaptations of it. Although *SotS* is set in an unfamiliar setting and there are many diverging narrative beats, this intertextual familiarity can be used to compare and explore different versions of the story, thus increasing awareness of text construction and how different authors with different cultural contexts can shape similar stories while conveying different messages.

Reading *against* the text in CLP involves considering how a text is positioned in relation to dominant values and narratives in its cultural and historical context. Both *CoBB* and *SotS* can be seen as counternarratives in a larger perspective of the fantasy genre, which has historically been dominated by white and/or male voices. These texts, on the other hand, are both written by Black women and center on the experiences of Black characters. Such counternarratives are important because they challenge dominant narratives in the fantasy genre and allow for more readers to see themselves represented in the texts, which can be empowering for readers who may feel excluded from the dominant narrative (Tschida et al., 2014) . In this regard, using such texts can in itself be a way of disrupting the commonplace – the texts challenge common assumptions about the fantasy genre and what kind of literature belongs in the classroom. By working with and interrogating the texts, learners might become more aware of what types of text they are used to engaging with, and start questioning why that is.

SotS and *CoBB* draw inspiration from African mythology, which is often left unexplored in European and North American literature in favor of Greco-Roman or Norse tradition. Rick Riordan's three popular series of mythology-inspired fantasy, for instance, represent Greco-Roman, Norse, and Egyptian myths respectively, while Thor and Loki have become dominant pop culture figures through Marvel's cinematic universe. This is not to say that African

mythology and cultural tradition does not feature in popular culture at all. Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* features several Yoruba deities alongside gods from many other pantheons, and Beyoncé's visual albums *Lemonade* and *Black Is King* contain references to the Yoruba goddess Oshun (Braswell Iii, 2021, pp. 7–9), to name a few examples. Still, African myths and traditions are rarely centered in popular texts in Norwegian classrooms, and by introducing texts like *SotS* or *CoBB* to learners, they are exposed to a more diverse array of cultural traditions.

      Nevermoor, unlike *SotS* and *CoBB*, is not clearly inspired by or rooted in issues of race and racial injustice. Jessica Townsend is a white Australian woman who has spent most of her life living in Australia or England. From this context, one might extrapolate that the issues of class and social inequality explored in *Nevermoor* draw inspiration from the historically deeply entrenched class systems of these countries. Themes of social class are heavily explored in many English literary works, including the famous works of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens which are generally considered part of the literary canon, as well as in more recent literature, such as in Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series. In regard to the literary elements dimension, Townsend's novel and its themes are in line with a rich tradition of English literature that explores issues of class and social inequality. *Nevermoor,* like many other texts, is critical of class division and elitism, and challenges existing systems of class. This can be used as a lens through which one compares portrayals of social class in literary works, encouraging learners to reflect on systems of class and socio-economic status in their own lives, which promotes awareness of sociopolitical systems (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383).

      The exploration of xenophobia and immigration issues in *Nevermoor* is also worth discussing in regard to the CLP contextual dimension. Heated discussions about immigration are not a recent phenomenon in the political sphere, and in the last few years, they have dominated public discourse. The 'Brexit' referendum took place in 2016, the year before *Nevermoor* was published, resulting in movement between mainland Europe and the U.K. becoming more difficult. Readers aware of this context might speculate on whether this impacted Townsend, an Australian immigrant living in London, and if the views explored in the novel are intended to reflect or criticize views espoused in real-world immigration discourse. At around the same time, Donald Trump was elected President of the United States after running on a platform that partly consisted of anti-immigrant rhetoric. In other words, immigration was a hotly debated topic on the global stage at the time of *Nevermoor*'s publishing, and one might draw connections between

this and the views espoused by Inspector Flintlock in the novel (see 5.3.3.). In the years since, sociopolitical events such as the war in Ukraine have continued to keep immigration issues as a central component of global political discourse. These conversations have made their way into the classroom, and it is likely that even very young learners have some awareness of immigration issues in the current landscape, which makes exploring the topic in the classroom both relevant and timely to the learners.

Investigating Townsend's context in an attempt to interpret and analyze the text might also lead to the discovery that she is a member of the LGBTQ+ community and has publicly identified as bisexual (Townsend, 2020). LGBTQ+ issues are not an explicit theme of the novel, nor are there any clear examples of LGBTQ+ characters in this installment in the series, but the author's identity can still be relevant in a critical literacy perspective. Learners can be encouraged to consider how author's identity and experiences as part of a marginalized minority might have shaped her writing, even if the themes explored in the novel do not explicitly relate to this. Morrigan Crow's search for belonging and fear of not fitting in, for instance, can be read as a reflection of the experiences of members of minority groups – such as the LGBTQ+ community – who have struggled to find acceptance in a society that often marginalizes their identities.

Reading *against* the text in a contextual perspective can involve interrogating how texts might look from other perspectives and considering which version of its historical and cultural context a text presents. If we follow the view that *SotS* and *CoBB* provide counternarratives to dominant perspectives, it might be interesting to have learners consider the stories in comparison to other portrayals of their real-world inspirations. This can encourage learners to develop a more nuanced understanding of how different perspectives shape our understanding of historical and contemporary events, and help them identify underlying ideologies, biases, and assumptions made in different texts. Such an approach also correlates strongly to the 'interrogating multiple viewpoints' dimension of critical literacy in Lewison et. al.'s model (see Section 2.2.2.). By considering the same events from multiple viewpoints, learners are encouraged to question their own assumptions and beliefs and become more aware of the power of that perspective has in shaping our understanding of the world.

Reading against the text also encourages the reader to question which narratives are excluded or left unexplored, and how a story might be impacted if told from a different

perspective (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 126). It is worth noting, for instance, that none of the three selected texts explicitly feature LGBTQ+ characters or perspectives. Of course, every text does not need to address every issue, but when reading against the text in a CLP perspective, awareness of perspectives or identities that are missing from a text is essential. The texts are diverse and emphasize perspectives and experiences that have been missing from dominant narratives, but they are not all-inclusive. If one chooses to emphasize this point, that, too, can lead to interesting reflections and discussions. The absence of LGBTQ+ perspectives in these texts is not necessarily a limitation, but it can provide an opportunity for learners to reflect on how events and themes in the books can mirror such experiences in metaphorical ways, or to consider if the text's narrative would have diverged from what is on the page if these perspectives were present.

Furthermore, the literary elements CLP dimension questions how certain groups of people are portrayed in texts in terms of whether they are 'flat' or stereotypical, or nuanced and complex (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 127). In both *SotS* and *CoBB,* all major characters are Black Africans, and are portrayed as nuanced individuals with different experiences, goals, personalities, and relationships to their culture and heritage. Symbols in the story sometimes require specific cultural knowledge that may not be obvious to white Norwegian learners who have not been exposed to this cultural knowledge. For instance, white is a symbolic color of mourning in *SotS* (Bowen, 2021, p. 151) and in real-world African countries such as Ethiopia. This has to be inferred from context, though, and is not explicitly stated, and the assumption that white and Western cultural knowledge is the default perspective is thus inherently challenged.

There are opportunities for encouraging critical literacy both by reading *with* and *against* these texts focusing on the CLP dimensions of context and literary elements. As mentioned intermittently, there are also several real-life parallels to events and systems in the novels, and the texts can be used to deepen awareness of historical and cultural events by drawing on these parallels. Learners can be encouraged to consider how historical and cultural context impacts texts, and how the authors convey their real-world ideologies and beliefs through fantastical narratives, which relates closely to LK20's aims of deep and interdisciplinary learning by encouraging awareness of the relationships between different fields of knowledge (MER, 2017, p. 12). Intertextuality and familiarity with similar texts can help facilitate understanding both of

the texts themselves and of how context and perspective shape how texts are constructed, thus encouraging critical reflection on which stories are told and whose stories are heard.

6.2. The reader dimension

The *reader* dimension of CLP focuses on the relationship between the text and the reader, and how the interaction between them results in the construction of meaning (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 130). This can involve drawing connections between the reader's personal experiences and events or themes in the text, but also, in a critical literacy perspective, interrogating how the reader's own identity positions them and shapes their reading. An example of reading *with* the text with a reader-response focus could be to ask learners to consider how their personal experiences relate to events or themes in the text. In *Nevermoor,* for instance, Morrigan is in a competitive, stressful situation and is afraid of failure. The learners could be asked to reflect on times in their own lives in which they have been under pressure or have wanted to achieve something that was difficult. Additionally, all three texts deal heavily with themes of outsidership. Learners, then, might consider if they have experienced feeling excluded or have been afraid of not fitting in. Asking such questions, as Borsheim-Black et al. explain, can activate the learners' pre-existing knowledge and encourage them to identify with and make personal connections to the text (2014, p. 130).

The reader dimension in CLP, however, emphasizes that leaning too heavily on personal connections can come at the expense of critical examination of the texts. If learners are asked to relate to a text and have the experience of being unable to do so, it can feel alienating and frustrating. In a critical literacy perspective, then, the next step is to question *why* they find it difficult to make personal connections. For example, in *CoBB*, there are three protagonists who each tell the story from their own perspectives. When working with this text, it might make sense to ask the learners which of the three characters they most strongly identify with. Presumably, the learners will have different answers to this question, and it is entirely possible that some find that they do not particularly identify with any of them. This can encourage critical discussions about how personal identity, power, and privilege can impact the reading of a text. In 5.3.2, I posited that the three characters can be viewed as metaphors for privilege. Following this train of thought, if a reader identifies strongly with Prince Inan, does that in some way reflect their own

identity or position? On the other hand, if it is difficult to relate to a character like Zélie, what might be the reasons for that? Is the reader's ability to draw personal connections a matter of race, or gender, or the experience of being – or not being – a part of a dominant group in society?

It should be noted that the answer does not necessarily have to be either. There is no inherently correct reading of a text, and learners should be encouraged to construct their own meanings (Rosenblatt, 1988). It is not inherently impossible for a member of a marginalized group to identify with Inan – for example, he is a young man under immense pressure to live up to his father's expectations, which is not an experience reserved for dominant groups. It is also entirely possible to identify with a character's way of thinking or feeling, or to simply find them interesting, regardless of one's own personal experiences. Still, making use of the three characters provides an excellent opportunity to interrogate multiple viewpoints, in line with Lewison et al.'s four dimensions model (see 2.2.2.). *CoBB* can help facilitate discussion and reflection on how the world looks different to different people, encouraging readers to consider how beliefs and assumptions shape our understanding of the world. Whether readers identify with the characters or not, and however this may or may not reflect the learners' own relationships to power and privilege, using the text in this manner creates room for conversations about topics such as how being part of a marginalized group can result in a different perspective on and understanding of the world.

Because the three texts are part of the fantasy genre, there are inherently elements in each of the books that are unfamiliar to the reader. These are worlds of magic, supernatural and often surreal, and sometimes entirely different from worlds with which the readers are familiar. This is part of the appeal of the fantasy genre, but to some readers, it can also be a barrier that makes it difficult to form a personal connection to the story. Heavy emphasis on the reader dimension might be frustrating for such learners. In this case, as suggested by Lewison et al., it might be a better option to start with the social dimension, focusing on sociopolitical events and issues and how they connect to such topics in the books (Lewison et al., 2015, p. xxxi). By considering how power structures in the texts can parallel real-world systems, readers might be encouraged to engage with other aspects of the text. If learners begin to see the relevance and importance of the texts in relation to the world around them in a critical perspective, the text might also become less alienating on a personal level.

6.3. Classroom implications and the assessment dimension

The dimension of CLP that concerns *assessment* is closely connected to the 'taking social action' dimension of Lewison et al.'s critical literacy model discussed in 2.2.2. In a literature classroom that emphasizes reading *with* the text, assessment might often involve learners writing summaries, analyses of themes and symbols, and/or writing about how the book relates to their personal experiences. The value of a text, in this approach, begins and ends in the classroom. The learners read and engage with a text on its own merits, and hopefully learn to analyze it in an academically appropriate way. This promotes language acquisition and the development of reading and writing skills, but in a critical literacy perspective, it is insufficient. The goal is for the learners to become more aware, conscious, and critical of real-life sociopolitical issues and systems, and the CLP assessment dimension aims to encourage this. In CLP assessment, the central question is how learners can apply the critical skills they have hopefully developed throughout the process to other areas of their lives. This requires the learners to be able to recognize sociopolitical issues related to the texts, and then consider how to use their skills to impact change or take social action.

In order to discuss this dimension, a more concrete view of how to engage with the selected texts in the classroom is required. Therefore, this section discusses concerns and implications of working with these novels in the classroom. In conjunction with this, I suggest some potential classroom activities for working with the novels and their themes. The aim of this is not to provide an extensive or definitive list of how to work with the texts, but to offer some examples of activities and opportunities for assessment that can serve as inspiration for other educators. Where it is not directly stated, the implication is that all of these activities must be supported with discussion and reflection. The connections between the texts, the activities, and real-world sociopolitical issues and topics should be made explicitly clear in order to facilitate deeper understanding and critical thinking by showing the relevance of the texts and activities to the learners' lives and to the world around them (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383).

6.3.1. Classroom suitability

Before bringing any text into the classroom, some practical concerns have to be addressed. First and foremost is its suitability for learners. The three novels are of varying length

and linguistic complexity, emphasize different themes and topics, and contain content that may not be appropriate for all learners. Therefore, before discussing how to teach these novels, we must briefly discuss the needs of the learners and the relevance of the texts to the target class.

Nevermoor, both in terms of language and content matter, is targeted towards younger readers. The protagonist and her friends are eleven years old, so for the purposes of identification, readers around the same age may find it easier to engage with the text. The novel does deal with themes of death, with Morrigan believing that she is doomed to die at a young age, but its atmosphere is generally light-hearted and humorous, and very much intended to be appropriate for young readers. Advanced readers of around Morrigan's own age would likely have little trouble with the text, but less advanced EFL learners at this age might struggle with some of the vocabulary. Still, with proper support and scaffolding, there are almost certainly parts of the text that could be used effectively with this age group. Additionally, the themes of class and social power addressed in the text are absolutely relevant for older readers as well. Considering the book was released in 2017 and has become quite popular, it is possible that some older learners already have some familiarity with the text outside the classroom. For the purposes of this discussion, however, I will assume a target audience of learners of similar age to Morrigan, i.e. learners in 6th or 7th grade.

SotS is the shortest of the three books, but also quite complex in terms of language, as it is highly descriptive and occasionally uses quite advanced vocabulary. It is targeted at a Young Adult audience and has been given an age rating of 13-14+ by most reviewers. There are instances of violence and bloodshed, sometimes described graphically, which some readers may find disturbing, and there is, as the content warning at the beginning of the novel explains, an instance of suicide. However, I would argue that these are neither gratuitous nor unnecessary, but rather integral to the themes of oppression and slavery in the book. As long the text it is taught with sensitivity and with consideration to the learners and their experiences, it can provide valuable opportunities for critical reflection. Keeping in mind the novel's age rating and language, it is probably most suitable for older students in 9th or 10th grade.

Similar reasoning applies to *CoBB*, although it should be noted that this text contains more frequent and more graphic depictions of violence. The scene in which Zélie is captured and tortured by King Saran is particularly brutal, and the book may be disturbing for some readers. Additionally, less advanced EFL readers might find it difficult to follow the narrative structure of

the three different perspectives. On the other hand, this can be an opportunity to explore literary devices such as point of view, which older learners have likely already encountered in their first language education. Given the mature themes and language, though, *CoBB* is likely most appropriate for older learners, in line with its overall age rating of 13/14 and older.

6.3.2. Dominant and marginalized narratives and critical thinking

Encouraging awareness of minority and majority perspectives is listed under the core values of the Norwegian curriculum (MER, 2017, p. 2019). In a critical literacy perspective, there is a clear link between this aim and the 'interrogating multiple viewpoints dimension of Lewison et al.'s model (2002, p. 383). One of the purposes of this dimension is for the learners to become more aware of dominant and marginalized perspectives, and to question which voices are heard and which are not. All three novels studied in this thesis deal heavily with themes related to the power of storytelling and how narratives are constructed. They deconstruct dominant narratives and explore how messages and texts are constructed by those in power to serve certain agendas.

In a critical literacy perspective, this can provide an opportunity to disrupt the commonplace by encouraging learners to question the narratives they are exposed to or take for granted in their own lives. It also positions them to be more critical of the stories they encounter or the messages they see in the world around them, and reflect on the non-neutrality of texts by considering how they are impacted by the greater context in which they are created (Janks et al., 2014, p. 2). Additionally, the focus on dominant narratives can be used to 'interrogate multiple perspectives by considering how the world might look from the perspective of those whose stories and perspectives are not typically heard.

There are many possible approaches to working with multiple perspectives in the classroom. Drama can be a powerful and engaging tool to explore this. In *CoBB,* the story of the death of King Saran's family and the following destruction of the maji is told several times, from several points of view. Zélie's understanding and memories of this event are vastly different from the king's retelling of the story. One possibility is to divide the class into groups and assigning half the groups King Saran's perspective and the other half Zélie's perspective. The learners create short roleplays showing their perspective on the story, then present the roleplays

to each other. This allows the learners to visualize and experience differences and similarities between differing interpretations of the same event. Since multiple groups are assigned the same perspective, they can compare how interpretations can differ even when presented with the same text. This activity can be followed up with a group discussion in which the learners reflect on the implications of having different perspectives on the same event, and how that can impact the way we approach historical and contemporary events.

Alternately, the learners' roleplays can be used as a starting point for a forum theatre activity inspired by Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (2014). In forum theatre, a scene is first presented in full. In the next run-through, the audience is tasked with finding opportunities to step in for the actors in order to intervene with the scene and provide potential solutions. This approach allows learners to actively engage with the material and consider different outcomes based on different perspectives. For example, learners could take on the roles of Zélie, King Saran, or other characters in the story, and through a forum theatre activity, they could explore different ways the story could play out if different decisions are made or if other perspectives are taken into consideration.

Either activity should be interspersed with and followed up by discussion that explicitly connects the literary content to real-world sociopolitical issues. The learners can be asked to reflect on how real-world events are presented in the media, and how they might look from a different point of view. A CLP assessment task could be to have learners use what they have learned about multiple perspectives to create a counternarrative to a current or historical event by telling it from a different point of view, such as by rewriting a news article. This could be used to work towards several 10th grade competence aims, such as "use sources in a critical and accountable manner" or "use a variety of strategies for language learning, text creation and communication" (MER, 2019, p. 8). Since one of the goals of critical literacy is to encourage the learners to take social action beyond what happens in the classroom, these news stories and articles could be collected and distributed to parents and/or the rest of the school as a class newspaper, thus allowing the learners to share their work and ideas with a wider audience and showcase how their learning can be used to impact other people's ideas and perspectives.

The real-world historical undercurrent of *SotS* is relevant in interdisciplinary approaches and is closely linked to history and social studies, which can promote understanding of the interconnectivity of different school subjects (MER, 2017, p. 12). One possible activity related to

SotS, as mentioned in Section 6.1, is for learners to examine other sources of information related to slavery and colonialism, such as textbook articles, journal entries, or other literary works. This provides another opportunity for learners to interrogate how the same event is described and understood from multiple perspectives, but with a more explicit focus on historical context. The learners can be divided into groups and assigned different sources of information, then asked to interrogate the text. This involves asking questions about the context of the text, such as who created it, for what purpose, and which points of view are represented or lacking, and how information in the text is presented through tone and language. The learners could create presentations comparing these texts and share them with the class, followed by a discussion on the implications of these differing perspectives and how they impact our understanding of historical events. Such an activity also clearly ties into the Year 10 competence aims to "read factual texts and assess the reliability of the sources" and to "use sources in a critical and accountable manner" (MER, 2019, p. 9).

With *Nevermoor*, too, there are many ways of approaching exploring dominant narratives and multiple perspectives. The first two chapters, for instance, concern Morrigan's life before being brought to the titular city, and readers are introduced to the concept of Cursed Children. As discussed previously, most people believe these children to be cursed, and they are made scapegoats for various misfortunes. Building on this, learners can be divided into groups and tasked with preparing news reports about issues supposedly caused by Cursed Children, drawing inspiration from the examples in the book. They should be assigned or come up with a problem (such as a power outage or a damaged building), a way to connect it to the supposed curse, and an explanation for what actually happened that is initially kept secret. In groups, they come up with headlines, interviews, and quotes from officials or witnesses, all of which place the blame on the Cursed Children. They present their 'findings' to the rest of the class in a mock news conference, in which the other learners take on the role of journalists and ask questions and investigate the source of the problem. They can try to guess the real explanation, but if they are unable to do so, the presenting group should reveal it. The purpose of this activity is to encourage learners to consider the information they come across in their daily lives critically, and to consider how underlying ideologies can influence the way events are reported and understood. They are encouraged to consider how narratives can be constructed and manipulated, and how people or groups can be marginalized or scapegoated through these narratives.

The activity can be followed up by activities related to real-world 'fake news' articles or propaganda that students may come across in their daily lives. They can analyze articles or social media posts that they suspect may be inaccurate and try to find evidence of this by examining it closely. This fosters awareness of the non-neutrality of texts, and also promotes media literacy by encouraging fact-checking and source verification. As a CLP assessment task, learners can create their own articles on current events or social issues with a focus on accuracy and objectivity, tying into the Year 7 competence aim to "talk about the reliability of various sources and choose sources for one's own use" (MER, 2019, p. 8). As suggested in the *CoBB* task above, this can also be turned into a larger project in which learners collaborate to create a class newspaper to be shared outside the classroom, thus encouraging the learners to take social action and connect their critical literacy skills to the real world.

6.3.3. Promoting intercultural awareness and counteracting prejudice

Nevermoor tackles issues of xenophobia, particularly in relation to immigration and the rhetoric used to dehumanize and 'other' immigrants. Considering current real-world immigration discourse (mentioned in 6.1), these issues are highly relevant and timely for learners to engage with in the classroom. One activity to explore this issue could be a mock debate in which learners take on the roles of the different characters in the text, such as Inspector Flintlock, Jupiter North, and Morrigan herself. This could be done in small groups, in which one individual is assigned a certain perspective, or in a whole-class setting, in which a number of learners are assigned the same role and work together to find arguments for their perspective. Through this, learners explore the topic of immigration through the lens of the novel, thus encouraging awareness of minority perspectives (MER, 2017, p. 9) in accordance with Lewison et al.'s 'interrogating multiple viewpoints' dimension (2002, p. 383). It also encourages learners to engage with a point of view with which they may not necessarily agree, in accordance with LK20's goal of ensuring the ability of learners to "deal with conflicts of opinion and respect disagreement" (MER, 2017, p. 14). The learners should prepare opening statements and find arguments supporting their position, which they then share. During the debate, learners should be encouraged to question the other characters' arguments based on their own roles.

Following the debate activity, a more explicit line to real-world sociopolitical issues should be drawn. There are myriad ways to do this, such as by using immigrant literature that explores the topic, or by addressing contemporary real-world immigration issues. In Chapter 6.1, I mentioned several contemporary real-world events related to immigration discourse that could be drawn on for the purposes of connecting *Nevermoor'*s exploration of these issues to sociopolitical topics in the real world. For instance, in conjunction with the debate activity, learners might compare the views espoused by Inspector Flintlock to real-life anti-immigrant rhetoric, looking at the ways language is used to dehumanize and alienate immigrants. Alternately, learners could be tasked with creating visual images, such as paintings and collages, inspired by the experiences of immigrants. These images could be displayed throughout the school to spark conversation and raise awareness, showing how art can be used as a tool for social advocacy while allowing the learners to express their critical literacy skills and what they have learned about these sociopolitical issues in unique and creative ways.

SotS and *CoBB* both deal heavily with racial issues, albeit in different ways. The former emphasizes the historical issues of colonization and slavery, and how this served to sever people from their cultural heritage and identity. In *CoBB,* intraracial dynamics are explored more explicitly than interracial issues, showing the diversity and unique dynamics that exist within ethnic groups. Issues that are still highly relevant in the modern world, such as colorism in Black communities, or how dominant Eurocentric traditions negatively impact those who are seen as 'other,' are explored throughout the text. Simultaneously, the novel explores issues of power and privilege, how these can be used to unfairly silence marginalized communities, and how marginalized groups face abuse and oppression, closely connected to real-world issues of police brutality.

To address the latter point, Adeyemi's own reflections on police brutality against Black people in the author's note section of the novel can be used as a starting point. (2018, p. 526). Learners in 8th-10th grade are likely to be at least somewhat aware of the Black Lives Matter movement and its relation to instances of police brutality, and will likely be able to make this connection in discussions on the topic. This can be used as a starting point for delving deeper into issues of systemic racism and racial injustice. For instance, learners can be tasked with researching an incident of police brutality in the U.S., such as the murder of George Floyd or Breonna Taylor, and planning a short presentation of the situation.

There are multiple ways for them to share this information with each other, but one I have found effective and engaging in classrooms is a 'speed-dating' format. In this activity, the learners line up and face each other one on one. Each learner is then given a set amount of time – one minute, for instance – to present their information to the person facing them. When the time runs out, the other person shares their presentation, then one line moves to the right, and the learners present to the next person. If they finish presenting before the time runs out, they have to ask each other questions and discuss the case. Through this method, every learner engages with everyone else's presentation personally, promoting active listening and questioning. The activity allows the learners to practice summarizing information and presenting it in succinct ways, while also providing them an opportunity to adapt their presentation along the way. This can help them understand how to engage in conversations about sociopolitical issues by actively listening, asking questions, and building upon others' ideas, thus potentially preparing them to draw on these skills in other contexts.

Lewison et al. encourage starting with the social dimension – the larger sociopolitical structures – and gradually encouraging learners to make connections to their personal lives (2015, p. xxxi). Examining racial injustice using literature and on a larger sociopolitical scale allows learners to engage with the topic at a distance, which can be less intimidating or emotionally taxing than immediately confronting these issues in their personal lives. Bridging the gap between sociopolitical issues and the learners' personal lives and experiences, however, is paramount to developing critical awareness (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383) . There should be opportunities to reflect on or discuss how issues of racism and prejudice impact the learners' own lives, such as by asking if they have experienced or witnessed instances of discrimination. It might be relevant to draw on sources highlighting instances of racism in Norway, and/or have the learners research this topic on their own, in order to encourage an understanding of the fact that these systemic issues are not limited to specific contexts or geographies, but are global phenomena that impact individuals and societies in different ways. This encourages awareness of both local and global minority and majority perspectives (MER, 2017, p. 9).

A potential follow-up activity to encourage taking social action in line with CLP assessment is to task the learners with creating posters that highlight instances of racism both international and local. The posters could be displayed in school to raise awareness and promote critical awareness of systemic racism. This activity could also incorporate other critical literacy

skills, particularly related to the construction of texts. Learners should be encouraged to reflect on how images and language are used to communicate certain perspectives or ideologies, and how this can impact how people perceive and respond to their messages. Through this activity, learners are encouraged to take social action while demonstrating their understanding of the issues and how to communicate them effectively.

In addition to dealing with issues of racial inequality, *SotS* and *CoBB* provide ample possibilities for promoting intercultural competence and awareness, in line with the English curriculum's stated goal of encouraging learners to develop knowledge of linguistic and cultural diversity (MER, 2019, p. 3). For instance, both novels draw on Yoruba mythology and West African cultures as part of their world-building. *SotS* engages with Yoruba deities and mythological creatures as prominent figures in its narrative. Simidele is a Mami Wata, an African water spirit similar to a mermaid. As previously discussed, learners are likely to be familiar with other interpretations of mermaids through popular culture, and it is therefore possible to draw on this knowledge to promote awareness of how different cultures often share similar concepts that are expressed in unique ways. The same applies to the other deities and creatures presented in the story. Esu, for instance, is a god of mischief, as well as a messenger to the gods. Parallels can be drawn to Loki, the ambitious trickster god in Norse mythology, or Hermes, the messenger god in Greek mythology. One approach could be to have learners research one of the mythological figures in *SotS* and compare them to figures from other cultural traditions. By doing so, learners can develop deeper understanding of the diversity of cultural expressions and beliefs, while also being encouraged to find similarities in ideas, themes, and motifs.

As an extension of this, learners can be asked to investigate how these figures are interpreted in other narratives, including popular media. What are the similarities and differences, for instance, between Mami Wata in different African cultures? How do these differ from mermaids as presented by Disney in *The Little Mermaid*, or the *rusalka,* the undead water spirits of women who died near water in Slavic mythology? Such comparisons also provide an opportunity to consider why so many cultures share similar creatures and figures, which can lead to discussions about the cross-cultural commonalities of being human. In encouraging intercultural understanding, this is important because it promotes empathy and respect across

cultural barriers and can foster an appreciation for diversity, thus working to counteract prejudice and discrimination, in accordance with curricular values (MER, 2017, p. 9).

One possible classroom activity is to have learners engage in creative projects that explore different interpretations of similar concepts. For example, learners can be tasked with creating a short film that shows a meeting between two similar figures, drawing on relevant cultural knowledge in writing scripts and designing costumes or props. Through these films, they showcase their understanding of different cultural perspectives and demonstrate how they can creatively incorporate cultural elements to create unique narratives. Alternately, they could create cartoons or write short stories demonstrating such a meeting.

Another possibility is to have the learners come up with their own interpretations of concepts found in mythological stories. What would a trickster god look like from the learner's perspective, for instance, and how is this different or similar to existing figures such as Esu? The activity could involve a brainstorming session in which learners reflect on other interpretations they have encountered in various mythologies and popular media and consider commonalities between them. They could then use these insights to create their own unique version of a deity or creature, including a visual representation of what it might look like and reflections on how it might behave, what its powers or abilities might be, and what role it might play in a larger narrative. This requires learners to reflect on different cultural traditions and narrative depictions of similar ideas, while also encouraging them to build on their knowledge in new and creative ways. Additionally, the activity provides a platform for learners to share their own cultural knowledge and experiences with their peers by discussing how their own identities shape their understanding and interpretations of these concepts.

The use of these novels as a tool to promote critical literacy and intercultural awareness, in summary, has great potential to foster empathy and respect while addressing sociopolitical issues on a larger scale. Learners can become more aware and conscious of the cultural diversity and sociopolitical issues that exist around them, and how these are connected globally and locally. Through engaging with the themes of the novels and participating in activities that encourage critical reflection, learners can develop a greater awareness of minority and majority perspectives, as well as systemic issues such as racism, xenophobia, and discrimination, and become more confident in their ability to engage with these topics in a meaningful way. Exploring and reflecting on different cultural expressions and beliefs, learners can develop a

greater appreciation for diversity, thus counteracting stereotypes and prejudice about other cultures, experiences, and perspectives.

6.3.5. Summary

Through CLP assessment, there are many ways for learners to express their understanding of these texts while demonstrating their developing critical literacy skills. By creating texts and images for audiences outside the classroom, they become more aware of methods of taking action and impacting social change, which can be applied to real-world situations. Activities such as the ones suggested in this chapter allow for both formative and summative assessments of English curricular aims throughout the process. A debate activity, for instance, opens for the assessment of several competence aims, such as whether learners can "ask questions and follow up input when talking about various topics adapted to different purposes, recipients and situations" (MER, 2019, p. 9), a Year 10 learning aim. Reflecting on and creating news articles draws on the learners ability to "talk about the reliability of various sources and choose sources for one's own use" (MER, 2019, p. 8) or "use sources in a critical and accountable manner" (MER, 2019, p. 9) – aims for Year 7 and Year 10 respectively – while also working with English-language texts and practicing writing skills. A focus on critical literacy and sociopolitical issues, in other words, does not exclude or detract from the development of other important skills and competences in the English classroom, but rather enhances and complements them. By taking a CLP-inspired approach to the process of engaging with literature, learners are encouraged to become more active and informed citizens while also developing essential language skills.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Main findings

The aim of this thesis was two-fold. The first goal was to analyze the three selected fantasy novels from a critical literacy perspective in order to uncover central themes and elements that are relevant to promoting critical literacy in the classroom. Through close reading and thorough thematic analysis, I came to the conclusion that all three texts tackle issues of

dominant and marginalized perspectives and how texts and narratives are constructed to convey certain messages or ideologies. These are central aspects of teaching critical literacy. Dominant groups in society have the power to create, change, or impact narratives, and minority voices have historically been – either intentionally or unintentionally – suppressed, thus reinforcing the existing power structures that uphold the status quo. Awareness of dominant and marginalized narratives has a close connection to that of understanding majority and minority perspectives, an ability which is emphasized in the curriculum's core value of democracy and participation (MER, 2017, p. 9). In other words, these texts' potential for discussing power dynamics in narratives and the importance of emphasizing diverse perspectives aligns with national educational goals, and the integration of critical literacy through these texts can contribute to achieving those goals.

The three novels address issues of xenophobia, discrimination, and systemic inequality. These sociopolitical issues are highly relevant, reflecting real-world challenges faced by individuals and communities both globally and locally. *Nevermoor,* for instance, with its light-hearted and child-friendly tone, tackles issues of immigration and immigrant rhetoric, a timely and important topic in the current political landscape. It deals with prejudice and how certain groups or people are marginalized or scapegoated, and highlights the consequences of prejudice and discrimination. *SotS* and *CoBB* explore themes of racism and racial discrimination as throughlines throughout their narratives and offer different ways of addressing these issues, and challenge readers to reflect on and interrogate the systems that perpetuate inequality and racial discrimination. Additionally, I found that *SotS* and *CoBB* are heavily inspired by West African traditions such as Yoruba mythology, which is frequently underrepresented in Norwegian classrooms, and using texts such as these therefore aligns well with the English curriculum's goal of using texts to develop knowledge of cultural diversity (MER, 2019, p. 3) and promoting intercultural awareness and competence.

The second aim of the thesis was to consider classroom implications and possible pedagogical approaches to teaching English and promoting critical literacy in the EFL classrooms. I considered the general suitability of the texts to different age groups and suggested multiple activities that might be suitable for engaging learners in critical discussions and promoting critical thinking and sociopolitical awareness. These activities include drama activities, debates, and creating different types of texts. By using these texts, I believe that

educators can foster an inclusive and empowering learning environment that promotes critical literacy while also working towards the overarching goals and more specific competence aims of the national curriculum. I believe, in other words, that all three of these texts hold great potential in the EFL classroom, both in terms of language learning and in encouraging critical literacy.

7.2. Limitations and implications

In Chapter 4, I touched on my concerns about addressing complex social justice issues from a position of privilege. This concern, too, is relevant in the practical application of teaching critical literacy using these texts. I am firmly convinced of the importance of highlighting and amplifying underrepresented perspectives, and that bringing diverse literature into the classroom is essential in creating learning environments that are empathetic and inclusive. As educators, however, we have to be mindful of our own positionality and how it may impact our reading and teaching of these texts.

As of 2019, fewer than 7% of primary school teachers in Norway came from immigrant backgrounds (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2019), and although I could not find recent statistics regarding the racial and religious makeup of educators in Norway, this number – along with my personal observations in classrooms – points to a relatively high degree of homogeny among educators in Norwegian schools. If issues related to race, immigration, and systemic inequality are to be discussed in the classroom, then, it cannot be left to the sole responsibility of teachers who have personal experience with such issues to educate learners about them. It is crucial for all teachers to be aware of these topics, and to actively seek out and emphasize diverse perspectives in their teaching, even if addressing these issues can be uncomfortable or challenging. Still, members of dominant societal groups need to be aware of their own implicit biases and approach such matters with sensitivity and a willingness to learn, and to actively engage in self-reflection and take a critical approach to their own understanding of the world.

Additionally, I mentioned scope as a limitation in the analysis of this texts. This still holds true, and I am certain that there are countless readings and analyses of these novels that would provide valuable perspectives and insights. The limited scope of this thesis allowed for a focused exploration of specific themes within the selected texts, but it also means that there are interpretations, themes and ideas that had to be excluded, or that I may not have discovered at all.

I would like to emphasize once more that this thesis is not an exhaustive guide to these texts. There are undoubtedly additional layers of meaning worthy of discussion and exploration, and countless other ways to work with these texts in the classroom. Still, it is my hope that this thesis has provided a starting point for considering the potential of the three novels in the EFL classroom, and that it might serve as inspiration for educators interested in exploring critical literacy and literature education.

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