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The Rise of Young Adult Black Science Fiction: An Analysis of Contemporary Novels by African American Women

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Abstract

Young Adult science fiction has gone through significant change since the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the inclusion of diverse authors and characters that challenge the lack of representation that has always characterized the genre from its very birth. Drawing upon Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* as female-authored novels representing white and black science fiction respectively, this thesis examines the recent contributions of women of African descent to the American literary landscape. In particular, I will explore the legacy of Butler's work in Walidah Imarisha and Adrienne Maree Brown's *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, a collection of twenty short stories and essays about social justice written by both writers and social activists. Furthermore, I will analyze two YA contemporary fantasy novels by African American authors that trouble mainstream conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality: *The Gilded Ones* was published in 2021 by 35-year-old Sierra-Leonean American writer Namina Forna and *Pet* was published in 2019 by 35-year-old Nigerian non-binary transgender author Akwaeke Emezi. Specifically, I will focus on the role of Deka and Jam, the black girl and transgender girl protagonists who act as the heroines in the novels, as well as on the African languages and traditions that the authors incorporate in their writing. Through my analysis, I will highlight the importance of including members of minority groups as the main characters of YA fantasy novels in order to make teenage readers see themselves as the heroes of their own stories, therefore opening up new possibilities for them in the real future.

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Introduction

The life period leading from childhood to adulthood is extremely delicate because it is when teenagers learn to shape their inner selves. However, as Leah Beth Phillips (2016) argues in her PhD thesis on the representation of the adolescent female body in YA fantasy, teens do not always freely choose whomever they wish to be because they are influenced by a number of factors that narrow their options and lead them towards the homogeneity of appearance. Teenage girls, for example, are deeply influenced in terms of physical appearance by the dominant, patriarchal discourses on the female body emanating from the West, and from the US in particular, that are mainly shared through popular and media culture. As Phillips (2016) illustrates in her work, the world these teen girls are growing up in is saturated with images of the ideal female body that are made available especially by social media and, as a result, the fit, whole, stable, white body is generally assumed as an image of perfection. In a way, the countless images of perfection that young girls are continuously exposed to end up defining their very self, so much so that they tend to hide their uniqueness in order to conform to the ideal model of the female body and not feel to be "other". Phillips (2016) also highlights the fact that because of the ongoing development of nowadays' digital technologies, this ideal model has the potential to influence all girls regardless of their geographic provenance and culture, therefore removing another kind of difference that has to do with one's ethnic origins. Moreover, she points out that according to the dominant gender ideology, a girl's self appears to be equated only with her body because the only thing that matters is whether her appearance reflects the ideal female body or not. For what concerns girls of color, thus, their black body automatically excludes them as ideal women and their race becomes their whole identity. The same applies for transgender women who were assigned male at birth and for disabled women with their deficient bodies, all of them being examples of imperfection. Inspired by the work of Phillips, it is precisely this imposed homogeneity resulting from the obsession with the norms of contemporary Western culture that this paper contests through the YA fantasy works of Namina Forna and Akwaeke Emezi, two examples of diverse authors who have significantly included in the genre female protagonists whose bodies can be deceptive according to the dominant ideology of the female body, but who nonetheless are the heroines of their story.

Science fiction is a literary genre that has been recently engaging with diversity and inclusion in terms of the hero's body and appearance. Specifically, YA fantasy literature by African American women is reconfiguring the traditional image of the white male hero that dominated the genre since its birth by replacing it with black heroines. However, throughout this work, I want to emphasize that this gender revision is not the only innovation in the genre, because there is an emerging group of African American female and transgender authors who are further working on diversity by

challenging the standard depiction of heterosexual heroes with good mental health in science fiction. In particular, I explore the YA fantasy of Akwaeke Emezi and Namina Forna through two novels that provide examples of female protagonists whose gender identity and mental health do not match the ideal model, directly countering the images of perfection coming from hegemonic discourses on the female body. In fact, the black neurodivergent transgender girl and the black girl suffering from PTSD included in these texts offer alternatives to both the traditional depiction of science fiction heroes, as well as the images of female bodies spread by popular and media culture, a space that is especially affecting teenage girls in contemporary society. The novels offer images of diverse female bodies that do not prevent teen girls from being the heroines of their own story, therefore allowing for the acceptability of different types of female bodies rather than the worship of the perfect one required by popular and media culture. By looking at the multiple instances of female bodies offered by YA fantasy novels by African American women and transgender authors, I hope to make the reader reflect on the fact that 'ideals are not expressions of things as they actually are but, rather, conceptions of things as they are desired to be' (Phillips, 2016, p. 10). As Phillips explains, what follows then is that the mainstream desire shared by hegemonic discourse wishing for teenagers to achieve 'a stable, secure, and, by default, heterosexual (adult) identity' is only a fantasy because there is no such thing as a single narrative of the self when it comes to human beings (Phillips, 2016, p. 10).

The subject of my thesis is YA science fiction literature by African American women dealing with issues of race, gender, and sexuality affecting teenagers of color in US society. In particular, I focus on two YA contemporary fantasy novels by African American women and transgender authors who have recently debuted in the field of science fiction, bringing with them significant changes in terms of diversity of characters and stories in a genre that has always been characterized by a lack of representational inclusivity since its very birth. The novels are *Pet* by Akwaeke Emezi and *The Gilded Ones* by Namina Forna. I chose these novels because by creating a utopian and a dystopian imaginary world respectively, they portray the best and the worst possible scenarios for teenage girls of color, providing the reader with the two extreme directions that his/her actions might lead to in the future. Through this paper, I offer a close reading of two novels that, despite being products of fiction, deal with current social issues and propose a troubling depiction of future society depending on the behavior we decide to embrace and adopt. I believe that it is important to highlight and spread awareness concerning the countless dramatic social inequalities and episodes of violence taking place in the contemporary US society, because in this moment many people are struggling to make sense of how easily human rights can be violated and ignored. This is the reason why it is necessary to share YA stories that tackle these issues and convey a message of hope, making every effort to teach the

teenage audience to have faith in the future so that they can believe that it is possible to change the world and make it a better place.

The purpose of this paper is to challenge Western ontological positions dominating science fiction novels that privilege white male heroes and uphold heteronormative values and ideals. Through the analysis of African American YA fantasy novels, I aim to demonstrate that it is essential to provide diverse teen readers with the chance to see themselves as the heroes of their own stories by including members of minority groups as the main characters. By doing so, diverse teenagers are likely to perceive themselves as a valuable part of a large community of people who share a common humanity despite any differences in terms of race, gender, and sexuality, and their inclusion in science fiction books is likely to open up new possibilities for them in the real future. As Ramdarshan Bold and Phillips put it in their article for *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*, 'subverting norms in YA, that is books written by authors from diverse backgrounds and/or featuring inclusive and representative characters is a form of "imaginary" activism that can, and does inspire, real-world change' (Ramdarshan Bold and Phillips, 2019, p. 6). I chose to focus on science fiction as a genre because it has the potential to influence the present by imagining possible utopian or dystopian futures that will move readers towards critical reflection, hope, and action. In fact, once they have been confronted with the imaginary worlds portrayed in the novels, young readers are likely to think about what they want or do not want to happen in the future and possibly do something about it. In a way, they will be reminded that every action and choice they make creates their future, so that hopefully they will understand what they must do if they want to move in the direction of a better world.

In the first chapter I introduce the literary category this work focuses on, that is to say YA literature. Through a brief history of YA literature, I show what the main issues related to the category are, the recent directions it is undertaking, and its value. I start by tracing the path from "Junior novels" to "Young Adult novels," concentrating on the main periods of success and decline the genre went through. In particular, among the most important trends in YA literature, I point out the serialization of fantasy novels, paranormal romance novels, and dystopian novels. Then I underline the recent turn to stand-alone novels of contemporary realism and the emerging of the "New Adult Literature" that specifically addresses young adults in their twenties. After a general overview of YA literature in the 21st century, I try to make clear what we refer to with the label of YA literature by illustrating the main characteristics of the genre. In addition, since scholars are still debating on the definition of the genre, I examine the dynamic nature of the terms "Young Adult" and "literature" which changes according to time and space, focusing specifically on the difference between "teen" and "Young Adult". Next I consider the "New Adult" label, pointing out the difficulty in distinguishing the novels according to the age category they specifically address. Besides, I make

reference to the "crossover" phenomenon that has led to a recent interest on the part of adult readers in YA literature, emphasizing the power of YA literature in involving readers of all ages, but also the implications that adults' interest might lead to in terms of marketing decisions. I also discuss the issue of banning the so-called YA "bleak books" that deal with uncomfortable topics by underlining the positive impact that such books can have in teenagers' lives, working as safe spaces to explore difficult-to-discuss topics that might really affect them in actual life. Moreover, I discuss the danger in banning books that deal with traumatic experiences as they can create shame among teens who are actually experiencing certain types of issues, so I introduce "bleak books" as useful resources for young readers in helping them better comprehend the world they live in. Then I focus in particular on the recent rise of interest in social issues on the part of young adults, which has led to the proliferation of social activism narratives that aim at inspiring protests to promote social change. Next I look specifically at speculative fiction as a popular genre among young adults who want to read about authentic teen issues through the lens of fantasy worlds. I briefly examine dystopian literature and its attractiveness for young people by introducing the concept of bibliotherapy, that is to say the unique form of therapy that reading about real issues in fictional worlds provides readers with, allowing them to work on their problems without facing them directly in real life. I especially consider the aspects that make it easy for teenagers to recognize the fictional worlds portrayed in dystopian novels as realistic depictions of their realities, pointing out the obsession with technology and science, fear and distrust of the government, and the increased level of violence in contemporary YA literature. Finally, I underline the value of YA literature as a genre that specifically addresses the needs of young adults in their growing up process, helping them to make sense of the world they live in and to develop their personal identities by offering them role models they can identify with.

In the second chapter I focus on science fiction and its power of imagining alternative worlds, examining in particular the contributions of women authors who have revolutionized the genre by introducing people of color and female characters with key roles instead of just accepting their traditional stereotypical function. First of all, I underline the paradox of praising science fiction as a genre where everything is possible since it has been characterized by a persistent lack of representation of minorities. In this respect, I introduce the point of view of Octavia Butler, the first black and female author to gain recognition as a science fiction writer. Through her view, I examine the possible reasons behind the lack of minority characters in science fiction books, ultimately focusing on the unconscious stereotyping that prevents many writers from visualizing minority people in diverse life contexts and on their desire for writing escapist literature that does not deal with real problems. Then I point out how science fiction has started to become a more inclusive field thanks to the contribution of minority authors such as women and women of color who allowed for a wider

range of stories to be told, making it possible for African speculative fiction to emerge, for example. Through an analysis of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, I explore the innovative work of female authors who challenged the literary conventions imposed by white male writers that dominated the genre, offering the reader a new type of science fiction that deals with current issues of society. As regards Le Guin's work, I point out its primary importance in discussing the meaning of gender and sexuality, questioning and expanding the commonly accepted norms concerning such concepts, but also in breaking with the tradition of the white male explorer in science fiction and with a set of assumptions related to racial identity. For what concerns Butler's work, I consider her legacy as the mother of Afrofuturism by highlighting the introduction of different tropes in science fiction such as a black teenage girl protagonist, a revision of the alien as it is known by its traditional definition, and the use of science fiction as a tool for social reform. In particular, I explore the legacy of Butler's work in Walidah Imarisha and Adrienne Maree Brown's *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. Through this anthology, I show how it is possible to expand the boundaries of science fiction by including social activists who daily fight for making the world a better place among the group of authors. Specifically, I present Imarisha's notion of "visionary fiction" to refer to the kind of speculative fiction that allows to examine current issues and imagine a better world. In addition, I discuss Brown's definition of science fiction as an "exploring ground" for developing the strategies that can be adopted so as to build such a world. Drawing upon the work of Imarisha and Brown, I propose science fiction as a helpful practice field for social justice movements because it allows to explore the many possible outcomes that our actions might lead to in real life. Furthermore, I highlight the role of hopefulness in promoting social change, recognizing the value of literature permeated by hope in making change happen. Finally, I introduce an emerging group of YA female authors of African descent who are currently dominating the American literary landscape by challenging the lack of representation they themselves experienced as teenage readers and offering actual teen girls and queer adolescents of color a story they can see themselves in.

In the third chapter I focus on the possibility of rewriting the future offered by African American YA science fiction novels. Through an analysis of Namina Forna's *The Gilded Ones* and Akwaeke Emezi's *Pet*, I examine the contribution of African American women and transgender authors in troubling the mainstream conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality. First of all, I describe the life of Namina Forna and Akwaeke Emezi from their birth in Africa to their move to the US, especially focusing on the political instability they grew up with in their homeland and the racism they witnessed as people of color in America. In particular, I point out how difficult it has been for them to establish themselves in the American literary landscape as diverse writers. I also consider

how their life experiences have shaped their writing projects, leading them to imagine alternative futures where diverse teenagers can see themselves represented. I discuss the importance of fantasy for them as it allowed them as children to disappear into imaginary worlds that made them feel safe in spite of the violence surrounding them. Then I examine the role of African culture, traditions, and ideals in their novels by highlighting the cultural elements they include and the presence of a non-Western epistemology. Specifically, I concentrate on examples of African language, food, clothes, music, symbols, and rituals and I point out how both texts question Western epistemology by offering a non-Western world view that emphasizes connection rather than division. Next I discuss how both authors challenge the stereotypical gender representation of science fiction by introducing non-white and female teenage protagonists as warriors who hunt and defeat the monsters, that is to say the social inequalities and instances of violence in American society. I thus show how the main characters differ from mainstream heroes of science fiction by describing them as a black girl dealing with trauma and a black transgender girl who communicates through sign language respectively. I also underline the fact that in spite of their diversity, they are represented as people who can be happy because they can find a family that accepts them as they are and they can be loved by a number of people that could possibly hurt them in real life. Moreover, they are gifted with the ability of seeing the unseen, which allows them to identify the real monsters and save their community. I especially focus on the opposition between adults and teenagers that sees adults as unwilling to change their minds and free themselves from the stereotypes that influence their thinking against teenagers as the ones who are willing to go beyond the appearances and admit that nothing is necessarily as it seems because it is possible to find the good in what are supposed to be the bad people and vice versa. In fact, in spite of the internalized teachings they received from adults, teenagers are willing to recognize the truth even at the cost of defying what is generally accepted and taught to them by adults, breaking the illusions fostered by them. Finally, teenagers are presented as the ones who hope for a better future and are determined to fight in the first place to make the world a better place. In particular, I point out that it is the female heroines who have faith in the possibility of change and in human beings altogether, so their actions are always based on this hope.

1. YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: ISSUES, DIRECTIONS AND VALUE

1.1. A brief history of YA literature

Nowadays Young Adult literature has gained so much popularity that it can currently be found on the top of lists ranking the best sales books in the US, but the category it stands for is still very new. In fact, this genre is 'a staunchly American tradition' (Garcia, 2013, p. 5) that especially started to become popular when novels such as the *Harry Potter* series, the *Twilight* series and *The Hunger Games* trilogy came out, but the wizards, vampires and dystopian worlds that characterize these works have not always been part of the field. YA literature has a rich and complex history, and very often it has been marginalized as a literary genre. In the last hundred years, it has suffered much change, mainly dealing with the content and the format that it has been adopting. In general, YA literature as a genre began to take root in the 1970s and 1980s due to the success of some controversial novels that were specifically targeted at teens, and it was successfully brought into existence thanks to the recent and quick development of the book industry, Stanford Professor Antero Garcia explains (2013). However, this literary genre had already started to emerge during the first half of the twentieth century, especially in the late 1930s, when the presence of teenagers in the economic field was continuously growing. According to children's and YA literature scholar Michael Cart (2016), the Depression helped creating a target audience for YA literature because the large number of young people who were driven out of their workplace ended up into the classroom. As statistics shows, while in 1910 only 15 percent of young Americans were in high school, between 1930 and 1939 the number had increased from 50 to 75 percent (Cart, 2016). As a result, many young people started to gather back together in the classroom and, as Cart points out, this daily contact was precisely what led to the emergence of a new youth culture that was mainly built on high school social life. Until that moment, this target readership had been known as teens or teensters, but in 1941 the term "teenagers" finally appeared (Garcia, 2013), and it was used in print for the first time in the September issue of the American magazine of science and technology called *Popular Science Monthly* (Cart, 2016). The genre thus already begun to take hold in the 1940s as it became clear that young readers were likely to become an attractive force for the emerging literary market. Nevertheless, the market had to wait for the end of World War II to gain actual prosperity because before that moment all the kids' money was meant for supporting their entire families.

Cart (2016) claims that the first book written explicitly for teenagers was *Seventeenth Summer*, even though it was published as an adult novel. It was a novel about first love which was released in 1942 by Maureen Daly and it mainly addressed young girls. Its success resulted in

numerous imitations, but these books were not referred to as "Young Adult" yet. Instead, they were known as "junior novels," and as Emma L. Patterson (1956) illustrates in her work on the development of such novels, they basically originated as stereotyped stories that dealt with young kids' experiences in adjusting to school and family, focusing in particular on portraying young girls' dreams of life and romance. These "junior novels" were so successful that the 1940s resulted in a decade of romance fiction. The romance trend then continued throughout the 1950s, though books specifically targeted to boys were being published too. Most of them dealt with young boys' occupations and interests, thus mainly involving sports and adventures. Anyway, Cart (2016) refers to most of the teen novels of the time as "inadvertent fantasies" because they gave the impression that all teenagers were white, they all belonged to the middle or upper classes, and they all lived in those typically American houses that were surrounded by white picket fences. As YA author S. E. Hinton wrote in *The New York Times Book Review*:

> Teenagers today want to read about teenagers today. The world is changing, yet the authors of books for teenagers are still 15 years behind the times. In the fiction they write, romance is still the most popular theme with a horse and the girl who loved it coming in a close second. Nowhere is the drive-in social jungle mentioned. In short, where is the reality? (quoted in Cart, 2016, p. 2)

Hinton's own novel, *The Outsiders*, provides an answer for teenagers' desire to read about contemporary realistic stories. In fact, the novel explores themes such as the urban warfare between teenage gang members and it uses the streets as the setting. It came out in 1967, and from that moment on, publishers began to take into account the intended teenage audience's requests for books dealing with real-life concerns. In other words, teenage readers needed other things to read, and publishers were happy to provide them with what they wanted. As regards Hinton's book, according to blogger Katie Behrens (2017), it typified exactly what young readers were looking for in literature, that is to say straight talk about the challenges and obstacles that teens face in their everyday life and a high level of emotional involvement, and the fact that Hinton was herself a teenager when she wrote the novel may have helped in this respect, since she was barely 18 years old when her work was published. Another revolutionary author of the time was Judy Blume, again a female writer who started writing books for teens where she dealt with what were typically believed to be controversial topics, namely racism, divorce, menstruation, sex, and masturbation. Blume boldly addressed the possible issues that teenagers were likely to go through in their growing up experiences, and it turned out that it was exactly what teenagers were looking for. The new decade of the 1960s would thus reject the previous idealized images of teenage life for a more realistic fiction, and a new genre, later known as Young Adult Literature, sprang into being.

In the following years, this category continued to grow, until reaching its first peak of popularity in the late 1960s, when the term "Young Adult Literature" was finally coined by the Young Adult Library Services Association and started to be adopted in common language. The YALSA is the most important American association dealing with YA literature. It was created in 1957 as the Young Adult Services Division during a major reorganization within the American Library Association. As the ALA official website states,

> The YALSA is a national association of librarians, library workers and advocates whose mission is to expand and strengthen library services for teens, aged 12-18. Through its member-driven advocacy, research and professional development initiatives, YALSA builds the capacity of libraries and librarians to engage, serve and empower teens. (ALAIR, 2002)

Before the creation of the YALSA, teens who went to the libraries wishing to pick up some interesting readings could not find exactly their own books, which is why so much effort was put into this project. It appears that apart from a few exceptions, such as J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), YA sections in bookstore had been mainly crowded with romance and horror stories, so that adolescent readers had no other option but to either give up on reading altogether or jump straight from children's books to books written for adults (Behrens, 2017). Nevertheless, among the novels of the time, an important role was played by Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974). According to Cart (2016), it was one of the most important and influential novels in the history of YA literature because it was the first YA novel to actually reveal teens the sad truth that happy endings cannot be guaranteed. The first "Golden Age of YA Literature" is associated precisely with authors who emerged around the 1970s such as Judy Blume, Lois Duncan, and Robert Cormier, Cart (2016) argues. The problem is that together with the Golden Age authors, the 1970s was also the decade of the so-called "single-problem novels". In that period, indeed, YA books mainly dealt with kids' experience in high school and the adolescent drama of being misunderstood. For example, Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* was published in 1970, and it was immediately followed by the anonymously authored *Go Ask Alice (1971)*, which dealt with the issue of drug addiction among teens. This trend then continued into the 1980s when episodic series books such as *Sweet Valley High* (1983-2003) and *The Baby-Sitters Club (1986-2000) began to come out*. Unlike the 1940s, however, these new romance novels were not known by their authors' names, but, instead, by the titles of the book series they belonged to. Cart (2016) observes that, significantly, these sequences of books were not targeted at the traditional purchasers, that is to say librarians and teachers, but rather at the teens themselves who had recently gained the opportunity to buy their books in the chain bookstores that began to open in the shopping malls, or what Cart (2016) refers to as their "modern mecca". Anyway, once these books degenerated into "issue novels," mainly dealing with topics such

as divorce, rape, and drug abuse, teens grew tired of reading such cliched stories. As a result, by the late 1980s, the market was saturated with this kind of books that usually conveyed a moral lesson for young people in general. This is the reason why the 1980s welcomed in more genre fiction later in the decade, also known as popular fiction because of its mainstream appeal, mainly consisting of horror novels from Christopher Pike and the beginning of R.L. Stine's *Fear Street* series (1989).

Unlike what happened in the previous decades, however, the 1990s were rather a decline for young adults. In fact, even though this decade gave birth to some literary works that teens may still be reading today, there were statistically fewer people aged 12-18, and this was due to the low birth rates that were recorded in the mid-1970s. Besides the lack of actual readers, another issue threatened the future development of YA literature. As Cart (2016) points out, the taxpayer revolts that characterized the US between the late 1970s and early 1980s posed a threat to the purchasing power of schools and markets, which had been the traditional market for YA books since the birth of the genre, because the budgets lowered. As a result, while the market was previously 80-90 percent institutional, it later became only 50-60 percent institutional. Schools and libraries, therefore, were replaced by the retail. Mall bookstores started to emerge, and as Cart (2016) claims, the problem was that these new super-size and super-furnished shops considered YA literature to be middle school literature, so that a new market for younger young adults was established, and if publishers wanted to follow the way of money, they had no option but to accept and actually propose the introduction of protagonists aged 10-14. Nevertheless, by the middle of the 1990s YA literature had made up ground to such an extent that it became one of the most vital and innovative areas of publishing, Cart (2016) shows. The teen population was growing so quickly that it increased 16.6 percent from 1990 to 2000, and a baby boom in 1992 resulted in a renaissance among teen readers (Strickland, 2015). Therefore, because of the growing rate of people aged 12-18 that characterized the last decade of the 20th century, the number of books being published for these readers started to rise unparalleled to any other time in history. For example, the sale of YA books increased by 23 percent from 1999 to 2005, industry analyst Albert Greco reports (YALSA, 2008). As a result, the bookstores could not but recognize the emergence of a new generation of consumers, and they started to create separate YA departments. According to Cart (2016), the second "Golden Age of YA Literature" began in 2000. The book industry, indeed, began marketing directly to teens for the first time at the turn of the century. Huge YA sections appeared in bookstores, targeting and welcoming teens to discover their new own genre. Publishers began to create stand-alone YA divisions or imprints such as Avon's Tempest and Simon and Schuster's Pulse. A significant trend in the field was the emergence of the so-called "chick lit," which began in England in 1996 with the publication of the adult novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding, and later arrived in America in 1999 with the publication of *Angus,*

Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging by Louise Rennison. These works gave birth to an actual literary phenomenon that quickly became known as "mean girl lit". A perfect American example of this category is Cecily Von Ziegesar's *Gossip Girl*, which debuted in 2002. This phenomenon was in itself emblematic of three other trends that continue to impact the YA literary field today, Cart (2016) argues. First, it was an example of the new kind of commercial fiction, that is to say fiction that is generally produced without any consideration for the traditional institutional market, but rather entirely aiming at meeting the needs of the retail market. Second, the series carried with it significant crossover potential. In other words, though published as YA, it showed widespread appeal to readers in their twenties and early thirties. Third, it was produced by a book packager, Alloy Entertainment in this case, which is a company that produces books for publishers. In Cart's (2016) words, it is a sort of "fiction factory" that provides publishers with ready-to-publish manuscripts on the basis of the ideas and projects that writers propose them, and it appears to be a vital force in the current field of YA literature.

Despite the incredible success of the *Gossip Girl* and other "mean girl" series, these types of stories were soon put into the shade by the advent of the *Harry Potter* books (1997-2007), surely one of the most remarkable phenomena in the history of publishing, as Cart (2016) puts it. J. K. Rowling's books gave way to a new era of speculative fiction, which became the most important trend of the first decade of the 21st century. In fact, these books inspired a whole generation of fantasy series writers. From their publication onwards, every new book belonging to the category was likely to be part of a series and it needed to be at least about 300-400 pages long. The following trend was to be found in the success of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* vampire saga (2005-2020), which began a subgenre of paranormal romance novels, but if *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* were responsible for revolutionary changes in the field of YA literature, a third series threatened to eclipse those works, that is to say Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* futuristic trilogy (2008-2020). Through these books, readers were reintroduced to the dystopian novel, which is the same field the following *Divergent* books (2011-2018) by Veronica Roth belong to, even though according to Cart (2016), Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) had already played a role in the rediscovery of the dystopian novel. Many scholars have wondered why paranormal and dystopian stories are actually capable of truly engaging with teens. As YA author, Ph.D. and cognitive science scholar Jennifer Lynn Barnes puts it:

> Just like adolescence is between childhood and adulthood, paranormal, or other, is between human and supernatural. Teens are caught between two worlds, childhood and adulthood, and in YA, they can navigate those two worlds and sometimes dualities of other worlds. (quoted in Strickland, 2015)

Today, thanks to the unsettling success of fantasy subgenres and series, YA fiction is enjoying a real literary flourishing. However, the newest trend among the YA field seems to welcome in a return to the genre's roots, that is to say the novel of contemporary realism, according to Cart (2016). The birth of this phenomenon can be traced, for example, in the emergence of authors such as John Green, who became known in 2005 when his first novel *Looking for Alaska* was published. As Cart (2016) ironically underlines, after all, his work seems to have something in common with the above mentioned series *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent:* all of them have been turned into blockbuster movies. From this perspective, 'YA has truly become the tail that wags the dog of publishing' (Cart, 2016, p. 9). Garcia (2013) seems to agree with Cart's view when he explains that the YA publishing model of serialization was certainly useful in responding to teens' desire for books that were always new, but the rapid proliferation of book series seemed to be more focused on profit than on the readers' experiences. Therefore, even though the serialization of YA books seemed to take off especially once the profits of the *Harry Potter* series became clear, current trends in YA literature appear to favor stand-alone novels instead, or non-serial books. Moreover, Cart (2016) points out how part of today's YA success is also due to its expanding audience. In fact, research shows that adults are currently responsible for more than 65 percent of YA books purchases. This means that some YA novels can have a sort of multigenerational appeal, which leads Cart (2016) to refer to them as "crossover books". As a result, a new subgenre has emerged within the field, known as "New Adult Literature," which mainly addresses young people in their twenties.

However, while the audience and content of YA books are currently expanding and changing, there is another area of the field that seems to be unwilling to make progress, that is to say multicultural literature, Cart (2016) argues. Statistics shows that from 2000 to 2010 in the US the Asian population grew from 10.2 million to 14.7 million, the Black population grew from 34.7 million to 38.9 million, and the Hispanic population grew from 35.3 million to 50.5 million (Cart, 2016). In 2012, Census figures already showed that young people aged 10-18 represented 13.6 percent of the total American population, but more than 16 percent of them were African American, 12.2 percent were Asian, and 17.7 percent were Latino, so that all put together, the minorities accounted for almost half of the American youth population. Considering the current rate of population change at the time, it was projected that in 2018 teenagers of color were likely to become the majority of American youth population. Given these shocking numbers and the revolutionary social changes they foresaw, what Cart (2016) wondered in his speech for the 2016 Fay B. Kaigler Children's Book Festival is whether the YA publishing industry was then really providing its readers with a realistic type of literature in terms of diversity and complexity. As publisher and co-owner of LEE & LOW BOOKS, a children's book publisher that focuses on diversity, Jason Low argues, 'Diversity is the missing piece of the

puzzle in books for young readers' (quoted in Cart, 2016, p. 10). Just to give an example of this lack of diverse voices and characters, the Cooperative Children's Book Center carried out an analysis of the 3500 books it received from publishers in 2015 and results showed that 105 were by Asian Americans, 98 were by African Americans, 78 were by Latinos, and only 8 were by American Indians. According to Cart (2016), the presence of very few minority authors in the YA field may be mostly due, above all, to the lack of editors of color. As evidence of this, almost all editors who took part in the *Publishers Weekly's* annual survey that was published in 2015 self-identified as white, Rachel Deahl (2016) reports. In addition, Cart (2016) points out that there are not enough writers of color who aim at writing books for diverse audiences, and, more importantly, he has encountered a lack of demand for diverse books in general, which means that teens, in their turn, lack an awareness of the field. For all these reasons, an organization called "We Need Diverse Books" was formed after a protest campaign that was inspired by the lack of diversity among the speakers who were present at the 2014 edition of the annual fan convention known as BookCon. According to its mission statement, it 'advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people' (Cart, 2016, p. 10). Anyway, in spite of the very slow growth that multicultural literature is experiencing, Cart (2016) admits that there is at least one area of diversity that is improving, that is to say LGBTQ+ literature. The first YA novel with gay content was John Donovan's *I'll Get There It Better Be Worth the Trip.* It was published in 1969, and from that moment on, the genre has gone through a quite steady period of growth until reaching the 21st century, when the speed at which books with gay characters are being published has incredibly increased. For example, just in 2015 more than sixty-four books with LGBTQ+ content were published, that is twenty-four books more than those which were published in the entire decade of the 1980s and only eleven less than those which were published throughout the 1990s, Cart (2016) underlines. LGBTQ+ literature, thus, definitely appears to be a flourishing category through which lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender fluid, genderqueer, and intersex characters are finally being included in the literary field for the first time in history. To conclude, all these changes and trends act as hallmarks of an expanding field that is continuously growing in the direction of an ever greater diversity of authors and characters across racial, ethnic, and sexual identities. In this respect, Cart (2016, p. 1) has defined YA literature as 'a notably restless art, a dynamic, risk-taking literature.' Many literary achievements and prizes have shown the real value of YA literature, proving that there is no reason to consider it as inferior to adult literature in general. After almost a century of existence, it has gained much literary credit, demonstrating that it needs to exist to grant teenage readers the books they love and need to read.

1.2. What exactly is YA literature?

YA literature is a literary category that has attracted much criticism because of many different reasons. However, the main area of criticism has to do with the difficulty in defining the genre itself. "Young Adult," in fact, is a vague label that has been placed on literature for teenagers in the last several decades, but, as Chris Crowe (2001) points out, it exists mostly for marketing reasons. In this sense, finding some sort of label to define this book category was necessary in order to make sure that books for teenagers went into the hands of teenagers, which was what publishers and librarians were struggling to figure out how to do at the time when the label was created. Nowadays, despite the incredible level of popularity that this genre has been able to reach, the term "Young Adult Literature" has not been clarified yet, so that the main problem for scholars is what to call these books. Several scholars have tried to come up with a definition of YA literature. Some of them have focused on the content. For example, Kelly Byrne Bull claims that YA literature 'consists of a wealth of genres that are written for and about adolescents. YAL is rich and complex, using authentic language and addressing issues that are relevant to contemporary adolescent readers' (quoted in Antonella Klinkhamer, 2012, p. 10). Similarly, Joyce Stallworth believes that 'YAL contains themes, plots, language, and characters that are consistent with young adults' experiences' (Klinkhamer, 2012, p. 10). Other scholars, instead, have taken into account the role of the audience. This is the case of Jean E. Brown and Elaine C. Stephens, who state that:

> Young adult literature may be defined as books written specifically for and about youth. It is a body of literature written for an adolescent audience that is, in turn, about the lives, experiences, aspirations, and problems of young people. In other words, the term "young adult literature" describes the primary audience for those works as well as the subject matter they explore. (Klinkhamer, 2012, p. 11)

Anyway, most scholars tend to agree on the fact that while YA literature can appear in the form of different styles and genres, teenage life in all its forms has to be the main and key subject. After examining YA literature in terms of style and structure, Pam B. Cole, Professor of English Education and Literacy at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia, has elaborated the following list describing the main genre characteristics and themes:

1. The protagonist is a teenager.
2. Events revolve around the protagonist and his/her struggle to resolve conflict.
3. The story is told from the viewpoint and in the voice of a young adult.
4. Literature is written by and for young adults.
5. Literature is marketed to the young adult audience.
6. Story does not have a "storybook" or "happily-ever-after" ending, a characteristic of children's books.

7. Parents are noticeably absent or at odds with young adults.
8. Themes address coming-of-age issues (e.g. maturity, sexuality, relationships, drugs).
9. Books contain under 300 pages, closer to 200. (Klinkhamer, 2012, p. 13)

In a few words, YA literature is likely to be characterized by adolescent protagonists who face coming-of-age moments in their lives, which are told in a contemporary narrative style that might be appealing to teenagers themselves, and taking the form of various literary genres.

However, after the occurrence of the first ever Young Adult Literature Convention that took place at the London Film and Comic Con in July 2014, many scholars have been trying to give an answer to the following question: what exactly is it that makes a book "Young Adult"? The most recurrent doubts revolve around four main issues: is "Young Adult" the same as "Teen"? And what about the "New Adult" category? Who is Young Adult Literature read by? What are its requirements and restrictions? According to Cart, 'the term "young adult literature" is inherently amorphous' (YALSA, 2008) because it is made of the terms "Young Adult" and "literature," which are dynamic terms that change according to how culture and society change. The term "Young Adult" was coined by the Young Adult Library Services Association during the 1960s to represent the 12-18 age range. At that time, this literary label referred to realistic fiction, which means that YA books were not set in an imagined world, but rather in the real, contemporary world that readers could see around them. This definition of "Young Adult" later expanded in more recent years so as to include readers as young as ten and as old as twenty-five. As regards the term "literature," it has expanded from the conventional definition of fiction to new forms of literary nonfiction and poetry. Moreover, Cart (YALSA, 2008) explains that because of the prominence that visual communication has recently gained, the pictorial dimension has entered the literary field too. Examples of this phenomenon can be found in the many graphic novels, comics, and picture books that are currently being published. This means that even though YA literature used to be dismissed as a genre consisting of little more than "problem novels" and romances, since the mid-1990s, it has really come of age as literature, to the extent that it has begun following a creative path that was born from artistic experimentation.

Due to the quick spread of the generally accepted definition of YA literature as dealing with issues that might be of interest to the intended readers, which initially were young people aged approximately 12-18, the labels "Teen" and "Young Adult" have been often used interchangeably, but scholars actually divide themselves according to two differing standpoints. As children's books critic Imogen Russell Williams (2014) clarifies, some scholars believe that the two labels basically refer to the same age group, and others claim that while both labels refer to age categories, "Teen" covers the 12-14 category and "Young Adult" is rather aimed at the 14+ category. According to this view, YA literature is more likely to deal openly with hot topics such as sex and drug or alcohol abuse, or tackle important issues that concern adult relationships in general. Therefore, YA books are

more likely to feature the kind of language that is used by adults, including swearing too. However, Williams (2014) underlines that the acceptability of the F-word varies from publisher to publisher, since its inclusion could cost the success of the entire work. As she explains, this can be frustrating for YA authors who claim that since teenagers tend to swear in real life, it is difficult to create credible voices for them without using this kind of language which, anyway, is a recurring feature of most movies and video games. Moreover, there is another problem resulting from the implied association existing between the YA label and teens that has to do with the perception they have of themselves. As Crowe (2001) reports, in the December 1999 issue of *Voices from the Middle* Chris Crutcher illustrates that this is a troublesome way of identifying teenagers who usually want to be seen as nothing less than adults, so any label that classify them or what they read as something less than adult does not seem to be acceptable for them.

As regards the "New Adult" label, it refers to a very recent genre that has emerged over the past few years. The phrase was coined by St. Martin's Press in 2009 so as to describe a specific category featuring characters in their late teens and early twenties, that is to say the following age category up from YA. In other words, it is what YA author Non Pratt has referred to as "YA with sexytimes" during the first Young Adult Literature Convention, which was held in London in 2014 (Williams, 2014). New Adult books, indeed, usually explore students' difficulties in leaving home, becoming independent and adapting to the new context of college life, but they also tend to deal frankly with sex. The birth of this New Adult genre was caused by the emergence of a new category of readers made of young people in their twenties who had to move back in with their parents because of the terrible economic situation that hit the country, Cart (2016) explains. By doing so, these people had to postpone their professional lives as adults until their early thirties and went through some sort of a second adolescence. Moreover, recent research has demonstrated that the brain actually continues to grow until the early- to mid-twenties, so that nowadays, as psychologist Robert Epstein puts it (Cart, 2016, p. 9), 'Thirty is the new twenty and most Americans now believe a person isn't an adult until age twenty-six.' As a result, YA literature had to work on its content and adapt it so as to reach not only older teens, but the new adults as well.

Anyway, what books count as Young Adult and what count as New Adult is still ambiguous, and their readership is equally hard to define. The correspondence between the intended and the actual audience is, in fact, another aspect of YA literature that is very much contested among scholars. The debate surrounding the readership is provoked by the fact that YA books do not simply sell to a specific age group, but rather speak to the interests of several generations of readers, so much so that "Young Adult" definitely does not mean 'a solely young adult readership' (Williams, 2014). In particular, Garcia (2013) points out that YA books have been increasingly captivating adult readers,

educators and literary critics. As a result, the age categories that had previously defined YA books' readers in terms of age range have become amorphous, as Cart (2016) puts it. The main reason why YA literature is likely to have gained popularity among readers of all ages lies in the fact that these works, even though they deal with teen experiences, do not speak exclusively to teenagers, but rather to the greater human condition in general. As demonstration of this, Garcia (2013) reports the results of a 2012 Bowker Market Research Report, which found that the majority (55 percent) of YA consumers are actually 18 years old or older. This report, better known as the Bowker Report, even clarifies that 78 percent of the customers are typically buying books for their own reading, so not for children, younger relatives or friends. In addition, the report indicates that the biggest age group buying YA books in the 21st century is made of adults aged 30-44, which make up 30 percent of all YA book purchasers in general, meaning that this tendency is not typical of young readers who have only recently become adults. On the contrary, actual adults are the primary consumers of YA books. However, the fact that YA literature's primary audience consists of adults and not of young adults, as the label defining the genre seems to suggest, has serious implications for the genre itself. In fact, because of the important role that this older audience plays in the market field, authors and publishers are likely to revise their decisions in terms of book content and marketing strategies, Garcia (2013) explains. The strong presence of adults, thus, is necessarily going to affect publishing decisions because the interests and needs of this age category need to be taken into account. As Garcia points out, this recent trend leads to a fundamental question: 'what happens when youth culture becomes mainstream culture?' (2013, p. 17). According to him, the sharp rise in popularity of YA books among adults, which has been referred to as the "crossover" phenomenon, is problematic because YA books are likely to end up following the market demand instead of young people's needs, which is the underlying principle of the genre. In this way, these works might distance themselves from their original intents, that is to say expressing the feelings of teens, and rather move in the direction of profit.

Despite the profound changes that YA literature has gone through over time, in her thesis on the development of YA literature Chelsea Elmore (2017) shows how it has been able to establish some specific standards for the category and maintain them consistently over the last two decades or so. For example, certain characteristics have become so intrinsic to the genre that their very presence allows a novel to be categorized as YA rather than adult literature. As Elmore (2017) reports, scholars Maia Pank Mertz and David England have classified these recurring features and created a list in their article entitled "The Legitimacy of American Adolescent Fiction". This list was then further refined by Robert C. Small, Jr. and appeared in his article "The Literary Value of the Young Adult Novel" as follows:

1. Adolescent fiction will involve a youthful protagonist.
2. Adolescent fiction often employs a point of view which presents the adolescent's interpretation of the events in the story.
3. Adolescent fiction is categorized by directness of exposition, dialogue, and direct confrontation between principal characters.
4. Adolescent fiction is characterized by structural conventions.
5. Main characters in adolescent fiction are highly independent in thought, action, and conflict resolution.
6. Adolescents are depicted as reaping the consequences of their actions and decisions.
7. Adolescent fiction will draw upon the author's sense of adolescent development and the concomitant attention to the legitimate concerns of adolescents.
8. Adolescent fiction strives for relevance by attempting to mirror current social attitudes and issues.
9. Adolescent fiction most often includes gradual, incremental, and ultimately incomplete "growth to awareness" on the part of the central character.
10. Adolescent fiction is, finally, hopeful. (Elmore, 2017 p. 35)

On the whole, what most scholars seem to agree on is the fact that the key element that cannot be missing in YA literature is an adolescent protagonist who will have to face many challenges throughout the novel so as to grow up and develop his/her interior self. As YA author Patrick Ness (2014) puts it, 'YA tends to be about finding your boundaries, testing them, learning where they are and how you exist within them.' In other words, it may help readers to figure out who they really are. However, Garcia (2013) shows that, unfortunately, YA literature does not simply tend to be about teenagers, but more specifically about white, affluent teenagers. In fact, it generally depicts the cultural practices and life styles of wealthy white adolescents, and by doing so, it reinforces them, leaving aside the life experiences of the many African American and Latino teenagers who cannot find themselves portrayed in the stories they read. Of course there are numerous YA authors that are contributing to the field by making multicultural settings and characters become more apparent and fostering young readers' awareness of the cultural diversity surrounding them. Nevertheless, Garcia (2013) underlines that the writers of and about youth of color that are actually recognized by the publishing industry can be easily listed in a single sentence, so it appears to be clear that there is a gap between the public endorsement of multicultural writers and all the rest of them. This gap results in troubling implications for teenagers themselves because by representing teenage characters, YA novels convey the possible definitions of what it means to be a teenager in today's society. As a result, if YA books only portray white protagonists, then the message coming from this contradictory depiction is that only white teenagers can be actual protagonists in real life, meaning that they should be in power.

1.3. From the "dark side" of YA literature to social activism narratives

YA authors are currently producing some of the bestselling books in the world, and this is incredible given that the intended readers are generally considered to be such a tough age group to

inspire and engage with. Nevertheless, many newly released books are subject to being challenged or even removed from libraries because of the uncomfortable topics they deal with, so much so that YA novels are now challenged more frequently than any other type of book, Cart (2016) points out. Many topics that are typically found in today's YA works, indeed, can have very sensitive and questionable subject matter, such as suicide and murder, gender confusion, rape, divorce, bullying and cyber-bullying. Aa a consequence, a recent concern has emerged about "bleak books" being released by YA publishers, as Crowe (2001) shows in his article on the problems with YA literature. What happened is that once these unpleasant realities became the subjects of the new YA literature, all books belonging to the category in general tended to be dismissed as "bleak books". The mainstream media, indeed, did not miss the opportunity to condemn the whole genre, claiming that 'teen sensibilities are too tender to be exposed to the unvarnished reality that YA books came to contain' (Cart, 2016, p. 4) from the mid-1990s onwards. It may be true that increasing numbers of books dealing with sex, violence, and death are being published, but as editor of children's books Richard Jackson puts it:

> When reviewers today worry about bleak stories, they are worrying on behalf of the audience about the readiness of young readers to face life's darkest corners. But in America there are kids living in those dark corners and they need our attention as much as the feisty, pert, athletic and popular youth so reassuring to adults. Even children in the sun will enter the darkness. They all need our tenderness. And we need our tenderness as art inspires us to feel it. (Cart, 2016, pp. 4-5)

In 2011, book critic Meghan Cox Gurdon wrote a controversial article in the *Wall Street Journal*, titled "Darkness Too Visible", which condemned the YA category and its popularity because of the recurring tropes that are being used in a genre that is supposed to be aimed at young people who are becoming adults. Gurdon (2011) claims that contemporary YA novels tend to expose a high level of violence, abuse, and obscenity that upsets teenagers, leading them to learn and actually reproduce these behaviors. In her article, the author describes a mother in the YA section of a bookstore who cannot really find anything to buy for her daughter because of the disturbing topics all the present books seem to deal with. In order to support her view, Gurdon (2011) cites examples of contemporary YA novels that are steeped in a surprising amount of violence as compared to the novels that used to be written in the past. Along the same lines, one of the first writers to note the increase in bleak YA novels was Sara Mosle, who wrote an article in the *New York Times Magazine* starting with the following words:

> Somewhere in America tonight, in a delicious rite of childhood, a teenager will curl up in a window seat or overstuffed sofa to devour a young-adult novel about murder, incest, rape or drug addiction. These are the subjects of a spate of recently published young-adult novels. (Crowe, 2001, p. 148)

Her argument against this alleged bleak trend in YA literature led to an outburst of similar generalizations about the current state of the whole field. Many scholars, indeed, have noticed that in teenage literature there has been a sort of trend toward 'stark, reality-based fiction' (Crowe, 2001, p. 148). As a consequence, YA novels consistently explore disturbing issues such as rape, mental illness, and murder. The journalist David Spitz, for instance, points out how books featuring inconvenient themes that had previously been ignored are actually replacing the usual happy endings and conventional underlying morals of the once popular teen novels known as "problem novels," which would obsess over some uncomfortable situation such as an accidental pregnancy for more than a hundred pages (Crowe, 2001, p. 148). Anyway, according to Marianne M. Jennings, Professor of legal and ethical studies at Arizona State University, YA literature is 'the trash that plants the destructive seeds of violence, theft, and sexual perversion in the still malleable minds of children' (Crowe, 2001, p. 148). This overly negative perception that keeps surrounding today's YA books constitutes a major problem for the whole field. As Crowe (2001) illustrates, certainly not all YA works are considered to be so irredeemably bleak, but all the negative generalizations about novels for teenagers have contributed to voice the criticism of those adults who were already worried that YA literature corrupts the young, and, unfortunately, this bad press has also caused concern among some people who previously had no problems at all with YA literature.

However, there have been many attempts on the part of scholars to explain the recent bleakness trend in YA books, but none of them has really managed to reconcile the critics. For example, Crowe (2001) suggests that the current trend towards hardcore literature may partly be a move to charm older teens and engage them into the YA category. In this way, YA authors would honestly tackle the darkest issues that teens are likely to face in their lives in order to gain their trust (Strickland, 2015). In other words, by dealing openly with uncomfortable themes such as identity struggles, sexual abuse, and drug or alcohol abuse, writers are actually meeting young people's needs and desires to read about what most affects them. When founding editor of PUSH David Levithan was helping developing the Scholastic Press' YA imprint in the late 1990s to attract new authors, he spoke directly with teens for about four years in order to find out what they wanted in their own literature. As the lead space and science writer for *CNN* Ashley Strickland (2015) reports, Levithan found that 'Teens wanted things that were real, that they connected with, it doesn't have to reflect reality directly. [For example,] they love *The Hunger Games* not because it's real in that it happens, but the emotions there are real, and it's very relatable.' It is commonly thought, in fact, that young people tend to struggle to see how literature can play a role in real life, so one simple strategy to succeed in engaging them and possibly making them understand the value of literature may lie in producing books that they can actually connect with. In general, when readers find a book that allows

them to connect with the situation described and the characters involved, they are more likely to enjoy what they are reading. This may thus be a possible reason why today's new teen novels are honest, direct, and fearlessly hardcore. Another possible explanation is provided by Cart, who explains that some people in the media believe that R-rated books, which means books that are not suitable to be read by kids under 17 years old because of violence, offensive language or sexual activities, are a product of publishers' desperate efforts to lure teens, as he puts it, and bring them back to reading (Crowe, 2001). However, as Crowe (2001) points out, it follows that concerned adults tend to see the publishing industry personified as a dirty old man, approaching a group of teens and tempting them with obscene books. Market forces are definitely playing an important role in the whole phenomenon because scholars such as Crowe (2001) recognize that publishers are indeed releasing some very bleak books, but those depressing stories are not the only kind they are publishing. According to him, the problem is that the negative hype surrounding despair-inducing books has obscured the many other fine YA books that are being published each year, and the mainstream media is primarily responsible for this. For this reason, it is important to underline that today's YA market offers a wide range of books for all kinds of readers.

In addition, another issue that is important to explore, as director of communications for UNLV University Libraries Sean Kennedy (2019) suggests, is whether there has been really a change in YA literature in terms of darker themes being explored today and not in the past. As Crowe puts it, 'Bleak stories are nothing new' (2001, p. 148). In fact, the literary canon consists of many very bleak novels, among which there also are *Oedipus Rex*, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, or *The Grapes of Wrath*, and, nevertheless, it is not considered as bleak as such novels are. In other words, it would be unfair to categorize the entire canon as dark, negative, and corruptive based on a few famous stories, Crowe (2001) explains. In Amanda Melilli's view (Kennedy, 2019), the Head of UNLV's Teacher Development and Resources Library, what most people are reacting to is the fact that there are just more books being published for the YA market than ever before, but, in reality, throughout the whole history of YA literature there have been stories dealing with young adults and their struggles in difficult situations. As an example, she mentions S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) and the traumatic issues it deals with so as to show that from the very beginning of the genre, books written for teens have actually dealt with uncomfortable issues. What has changed is the fact that now there is a larger market for teen readers and there is more space for writing diverse stories. In this sense, it is possible to claim that today readers can see a larger variety of difficult issues being addressed in YA literature, but this does not mean that darker themes are actually being more explored now as compared to the past. Moreover, the presence of a larger market also allows for a variety of other

stories to be told as well, such as comedies, historical fiction, and fantasies, so that it is important to understand that bleak stories are not monopolizing the YA literary market.

Common themes in the most challenged YA books tend to revolve around racism, sex, mental illness, drugs or alcohol abuse, and violence in all its forms. However, despite being considered disturbing topics, scholars insist that it is essential to see the value in discussing precisely these topics with young adults. In particular, Melilli (Kennedy, 2019) claims that there are many reasons to encourage young readers to explore literature on difficult-to-discuss topics. First of all, it is important for teenagers to read stories about people who can offer different worldviews from their own because of the fact that our communities are becoming increasingly diverse. Therefore, reading can be helpful in order to understand how to positively engage with people who are different from us and build a meaningful relationship with them. For example, Melilli mentions hearing Angie Thomas talking about her book *The Hate U Give,* which was present in the list of the ten most challenged books of 2017. During this talk, Thomas revealed that today's communities have a desperate need of decency, 'but decency requires empathy, and empathy requires imagination' (Kennedy, 2019). According to writers such as Thomas, diverse stories have the power to feed our imaginations and allow us to develop empathy for people who are different from us, and this may ultimately lead to build new communities based on foundations of decency. In other words, these books are valuable precisely because young adults today are actually living in complex societies, so reading about the traumatic experiences they are likely to go through during their life can have a positive impact on them. In fact, Melilli (Kennedy, 2019) truly supports the idea that these types of stories are being written because books can help teenagers to feel less alone and make sense of the confusing world they live in. As she puts it, 'We would all love to live in a society where traumatic issues do not exist, but ignoring the stories does not make the issues go away. It just makes people feel more isolated' (Kennedy, 2019). Certainly not all teenage readers are ready for heavy stories, but this does not mean that such stories should not exist or should not be made accessible. Some teenagers, indeed, may be mature enough to read them and benefit from this reading experience. It is up to parents, librarians, or teachers in general to know books and to direct young readers towards the kind of literature for which they are best suited. From this perspective, challenged books can be recommended as readings as long as they match the needs and interests of the readers, or better put, as long as they appear to be relevant for the reader at that point in his/her life. As chair of the Banned Books Week National Committee Judith Platt has stated on the occasion of the 2015 Banned Books Week, 'young people need to be allowed the freedom to read widely, to read books that are relevant for them and to be able to make their own choices' (ALA, 2015).

Many YA novels that have entered the most banned and the most challenged books lists are increasingly being contested by countless scholars, but as Melilli puts it 'a frequently challenged book is not inherently different from an unchallenged book. It just means that it was popular enough that a lot of people read it and objected to its content enough times to make a list' (Kennedy, 2019). This is exactly what happened with most of the extremely popular YA books such as the *Harry Potter* series, the *Twilight* series, and *The Hunger Games* trilogy, which were eagerly consumed by American teenagers. In the same way, *Thirteen Reasons Why* was published in 2007, and when it was adapted into a Netflix series it became the most challenged book of 2018. Melilli (Kennedy, 2019) underlines that when a book appears in the list of banned books, it is important to consider that what people are actually objecting to is the topics it deals with, not necessarily the book itself. In a way, the level of visibility that the title receives serves as a key indicator of whether or not it will be labeled as a banned or challenged book, she argues. Anyway, since young adults can see themselves reflected in YA novels, banning them means to negate their existence as human beings. As Melilli (Kennedy, 2019) explains, teenagers may interpret the banning action as a way of telling them that if they are experiencing certain types of issues, then there is something wrong with them that must not be discussed. In other words, it creates shame among them. This is especially true when books are banned because they portray specific identities, namely LGBTQ+ identities. In these cases, the banning action sends the message that there is no place for such teens in their communities. In addition, it also denigrates young people in general by telling them that they are not capable of handling difficult topics, even though they are exposed to these issues in every aspect of their lives, particularly in the news and social media. As Melilli (Kennedy, 2019) puts it, 'I understand that we want to protect the teens in our communities from the world's ugliness, but that cannot be done by removing the resources that help them explore and understand these issues in developmentally appropriate ways.' Many YA writers seem to share this view. For example, Native American writer Sherman Alexie (2011) declares: 'I write books for teenagers because I vividly remember what it felt like to be a teen facing everyday and epic dangers. I don't write to protect them. It's far too late for that. I write to give them weapons - in the form of words and ideas - that will help them fight their monsters. I write in blood because I remember what it felt like to bleed.' Therefore, banning books can do young readers no good. As Melilli (Kennedy, 2019) argues, 'Banning books is just a fake fix that makes "us" adults feel better. It is a convenient way to make us feel less powerless in a world where we have no real control over what is happening to our kids.' In other words, banning a troubling book does not eliminate the issues it deals with from our reality. It just removes a resource that can help young people better comprehend them.

YA literature is a genre that has definitely managed to capture the specific interests of the teen audience through the development of many different subgenres. In fact, today the options for YA readers are endless. However, scholars have found that the current trends in YA literature focus around three main categories: escape (from life or to new worlds), romance, and social issues. If YA books are generally meant for young people between the age of 12 and 18 years, this means that the current target audience for YA novels is Generation Z, a social group defined by the use of technology, multiculturalism, and a focus on one's own career, as communications coordinator for the Center for Migration Studies of New York Emma Winters (2019) illustrates in her article on the influence of Gen Z on YA literature. As she puts it, 'While this generation, along with the millennials, has been derided as sensitive "snowflakes," they are proving themselves to be resilient and thoughtful activists' (Winters, 2019). For example, on February 14, 2018, a 19-year-old former student opened fire on students and teachers at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, killing 17 people and wounding many other. After the mass shooting, the Parkland students led a historic march for gun control, known as the March for Our Lives. This is just one of the many examples of marches and protests organized by young students against gun violence. Among other social issues, Gen Z members have been recently marching together with the Black Lives Matter movement, supporting women and LGBTQ+ people in their quest for equality, fighting for ensuring access to mental health resources and making their voices heard in the 2018 midterm elections. Because of the actual involvement of young people in activism, YA literature is changing in its content, following the recent interest in social justice issues on the part of its intended readers. An example of such a change can be found in *Dry* (2018), a dystopian novel in which the authors, Neal and Jarrod Shusterman, explore the issue of climate change. It is a survival story set in California after the state has run out of water. The survivors are Alyssa, her younger brother, Garrett, and her neighbor, Kelton. Despite their desperate attempts to survive, they eventually become dehydrated and a blazing fire breaks out, moving faster than they can run, so that it finally surrounds them. However, although Alyssa is holding a loaded gun, she does not kill herself. Instead, a helicopter appears and the pilot showers the three protagonists with water coming from the nearby reservoir they had been trying to reach. They all manage to drink the water and they even spit it into each other's mouths, and the book ends with California beginning to return to normal. According to Winters (2019), when tackling an issue such as climate change, the temptation to lose hope can be really strong, but yet, the novel provides the readers with an image of hope rather than despair. As Alyssa says at the end of the novel:

> Wasn't it Jacqui who told us that the human body is sixty percent water? Well, now I know what the rest is. The rest is dust, the rest is ash, it's sorrow and it's grief. … But above all that, *in spite of* all that, binding us together … is hope. And joy. And a wellspring of all the things that still might be. (Shusterman, p. 274)

Alyssa is thus making clear the message of the book, telling the readers directly the lesson to be drawn from what they have read, and in Winters' view (2019), this kind of earnestness is precisely what is needed to work effectively for social justice. She underlines the fact that the novel deals with an issue that is currently affecting the readers' lives without using metaphors or fictional time and places, so it is directly addressing climate change as it is happening in real life. In fact, in 2018 a real fire, known as Camp Fire, actually erupted in Northern California's Butte County, killing at least 85 people, so that it is now referred to as the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California's history.

However, today's YA books such as *Dry* are not the first of their kind. YA literature has dealt with serious topics for decades, starting with gang violence in *The Outsiders (*1967) and drug abuse in *Go Ask Alice* (1971), moving on to feminism in Latina culture in *The House on Mango Street* (1984), sexual assault in *Speak* (1999) and finally racial justice in *Bronx Masquerade* (2002), just to give a few examples. Basically, there is a whole subgenre of YA "social problem" narratives. More recently, indeed, YA social problem narratives are taking the form of social activism narratives, that is to say books about protests. For example, Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, which remained for 100 weeks on the New York Times Best Seller List and was even made into a movie, is one of the most recent YA novels that have contributed to forging the way for YA social activism narratives. Starr, the protagonist, is an African American teenager who witnesses with her own eyes the racist shooting of her childhood friend Khalil on the part of a police officer. The loss that she experiences makes her reflect on the effects of silence and leads her to speak out about police brutality, joining and actually leading a protest. While at the beginning Starr is reluctant to testify about what happened, she later comes to understand that her voice is a powerful tool to spread the truth and she finally resolves not to stay silent anymore. The novel thus represents the protest as a meaningful action to make a change in society and Starr's voice becomes a weapon in the fight for justice. Exactly as *Dry*, this novel states exactly what it means because Starr's final words are: 'People are realizing and shouting and marching and demanding. They're not forgetting. I think that's the most important part. Khalil, I'll never forget. I'll never give up. I'll never be quiet. I promise.' (Thomas, p. 633). All things considered, in these days we need YA novels because they are sincere about the world surrounding us. These books say what they mean and in doing so they invite us to acknowledge today's issues and possibly do something to make a change. Some YA books even call us to activism, for example by coming together as a community and practicing

solidarity outside in the streets. As Winters (2019) puts it, 'Young adult literature has a lot to say about social justice and we all need to hear it.' Certainly *YA literature* is not the only popular field that is actually trying to make sense of the world, dealing with the countless injustices and obstacles that impede change. Many books, songs, TV shows and movies, in fact, are trying to do that, but YA literature offers an earnestness and hopefulness that can be rarely found elsewhere, and this is precisely what makes readers really want to care. For this reason, YA literature might act as a doorway towards larger reflections on current sociocultural issues.

1.4. Speculative fiction and the rise of dystopian literature

Nowadays, the majority of young readers are especially attracted by speculative fiction or make-believe genres such as adventure, fantasy, science fiction, paranormal or supernatural fiction. However, Professor Sean P. Connors, who teaches courses on YA literature and graphic novels at the University of Arkansas, points out that many scholars belittle YA novels belonging to the genre of speculative fiction as merely genre fiction. As he puts it:

> Critics occasionally deride speculative fiction, an umbrella term used to refer to a range of genres, including science fiction (SF), fantasy, utopian and dystopian fiction, as genre fiction with the result being that they dismiss it as a form of entertainment. The cultural expectations that have historically accompanied young adult literature, namely, that it must perform a didactic function, coupled with its status as a commodity, subject it to additional stigmas and mischaracterizations. (Connors, 2013, p. 146)

In fact, since the beginning of the category, YA literature has most commonly been written with the underlying intention of teaching something. YA books were thus meant to teach a specific lesson or behavior to the intended readers. This method of writing with a purpose in mind is known as didacticism. As Elmore (2017) explains, didactic literature typically targets the young minds because they are considered to be malleable, so they can still be subject to change. As she illustrates, the didactic style of YA literature is particularly evident in the earlier stages of the genre, especially in the extremely didactic works that were written before the 1960s. At that time, literature was mainly used to teach young people how to behave, so many parents and teachers used that kind of books with the aim of shaping and correcting kids' behavior, showing them how they should act in order to become good citizens. As a result, the teenage novels of that time, known as "junior novels," tended to be considered as safe readings since they were not dealing with real teen issues, but simply with the issues that adults deemed as appropriate for their children to know. The didactic aim has been severely questioned, however, during the 1970s. After that decade, YA novels were no longer written as adolescent guidebooks for learning how to behave properly. Instead, they began dealing with serious issues, even by addressing taboo concepts that had never been tackled in previous literature

for teens. According to Elmore (2017), three major works that inspired change in the YA literary field were *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970) and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999). These novels were considered inappropriate readings for teenagers because of the content they proposed, namely sex, violence, profanity and dishonesty. Regardless, such content was what led future writers to make revolutionary adjustments in novels for teens, both in terms of subject matter and character development, implementing realistic depictions of teenage life. These changes later inspired a whole new framework for the YA category and most YA writers started to increasingly write books that presented true-to-life issues and topics.

YA literature has gone through significant change since the publication of the previously mentioned groundbreaking novels *The Catcher in the Rye, Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret,* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower.* YA authors have now begun addressing authentic teen issues and fears through various subgenres in the YA category. In particular, although common teen issues and problems are still being discussed through the so-called "problem novels," Elmore (2017) suggests that the most recent trend in YA literature is dystopian novels. In fact, the increasing number of both problem novels and dystopian novels has generated a renewed focus on the teenage readers' needs, but it is mainly the quite recent appearance of dystopian novels, starting already in 1993 with Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, and then going on until the 21st century with Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* in 2008*,* and Veronica Roth's *Divergent* in 2011, that has especially caught young readers' attention. These types of novels, indeed, have really managed to connect with young people in a way that has never happened before. Huge publicity surrounded them throughout the years following their first release, and they have all recently inspired film adaptions. As Elmore (2017, p. 1) puts it, 'They are, in a sense, a good representation of the young adult literary genre as a whole in relation to the 21st century.' The major traits of a YA fiction novel outlined by Maia Mertz and David English in their 1983 article are still applicable in order to define why these critically acclaimed novels qualify as YA literature. However, the genre has suffered drastic change before reaching its present state. Changes are common in almost all literary genres, but in this case, it is important to acknowledge them because of the rapid rate at which the category has gone through such transformations. Certainly dystopian societies, heroic characters, violent scenes, and revolutions are common features of YA dystopian literature, but as Elmore points out (2017, p. IV), 'the genre of young adult literature has grown from a didactic category made of problem novels and taboo themes into a mimetic vision of modern life by way of dystopian fiction.' As she illustrates, according to the idea of mimetic realism that has been explored in detail by theorist Matthew Potolsky, any work of art, including literature books, tends to represent the truth in reality. By applying the mimetic theory to recent trends in YA literature, it might thus be argued that YA dystopian novels are not depicting fantasy worlds. Instead,

they are actually portraying nowadays society. It follows that the recent increased interest in dystopian literature may be related to real ongoing issues that can actually be encountered in today's modern world. In other words, although the dystopian world represented in the novels may seem unrealistic, mimetic theory suggests that the authors rather describe an existing reality, even though they are selective in choosing what to present to the readers. As a result, the real reason behind teens' unexpected interest in dystopian literature may lie in the fact that the fictional worlds portrayed in the novels are less fictional than they are considered to be, so much so that young readers are able to recognize them as a representation of real life.

Elmore (2017) argues that assuming that teens enjoy YA dystopias for their action-packed plot, therefore, is probably incorrect. Many explanations have been given for young readers' interest in the genre, but the two explanations that have been most supported by scholars are both related to its therapeutic value. According to this view, teenagers have a special interest in fictional worlds, first because the characters' epic emotions match their own feelings, and second because through literature they can safely work through their own issues without facing them directly in real life. In a word, adolescent readers find therapy in dystopia. The idea of reading for closure, comfort, or guidance might lead to thinking of the once popular problem novels' aim, but the approach that is adopted in dystopian literature is different, Elmore (2017) explains. Eastern Illinois University Professor Melissa Ames (2013) argues that dystopian novels offer a unique form of bibliotherapy, which is the therapeutic experience that books can offer to those people who find a way to deal with their problems through reading. According to her, this experience cannot be lived through reading most problem novels that replicate teen issues in literary form and provide the intended readers with some sort of direct advice on what to do. In fact, because of their therapeutic purpose, these novels have not quite escaped the didactic framework entirely. In contrast, dystopian novels offer catharsis in subtler ways as compared to problem novels because they 'mirror and criticize reality, forcing readers to consider reality, ironically at the same time as they are escaping from it. Such narratives play upon deep, unresolvable fears from "reality," exaggerating (and sometimes solving) them in fictional scenarios' (Ames, 2013, p. 6). In other words, the main reason why YA dystopian literature works so well as a form of bibliotherapy for teenagers appears to be its mimetic portrayal of reality or, as Elmore (2017, p. 44) puts it, the fact that 'the text represents a shadow of reality rather than its harsh actuality.'

However, teenagers are not likely to connect to stories that are completely unrelatable to their everyday lives. For this reason, it is essential that dystopian works mimic what teenage readers know and constantly experience in real life. For example, Ames (2013) reports author of the dystopian *Uglies* trilogy Scott Westerfield's view, according to which the futuristic worlds portrayed in YA dystopian fiction strongly resemble the reality in which the teenagers are living in. According to him,

for example, these works can connect with adolescent readers because they portray the high school experience as a sort of dystopia. As he describes it, 'Bound by the rules of teachers, parents and society, with little power over your own existence, life as a teenager can feel like living in an authoritarian state' (Ames, 2013, p. 9). Many other types of dystopian plots or character struggles can be explained in terms of their similarity with teenage life experiences, so that a profound bond between the characters and the readers is established. However, as Elmore (2017) underlines, the key aspect is the fact that young people can see these similarities easily and establish a connection absently. Thus, introducing worlds that appear to be "other worlds" is a strategy that allows young readers to escape in the text and deal with specific issues in their lives absentmindedly, instead of openly discussing them, so that they can come to see their own existence more clearly. In a way, the fictional worlds that are depicted in literature can be considered imitations of the real world, so much so that the fantastical settings depicted in novels such as *The Giver, The Hunger Games*, and *Divergent* provide a safe place where it is possible to address personal troubles and learn to overcome them, all without ever thinking of such difficulties directly. In other words, reading dystopian novels allows adolescents to make more abstract parallels between their lives in the real world and the characters' lives within the imagined worlds. Although these types of books do not seem as relevant as problem novels, the connections made between fictional worlds and reality, so between characters and readers, are important to consider because the readers' interaction with the text can potentially affect their development positively or negatively. For example, in her article entitled "The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction," Raffaella Baccolini (2004) claims that since teens identify their own world with the fictional world found in dystopias, by observing a hopeful ending in the novel, they allow themselves to think that positive outcomes are actually possible in real life. Therefore, reading about the fictional conflict resolutions that take place in YA books can aid young readers in overcoming their own struggles.

The dystopian trend has recently gained so much popularity among young people that it has even expanded from YA fiction to films, TV series, music, and video games. However, as regards literature, scholars points out that there are many possible reasons why teenagers might enjoy dystopian fiction so much. For example, in their article "The Power of Pleasure Reading: The Case of Dystopias," Jeffrey Willhelm and Michael Smith (2016) analyze the four major reasons why teenage readers might show particular interest in dystopian novels:

> 1) the pleasure of losing oneself in a fictional world, separate from reality, 2) the pleasure of drawing connections between oneself and characters within the book— and learning how both should interact with others, 3) the pleasure of solving challenges within the book—while solving one's own challenges in the process, and 4) the pleasure of the work—of learning something and applying it in the real world (Elmore, 2017, pp. 40-41).

Despite all of these pleasure experiences, there is yet another theory expanding on the reasons why teens might be interested in dystopian novels. This theory can be rooted in the recent political atmosphere of the US. According to Ames (2013), for instance, the sudden adolescent interest with dystopian fiction is linked with the actual tragedy that took place in New York on September 11, 2011, and the following sociopolitical situation characterizing the country. She argues that teens' motivation to get involved in politics has increased since that event, which in turn has caused the dystopian trend in YA literature to gain recognition. Therefore, she interprets teenagers' fascination with futuristic governments and political unrest as closely connected with their wish for political involvement. As she puts it,

> the reading preferences of this generation indicate that this label of 'apolitical' may not be as fitting as some believe. In fact, the popularity of young adult dystopia, which is ripe with these political themes, suggests that this group is actually quite interested in these topics, although they often turn to the safe confines of fiction to wrestle with them. (Ames, 2013, p. 3)

It would appear, then, that teens who were previously uninterested in political issues have increasingly become more involved in current news concerning the society they live in. Although most young people did not actually experience that event, throughout her work, Ames (2013) attempts to prove that dystopian novels provide a therapeutic outlet for young readers to cope with the trauma regarding 9/11. As teens continuously deepen their knowledge about current issues existing in America through social media and the news, dystopian novels that deal with such issues provide an opportunity for young people to work through what they encounter in the real world. As Ames (2013, p. 7) explains,

> In terms of YA dystopias in particular, the fact that teenagers are eagerly consuming these themes suggests that they are seeking a safe space to wrestle with, and perhaps displace, the fears they play upon—fears that are set and, not unimportantly, *resolved* amidst the comfortable narrative threads of young adult narratives.

In brief, the sudden interest in YA dystopian literature appears to be, at least in part, due to the US political and economic environment. Therefore, teenagers read dystopian novels in order to deal with certain types of trauma and work through issues that are difficult to address directly. These novels can thus be considered as representing the current general political and cultural climate in America.

Many different types of connections between dystopian worlds and modern society exist, but they are not always easy to see. According to Elmore (2017), some of these hidden realities are obsession with technology and science, fear and distrust of government, and the increased level of violence. According to scholar Rachel Wilkinson (Elmore, 2017), obsession with science and

technology is possibly the main characteristic of dystopian settings. As evidence of this, she explains that the government structures in dystopian worlds tend to abuse technological and scientific advancements. As a consequence, a widespread fear in dystopian societies arises from being under constant surveillance and observation. As Elmore (2017) illustrates, the underlying truth is that people are frightened of what technology and science might do if they continue to progress at such an accelerated rate. However, fear of technology can take different forms. For example, some people may fear the scrutiny and control that comes with technological advancements because of the fact that text messages and phone calls can be traced. Moreover, passwords can be saved on web browsers, and social media such as Facebook have started using the users' data for advertisement purposes, so that once the user creates a social media account, all the advertisements and commercials then become tailored to his/her personal interests. This means that the creation of the internet has brought with it an obstruction to privacy that has generated a recent debate concerning our security while using the web. For example, Nicholas Carr (Elmore, 2017), whose works focus on the intersection between technology and culture, argues that the creation of the internet has altered the thinking processes through which the human brain works and absorbs information, so that all the technological advances that have taken place in the last years have drastically changed our life in terms of communication and thinking. As he puts it,

> Never has a communications system played so many roles in our lives—or exerted such broad influence over our thoughts—as the Internet does today. Yet, for all that's been written about the Net, there's been little consideration of how, exactly, it's reprogramming us.' (Elmore, 2017, p. 49)

MIT Technology Review writer David Byrne seems to agree with Carr's view on the consequences of technological advances, but his fear is more concerned with the social aspect of human connection, Elmore (2017) explains. In fact, he believes that the rise of technology has especially affected the way human beings interact with one another. In particular, he focuses on specific technological tools that have been recently developed in order to increase efficiency, namely driverless cars, automated checkout, online ordering, and home delivery, but have actually provoked a loss of human interaction. According to this view, 'The more science and machinery progresses, the less people will speak to each other' (Elmore, 2017, p. 50). Both Carr and Byrne fear the deep changes that the internet is bringing to the modern American society, especially because many people have become so dependent on scientific innovations that they seem to be unwilling to acknowledge the negative impact that technology might have on their life. However, dystopian novels that deal with the overuse of science and technology can act as a sort of mirror through which people can actually see the real issues characterizing modern society reflected in dystopian worlds. Precisely for

this reason, young readers can relate to dystopian stories that involve modern issues and imitate them in realistic terms.

Another characteristic of dystopian worlds is fear and distrust of government structure, which again is an issue that characterizes the real world too. As Elmore (2017) points out, although dystopian novels tend to depict extreme versions of reality, they nonetheless portray a shared fear among today's American citizens, that is the fear of government corruption. This is another issue that teenage readers can relate to because even though it is represented through a fictional world, it still reflects the truth in modern society. Finally, another characteristic of dystopian novels that also provokes fear in real life is the increased level of violence both in the media and in actual events. As Elmore (2017) points out, parents especially object to the early exposure to violence that dystopian works undoubtedly offer to young readers, but the inclusion of such violent actions is important precisely because of their authenticity. Therefore, writers do not include violent scenes so as to scare teens, but rather to warn them of what they might experience in their own life and prepare them to deal with it. The increased level of violence is not a fictional issue in the US, indeed. As Kim Soffen (2016) reports, gun fatalities have significantly increased and become evident in the last ten years. For example, just between 2015 and 2016 the victims of mass shooting have risen from 12 to 58. A memorable example is the Orlando nightclub shooting that took place in 2016, when at least 49 people were killed. Moreover, the number of fatal shootings by police officers has also increased by 6 percent only in the first half of 2016. As a consequence, in the last few years the US has witnessed the revival of several different sociocultural revolutions. For example, the "Black Lives Matter" movement was born to protest police brutality and racial discrimination against black people in the US. The people involved in this movement wanted to emphasize the wideness of racial inequality experienced by African Americans, triggering countless protests against car stops and street violence that have been heightened by the media. In the meantime, a countermovement has been formed, known as the "Blue Lives Matter". This movement was born to highlight the fact that police officers had been killed too, and it advocates that those who are convicted of killing police officers should be sentenced under hate crime status. However, police officers voluntarily choose their job, so even though their job is dangerous, risking their life is part of a work they are paid for and they are supposed to be trained to handle. Conversely, the vulnerability of African Americans is caused by no other reason than the color of their skin, therefore it is important to point out how absurd it is to equate the two social movements, though the defense of black lives usually tends to be used as a pretext to give birth to protests accusing such movements of racism. Nowadays, attacks against the government continue to produce mixed responses in America. For example, the Black Lives Matter Movement appears to be sharing many claims with the more recent Antifa Group, which is a left-wing anti-fascist and anti-

racist political movement. While Black Lives Matter is a movement consisting only of people of color who mainly focus on the racial issue, the Antifa Group consists primarily of white people, many of whom are anarchists and communists, who seems to be more radical in self-representing themselves. Anyway, it is an explicitly anti-racist movement whose members usually take part in Black Lives Matter protests, so the two movements are not that different, really. According to Elmore (2017), the tension between opposing movements such as Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter might be found in dystopian novels where the government opposes the needs of the people, and since the possibility of government revolt has become a widespread idea, literature is now reflecting this ongoing issue. Consequently, teenagers are able to make the connection between political unrest in the real world and the social factions portrayed in dystopian novels.

In conclusion, the most recent trend in YA literature has been dystopian, but some scholars argue that even this trend is becoming outdated. For example, *Vox* writer Constance Grady (2017) believes that 'teen suicide stories are starting to fill the place in the pop culture landscape that until very recently was taken up with stories of teen dystopias.' In her opinion, dystopian novels no longer appeal to young readers and an obsession with teenage suicide has taken their place. According to Grady (2017), the transition from dystopia to suicide stories is likely to eliminate the hope factor that characterized dystopian literature. In fact, YA books that have become popular in the last few years tend to deal mainly with violence and death. Recent titles such as Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007), Gayle Forman's *If I Stay* (2009), and Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* (2017) testify the fact that YA literature is moving forward yet again, and will possibly leave dystopias behind in the near future. In a way, it would seem that teenage literature simply gets darker as time passes. Moreover, the sexual and violent behaviors of YA protagonists are becoming more and more similar to the behaviors of adult protagonists. Therefore, among the most recent concerns within YA literature there it its uncanny resemblance to adult literature. In fact, since YA authors of the 21st century seem to be free to write whatever they want, *The Atlantic* journalist David Brown has raised the following question: 'But if everyone is reading this subset of fiction where seemingly no subject is taboo, why is it corralled as young adult, anyway?' (Elmore, 2017, p. 64).

1.5. The value of YA literature

YA literature has recently become one of the most successful and popular publishing areas, but despite its continuing development in complexity and range, there is an ongoing controversy surrounding it that concerns its alleged lack of value, not only in terms of literary quality, but also in terms of usefulness and importance. Anyway, attacks on YA books are nothing new. In fact, despite the sharp increases in book sales that the YA category has recently shown, for more than a century

there have been many librarians, teachers, and even parents who have attacked books written specifically for teenagers. Their complaints have varied over the years, but as Crowe (2001) illustrates, most reasons causing disapproval generally have to do with one of the two following categories: YA books are objected to either because they are not the classics or because they tend to corrupt young readers. Of course, there may be some YA novels whose level of depth and artistic development cannot be compared to that of those literary works that are referred to as the masterpieces of the American literary canon, and, undoubtedly, there are some YA works that might have a negative effect on certain teenage readers, but it is important to point out that there are just as many YA books that are characterized by great writing, engaging stories, and meaningful characters that can provoke critical thinking in some readers. However, as Crowe (2001) puts it, unfortunately, the few low quality works are the books that critics of YA literature seem to be most familiar with. As a consequence, a key issue of YA literature that needs to be addressed is its alleged lack of quality. According to Crowe (2001), this is the result of years of bad marketing which have made it difficult for people in general to believe that there actually are YA books worth reading. The first reason behind this alleged lack of quality is precisely what these books usually look like. Many YA novels, indeed, are typically complemented by repulsive juvenile covers, and because we tend to judge books by their covers, sometimes this kind of 'childish, amateurish or sloppy cover art' is enough to condemn a book without even opening it (Crowe, 2001, p. 146). As a consequence, just by looking at how books present themselves, kids are misled to think that those books are not for them. Moreover, when teenagers or their parents read a poor quality YA book, it is easier for them to dismiss the entire field as cheap literature, but just like adult literature, YA literature too is characterized by a wide range of quality. Of course, low quality formulaic and unchallenging YA novels will always exist, but the same applies to books written for adults, though this is not a good enough reason for treating as alike the whole category of books targeted at adults and dismiss it as pointless. Therefore, YA literature should be seen as a high quality genre comparable, and certainly not inferior to adult literature.

YA literature is a rather recent literary category, so according to Crowe (2001), a major cause that might possibly be at the heart of the sharp criticism surrounding the field is the fact that YA books have not been around long enough to be canonized. In fact, Cindy Lou Daniels (2006, p. 78) argues that there are some critics in the field of education who insist that YA literature does not deserve serious 'attention because it does not offer enough substance to be included within the traditional literary canon.' For example, as Crowe (2001, p. 147) reports, Kathleen Parker criticizes what she refers to as the "more fun-to-read" YA works for taking the place of literary classics, a phenomenon that concerns many adults who share the traditional view that 'if something is

entertaining, it certainly cannot be worthwhile, while the effort required by reading the classics, though inherently unpleasant, is ultimately good for you.' Nevertheless, many teachers and scholars of literature agree that there are many funny YA novels that can be used in meaningful ways too, exactly as there are countless classic literary works that can be also used in entertaining ways. These teachers do not mean to eliminate the classics from the schools, but rather suggest making a more reasoned use of them. However, the growing presence of teachers who advocate for an increasing use of YA books in schools is probably responsible for making critics feel that YA books are threatening the place of the classics in school curricula, as Crowe (2001) explains. Anyway, there are a few scholars who recognize that some books for young readers have actually risen to the "classic" status, but in Crowe's view (2001), the problem is the "classic" label itself. As he puts it, 'We do have some novels that are indeed classics in YA literature, but the field simply has not been around long enough to stand the test of time the way *Beowulf*, Shakespearean plays, *Pride and Prejudice*, *War and Peace*, and other works have' (Crowe, 2001, p. 147). In other words, while there are some YA stories that can be referred to as classic, there really are no books that can fit into the generally accepted classification of literary classics, and for many critics of the field, this is a serious problem because there are many adults who believe that young people should read the classics and nothing else. In their view, reading books that do not belong to what is generally accepted as canonized literature may prevent young readers from making progress in terms of cultural literacy. In other words, they believe that YA novels are a waste of valuable educational time and resources since these works are responsible for making the young minds weak.

As previously discussed, according to Cart (2016), the book industry is now enjoying a second "Golden Age of YA literature," so that it bears asking why YA fiction has become so successful. As Cart (2016) puts it, YA literature has often been described as "developmental" because of the age group it refers to. Young adulthood, indeed, is a period of passage in everybody's life that is characterized by unique physical and emotional needs and YA literature addresses precisely these needs. It addresses young people who are growing from the condition of childhood to that of adulthood, which means that they are changing subjects in evolution who need to shape their own identity. That is the main reason why YA literature is a valuable genre: it addresses not only young adults' interests, but also their needs. It helps them to find role models, to make sense of the world they live in, and to develop their inner selves. In other words, YA literature can help its young readers to become thoughtful and responsive citizens. As Cart (2016, p. 11) points out, 'by telling its readers the truth, however disagreeable it might sometimes be, it equips readers for dealing with the realities of impending adulthood and for assuming the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.' For this reason, it can also be used as a powerful tool to face what has been referred to as the "literary crisis

among middle and high school students" (YALSA, 2008), that is to say the poor level of adolescent literacy that The Alliance for Excellent Education has pointed out. As evidence of this, results from the research of the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that 65 percent of graduating high school seniors and 71 percent of America's eighth graders are reading below grade level. As a consequence, organizations such as the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English argue that YA books could be useful as reading material that teens actually want to read. In addition, given that right now YA novels frequently appear among bestseller lists, young people might even feel encouraged to read such books. Anyway, 'As a literature of relevance that meets developmental needs – including literacy skills — young adult literature also becomes a developmental *asset*, which YALSA's *New Directions For Library Service To Young Adults* defines as "a factor promoting positive teenage development"' (YALSA, 2008).

Finally, another chief value of YA literature lies in the fact that it provides teen readers with the chance to see themselves reflected in its pages. The young adulthood life period is especially known for being characterized by tension. On the one hand, teens have a desperate need to belong, but on the other, they are also inherently unique. However, they tend to hide their uniqueness because, in their view, it means to be unlike their peers, to be "other". In addition, 'to be "other" does not mean just to not belong but, worse, to be outcast' (YALSA, 2008). Thus, by seeing themselves represented in the pages of a YA book, young readers are more likely to feel reassured that they are not alone after all. In other words, the possibility to see oneself portrayed in YA novels allows teenagers to perceive themselves not as "other," but, instead, as a valuable part of a larger community of diverse people who share a common humanity. YA literature, therefore, also tends to foster important human values such as love, compassion, and empathy by portraying the lives of people who are unlike the readers and, therefore, allowing them to access their inner selves. In this way, YA literature 'invites its readers to embrace the humanity they share with who – if not for the encounter in reading – might forever remain strangers, irredeemably "other"'(Cart, 2016, p. 11). For all of these reasons, the Young Adult Library Services Association deeply values YA literature, so much so that it considers it to be a fundamental part of public and school library collections, and believes it is essential for a healthy youth development and the consequent development of healthy communities.

2. THE POWER OF IMAGINATION: FEMINIST FUTURES IN BLACK SCIENCE FICTION

2.1. Why is science fiction so white?

Many of the world's most celebrated science fiction authors are white and so are the characters that appear in sci-fi books and movies. Zimbabwean journalist Mako Muzenda (2017) argues that 'for a field of literature that is meant to venture boldly into new terrain and embrace all kinds of ideas, it is not the most diverse,' and that lack of diversity is a major weakness for a genre that generally prides itself on exploring infinite possibilities. As *Vox* writer Alex Abad-Santos (2014) puts it, science fiction is all about possibility because it has the freedom to imagine hypothetical versions of reality where all the cultural rules and norms that characterize our experience as human beings do not apply. As a result, science fiction novels allow to metaphorically explore a number of possible stories about both our history and present. However, Abad-Santos explains that 'Despite all of this potential and all of this imagination, our mainstream cultural gatekeepers – the people choosing which movies get made and who gets cast in them – are still prone to ignoring non-white and female characters.' As an example, Lee and Low Books produced an infographic showing the diversity gap in the American science fiction film industry based on the top hundred domestic sci-fi and fantasy movies as of 2014. The infographic shows that movies with a black male protagonist accounted for 8 percent (and among these, movies with a villain of color, typically interpreted by Will Smith, accounted for 3 percent), and movies with a black female protagonist as well as movies with a LGBTQ+ protagonist accounted for 0 percent (reported in Abad-Santos, 2014). According to Abad-Santos (2014), the main reason behind the lack of diversity in science fiction stories is likely to have something to do with the way the genre has been traditionally defined by white male scholars. Rob Latham, an English professor who is part of the University of California Riverside's Science and Technoculture Studies program, claims that 'the genre suffers from its narrow scope' (quoted in Abad-Santos, 2014). In fact, many scholars believe that science fiction developed from pulp magazines in the 1930s and white men, many of whom were practicing scientists, were the authors writing for such magazines. The problem resulting from the adoption of the style and content of pulp magazines as the working definition of science fiction as a genre is that other forms of storytelling that were not included in such magazines tended to be ignored. Stories that did not fit this definition of science fiction were not considered, and people of color and women wrote precisely such kind of stories. Latham, though, believes that science fiction actually existed outside of these magazines in many different types of fiction books, and even more in mainstream magazines. He cites W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Comet*, George S. Schuyler's *Black No More*, and Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood* as examples of science fiction stories appearing outside

of pulp magazines. Anyway, Latham concludes that science fiction has been defined by white male scholars in a way that privileges them and the position they occupy in the world as white men, which has undoubtedly turned out to constitute a serious problem in terms of representation (Abad-Santos, 2014).

There have been countless occasions when people of color have not been depicted at all in science fiction and fantasy books and movies, therefore resulting in a loss of participation on the part of the black public who could not identify with the stories that the genre had been offering them. In a 1970s essay with the provocative title of "Why Blacks Don't Read Science Fiction," African American writer Charles R. Saunders reflected on the pervasiveness of anti-blackness in the genre:

> Although white Americans science fiction writers were capable of stretching their imaginations to the point of conceptualizing aliens with sympathetic qualities, a black man or woman in a spacesuit was an image beyond the limits of their imaginations… If blacks appeared at all in the pages of the science fiction pulp magazines, they were presented as offensive "darkie" stereotypes. (quoted in Brady, 2021)

As Amy Brady (2021) highlights, black characters are likely to die quickly and they are unlikely to ever interact with any other people of color throughout the story since most of the invented galaxies seem to contain only about three black inhabitants. Ytasha L. Womack (2013) is a critically acclaimed author and filmmaker who analyzed the stereotyped presence of black characters in mainstream works of speculative fiction, pointing out that when they do appear, it is often as sidekicks or advisers. Some scholars argue that the lack of representation of people of color in science fiction may be due to the misconception that Africans or African Americans dislike science fiction and, more importantly, it is commonly thought that there is no such thing as an African geek culture (Serrano, 2020). Accordingly, there are few examples of black protagonists in canonical science fiction films or novels dealing with the progress of science and technology and, whenever they appear, their depiction is simplistic and full of cliches. For example, in her 2013 work on the world of black sci-fi and fantasy culture, Womack mentions fictional figures such as "the silent, mystical type" and the "scary witch doctor," which are closely related to stereotypes of African and pagan mythology, witchcraft, and magic. Anyway, as she puts it:

> when, even in the imaginary future – a space where the mind can stretch beyond the Milky Way to envision routine space travel, cuddly space animals, talking apes, and time machines – people can't fathom a person of non-Euro descent a hundred years into the future, a cosmic foot has to be put down. (Womack, 2013, p. 7)

In other words, mainstream readership appears to be unable to bear the presence of people of color in science fiction, but since fantasy literature is a genre that is built on the idea that everything is possible, the persistent lack of representation is a deeply problematic issue. In a way, it might be

argued that non-realist fiction reproduces the same racial stereotypes as any other narrative genre. According to Joshua Yu Burnett (2015), fostering such stereotypes contributes to fuel the many controversies the genre of science fiction presents: 'it has been a predominantly white, middle-class, male, straight narrative genre rather than a platform for counterhegemonic discourse.'

Many black scholars have been wondering why the genre of science fiction has been exclusively associated with white male writers. In this regard, it is important to discuss the work of Octavia Butler, who was the first black and female author to gain recognition as a science fiction writer. In her essay *The Lost Races of Science Fiction,* which she first published in *Transmission Magazine* in 1980, Butler illustrates her answer to the question: "why is science fiction so white?". Instead of concluding that the problem is due to some form of inherent racism, she attributes it to human beings as creatures of habit (quoted in Klein, 2020). In Butler's view, people tend to get comfortable with the way things are and do not like when they change, but as she points out, this is the opposite of what the science fiction genre has always dealt with. Science fiction has always been used as a platform to discuss and deal with change, both in technology and society, which is why it is a paradox that science fiction itself has changed so slowly and often under protest. Anyway, she believes that habit and custom represent a more insidious problem than outright racism. As she clarifies: 'People resent being told their established way of doing things is wrong, resent being told they should change, and strongly resent being told they won't be alone any longer in the vast territory – the universe – they've staked out for themselves.' As a consequence, 'Science fiction has always been nearly all white, just as until recently, it's been nearly all male' (Butler, 1980). This means that, in a way, custom can be strong enough to prevent people from seeing the need for science fiction as a genre to reflect a more realistic version of the world. What is more, adherence to custom may also lead people to oppose change by becoming even more extreme in their customary behavior. As Butler puts it, 'A custom attacked is a custom that will be defended,' so much so that 'whites who feel defensive about racist behavior may make racist bigots of themselves' (Butler, 1980).

Another insidious problem that Butler identifies is laziness, possibly combined with ignorance, as she highlights. For example, she claims that there are many authors who have always written stories set in all-white universes, so that even though these writers might not feel particularly threatened by the idea of depicting a mixed-race world, still they might consider the change too much trouble. In fact, if they already know how to do what they have been doing and their way works, why should they change it?, Butler asks. Besides, they may not even know any minority people, so how could they write about people they do not know? Ignorance, thus, can be responsible for writers' hesitation to write about minorities they do not know enough. Some writers may even be worried about accidentally giving offense. Anyway, Butler points out that authors generally do research when

they want to write about subjects they are not familiar with. For example, they may read autobiographies by members of the group they want to write about or even talk to them. However, Butler explains that some writers prefer to avoid research and wittily set their stories in distant egalitarian futures where cultural differences have gradually become less important and race has finally ceased to matter. For example, their characters may be indistinguishable in terms of race because what matters is rather a specific ability. Anyway, Butler believes that what authors should keep in mind is the fact that they are writing about human beings, and for this reason they should get comfortable with their racially different characters, otherwise they are likely to end up creating 'unbelievable, self-consciously manipulated puppets; pieces of furniture who exist within a story but contribute nothing to it; or stereotypes guaranteed to be offensive' (Butler, 1980). As previously mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, this is the main way the few minority characters were likely to be represented when they were first introduced into the genre. Yet, as regards sci-fi movies, Abad-Santos (2014) cites Gene Rodenberry's *Star Trek*, which debuted in 1966, as a ground-breaking work for including characters such as Sulu and Uhura, even though they were not as developed as the three white male leaders. Nevertheless, what Rodenberry did was quite revolutionary for his time. In fact, the real power of Roddenberry's vision of the future was that he fearlessly addressed the taboo of racial integration by making it the fundamental reality of humanity's future, according to Abad-Santos. Roddenberry's idea was to portray a racially diverse crew, therefore attempting to broaden what it means for people of color to be in the future, which is important because if science fiction is about depicting the future and that future features only white people, then it sends a message to non-white audiences that there is no place for them in the future. As authors, African Americans certainly need to be allowed to access the literary field so as to tell their own stories, but it is just as important that as human beings they are allowed to imagine their own futures.

Representation in mainstream science fiction has certainly improved throughout the years, but there still is a long way to go. In her essay, Butler recalls her experience in college in 1965 when the teacher of a creative writing class suggested another student that he should not use black characters in his stories unless their blackness was somehow essential to the plot because she believed that the very same presence of those characters was likely to change the focus of the story. Some years later in 1979 Butler attended a science fiction convention where one of the attending writers gave more or less the same reason for not using a black character in his story and even supported the idea that black characters can be substituted by extraterrestrials when the aim is that of introducing a different type of race without making anyone uncomfortable. Consequently, Butler asked herself:

> Science fiction reaches into the future, the past, the human mind. It reaches out to other worlds and into other dimensions. Is it really so limited, then, that it cannot reach into the lives of ordinary everyday humans who happen not to be white? (Butler, 1980)

As a black female science fiction writer, Butler has often been asked why minority characters in general have been noticeably absent from most science fiction works. According to her, the main reason why there have been so few black characters in science fiction lies in the fact that white writers are not truly able to visualize black people in diverse life contexts. As a result, black characters may act as a disruptive force in the story and their mere presence is likely to alter the narrative and focus it on race rather than whatever other aspect the author had planned to focus on. As she puts it, 'No writer who regards blacks as people, human beings, with usual variety of human concerns, flaws, skills, hopes, etc., would have trouble creating interesting backgrounds and goals for black characters' (Butler, 1980), implying that the real problem behind the lack of black characters is the kind of stereotyping, conscious or unconscious, that they are still subject to, which leads white people to consider them as less than human. In fact, Butler further explains that 'No writer who regards blacks as people would get sidetracked into justifying their blackness or their presence unless such justification honestly played a part in the story' (Butler, 1980). As regards the possibility to substitute extraterrestrials for people of color, Butler illustrates that since the literary genre involved is that of science fiction, readers are not likely to pay attention to any analogy that should make them visualize black human beings instead of fictional beings with tentacles, for example, because they are likely to believe that such weird characters are actually involved in the story. She then questions a commonly accepted theory among scholars according to which readers might still imagine other races based on the fact that the presence of white characters is just a way to represent all of humanity and, anyway, all people are alike so it does not matter which color of the skin they have. According to her, white writers simply represent themselves, not a universal human type. As previously discussed, there are literary critics who truly support the idea that some sci-fi writers may be trying to portray a color-blind future or a future where race does not matter, but as speculative fiction writer Nalo Hopkinson explains,

> The standard excuse in science fiction is that in the future, there won't be any racism or classism, or we won't have any races because we'll all interbreed and be, I dunno, beige. […] Perhaps so, but so often, those are really excuses for lazy characterization that erases ethnocultural specificities and differences in experience. Plus, we've been interbreeding for millennia. It's a beautiful thing, but it hasn't yet created the perfect world. (quoted in Abad-Santos, 2014)

In other words, as Latham puts it, it simply is 'a way of ignoring and erasing the question' (quoted in Abad-Santos, 2014). Butler then mentions another reason that was used as a justification

not to include minority characters in science fiction books that has to do with its being considered escapist literature. In a sense, readers are interested in this genre precisely because it allows them to escape from reality, therefore they should not be burdened with real problems. As André Carrington provocatively asks,

> How can you write about life and death in the obscure rhetoric of a teenage diversion? How can a trivial hobby provide the words we need to shake the serious-minded know-it-alls wringing our hands about crime and the Black family out of our conventional wisdom? (Carrington, 2016)

In short, Carrington is referring to the fact that the issues and criticism concerning state-sanctioned racial violence are entering the repertoire of fantasy and video games for teenagers' entertainment, which is traditionally considered as a space where the mind can divert from serious concerns. However, as Butler ironically points out, sci-fi readers are prone to read about issues such as wars, kidnapping and planet destruction. Minority characters, instead, appear to be too real and heavy to read about because of the possible racial statement that might be implied in the story, while the only statement that is possibly made is that black people are human beings too. Butler finally lists another reason for not using black characters in movies in particular which came from her agent, who explained that blacks were out of fashion at the time he was speaking and since the film industry was and keeps being very concerned with current trends, people of color were not to be included. All these reasons lead to another popular question in science fiction conventions: why are there so few black science fiction writers? A 2016 report by Fireside Fiction states that only 1.96 percent of the science fiction stories published in 2015 were written by black authors (Muzenda, 2017). According to Butler, the answer to this question is similar to the reason why there were once so few women writing science fiction, that is to say the lack of authenticity they perceived in a genre that has always been mainly dominated by men. As she explains, science fiction writers usually are also science fiction readers, so the fact that they could not find themselves represented in the genre led to the consequence that there were few black readers, which in turn means that now there are few black writers. The lack of representation has made it hard for people of color to imagine that their writing would ever find room in the genre. As author Sunil Patel said, 'Growing up I literally did not think that Indian people could have science fiction and fantasy adventures. I thought fantasy adventures were for white British schoolkids' (WIRED, 2016).

However, things seem to be starting to change as the black readership appears to be growing. In addition, there are non-white writers who are pursuing filmmaking, producing, and writing careers in science fiction, which is a major step towards getting more and more diverse people represented on screen. In the years since Saunders' remarks about anti-blackness in the genre, black writers have

undoubtedly become more prominent in speculative fiction, but given white men's persistent dominance of the field, non-white authors are all too frequently still overlooked. *Black Sci-Fi Short Stories* is a 2021 collection that aims to correct this bias, presenting readers with a wide range of short stories from 20th- and 21st- century black writers, a number of which have never been published before, and voluntarily excluding works by well-known writers in the genre such as Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, or Nnedi Okorafor. In this way, the anthology provides the readers with new and lesser-known voices attempting to overcome Saunders' bleak observations of a genre that has been excluding black authors since its birth. Similarly, in response to the tendency to favor certain voices and portrayals of particular characters, *Lightspeed* magazine, which is founded on the principle that science fiction is a vast and inclusive field, launched a provocative issue titled "People of Colo(u)r Destroy Science Fiction," aiming to celebrate the contributions that people of color have made to the genre. The issue includes essays and reprint fiction selected by Sunil Patel and Nisi Shawl, as well as original fiction selected by Nalo Hopkinson, who in an interview reported in an episode of *Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* said: 'I've just been kind of vexed recently by what seems to be a growing notion that science fiction and fantasy really shouldn't change and shouldn't challenge the reader. That is what they are there to do' (WIRED, 2016).

Nowadays, for example, a growing number of writers are venturing into African speculative fiction. Nnedi Okorafor, among them, is a famous Nigerian-American writer of fantasy and science fiction novels for both children and adults that are heavily influenced by her African heritage. She was the first black author to win the World Fantasy Award for Best Novel in 2011 for her work *Who Fears Death*, which is set in a post-apocalyptic Sudan and specifically deals with the traditional beliefs of the Igbo people, her ethnic group. The recent creation of black societies such as the African Speculative Fiction Society in 2016, in conjunction with its Nommo Awards for speculative fiction works by African writers, is a big step in recognizing the value of African authors in speculative fiction. Moreover, African authors' recent inclusion in websites, magazines and publications is fundamental in introducing the readers to different types of writers, and getting aspiring authors the visibility they deserve and need. As Muzenda (2017) puts it, 'What had started off as a fringe movement is growing into a vibrant community of people dedicated to letting Africa's voice be heard in speculative fiction.' In the 2014 essay "African Science Fiction Is Still Alien" published on her personal blog, Okorafor reflects on why it is so important to be represented in science fiction. She reaches two conclusions: '1. Africans are absent from the creative process of global imagining that advances technology through stories. 2. Africans are not yet capitalizing on this literary tool which is practically made to redress political and social issues' (quoted in Muzenda, 2017). It is no secret that the American publishing industry has its own ideas about African literature. Generally, there is a

belief that Africans should not write speculative fiction because they are not familiar with the main themes that are traditionally associated with the genre as it was born, namely technology and progress. According to Muzenda (2017), the growth of African speculative fiction has been hampered by this unquestionable definition of what constitutes an African story and it is unlikely to fully develop unless publishing houses start to recognize its importance. The development of what she refers to as a home-grown genre is extremely important for African writers because as she illustrates,

> There is power in imagination and creativity, in conjuring something new and exciting from reality. Speculative fiction in all its shapes and forms allows both writer and reader to transport themselves into an alternate world, a space they can completely immerse themselves, a space they can claim for themselves. In a modern world where issues of representation, ownership and space are constantly coming under question, it is integral for African literature to be present in genres it was previously absent from. (Muzenda, 2017)

In a way, Muzenda (2017) argues that Africa, a continent full of cultures, religions, and rich folklore, might be the perfect breeding ground for speculative fiction as a genre whose possibilities can outweigh its exclusionary history. As Zimbabwean author Masimba Musodza proposes, science fiction should be allowed to develop in different directions and have more from different places instead of always trying to follow the trends in the West (quoted in Muzenda, 2017).

2.2. Challenging the literary conventions: Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)

During the 1960s, both society and the science fiction genre were underdoing profound changes. Second-wave feminism was developing, as many women wanted more than just the right to vote, leading to a movement that included every aspect of life, from political participation to the private sphere. The feminist movement during the 1960s and 1970s is known as the second wave of feminism and it focused on women's experience as a way to oppose and put an end to patriarchy. Simultaneously with these social changes, the science fiction genre was changing too. When space travel became a concrete reality, many science fiction readers were let down by the limitations of real space exploration and wanted to go beyond thought experiments and the hypothetical situations they envisioned. As Ellen Andersson (2020) explains, simply fantasizing about a galaxy far, far away was no longer enough. The genre needed to be elevated in literary and stylistic quality, as well as reflect the ongoing changes in society in order to engage the readership. Therefore, a previously male-dominated genre was beginning to open up, and women writers began to emerge. Their stories would reflect the current issues of society, such as equal rights and personal freedom, in a way that the previous male writers had not taken into account. Female writers questioned the accepted norms by creating thought experiments and fictional adventures where different aspects of gender would be

explored and analyzed. Some prominent novels from that period are Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* (1975) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), which are all rightly summarized by critic Brian Attebery as powerful feminist science fiction that influenced the genre and made it almost impossible for a science fiction writer to take gender for granted anymore (reported in Andersson, 2020). As Becky Chambers recalls, for example, in *The Left Hand of Darkness*

> There were no lasers, no damsels, no chosen ones. There was war, yes, but a real war, a war not for the fate of the galaxy but for hatred and fear (things that rang true while living in America in late 2001). There was science, too, but it wasn't the science of physics or technology. It was the science of culture. The science of bodies. (Chambers, 2018)

In fact, when feminist science fiction writers started to heavily question the role gender would have in the future, it could no longer be presumed that gender roles and gender identity itself would keep existing or go on unchanged into the future. When science fiction writers explored different possible futures, imagining different possible outcomes of our society, the question of gender would now have to be addressed in some way, either explaining why it was unchanged or how it had evolved.

Ursula Kroeber Le Guin was born in Berkeley, California, in 1929. She was the bestselling author of the *Hainish Cycle*, a collection of science fiction novels and stories including *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which was awarded both the Nebula and the Hugo Awards for best science fiction novel of the year 1969. With the awarding of the 1975 Hugo and Nebula awards to *The Dispossessed*, another novel that is included in the collection, Le Guin became the first author to win both awards twice for novels. As English novelist Zadie Smith puts it, 'She was able to reimagine many concepts we take to be natural, shared, and unalterable – gender, utopia, creation, war, family, the city, the country – and reveal the all-too-human constructions at their center' (Browns Books, n.d.). Le Guin is best known for her science fiction books from the late 1960s onwards, in which she questions the conventions of the genre by creating characters and societies that challenge our understanding of gender, race and political organization. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is the starting point of a thought process that develops through her whole work: rethinking and redefining gender and sex. In fact, it is considered a groundbreaking feminist literary masterpiece and it has often been discussed in gender studies. Le Guin began writing this novel because she wanted to understand the meaning of sexuality and gender and how they affect our social relations. She imagined a world where it had never existed. She thus created Gethen, a planet without sexual prejudice thanks to the lack of gender and sex binarism, located several hundred light-years away in the icebound planet of Winter. She then created an androgynous, ambisexual human species, the Gethenians, members of a society where gender is not important at all since it does not exist in the present and has never

existed in the past. As a result, Le Guin is able to conceive a world where men and women appear to be completely equal in their position in society and imagine how it would look like and how it would function. In 1976 Le Guin wrote an essay titled "Is Gender Necessary?," in which she expresses her motivations for writing the novel and reflects on her experiment with portraying gender in the book, then added a *Redux* in 1988 where she examines her evolving thinking on the subject. As she puts it:

> If we were socially ambisexual, if men and women were completely and genuinely equal in their social roles, equal legally and economically, equal in freedom, in responsibility, and in self-esteem, then society would be a very different thing. […] it seems likely that our central problem would not be the one it is now: the problem of exploitation – exploitation of the woman, of the weak, of the earth. (Le Guin, 1976, p. 172)

As Andersson (2020) argues, Le Guin manages to question the actual importance of gender and sexuality in society and explore a non-binary version of reality. In short, she uses the science fiction genre in order to present new ideas regarding femininity and masculinity.

The novel consists of a combination of narratives and short stories, providing the reader with multiple perspectives from the different members of the Gethenian society that give access to different levels of cultural insight. The main narrative is narrated by both Genly and Estraven in separate chapters, alternating throughout the novel. Genly is a human ambassador from Earth who has been sent as an envoy to Gethen with the aim of convincing the Gethenians to join the Ekumen, an intergalactic trade federation. Estraven, on the other hand, is born in Gethen. He[1] works as the King's ear and he is responsible for helping Genly succeed in his mission. In this way, life on Gethen is presented through both the eyes of the alien and the native character. The Gethenians are a supposedly genderless species that randomly take the form and appearance of either a biological female or male body when they are sexually active, a period of time that it known as "kemmer," making it impossible to tell who will bear children, for example. Since everybody spends the majority of their lives without having an assigned sex, the concept of gender appears to be non-existent, and therefore no one faces any limitations or is discriminated against because of it. As Andersson points out, 'Where they go in life is generally based on their abilities, not their sex, gender identity or gender expression' (2020, p. 6), the exception being the "perverts." Some Gethenians have a biological mutation that results in their being constantly in kemmer, and always presenting themselves as either male or female, so that they are continuously controlled by their sexual desires. These people are known as "perverts" and they are barely tolerated by the other inhabitants. Moreover, since they are always motivated by their sexual desires, they cannot

[1] Estraven will be referred to as "he" / "him" throughout the chapter in order to reproduce Le Guin's choice to use "he" as a gender-neutral pronoun for the Gethenians in the novel.

be trusted. In fact, sex exists on Gethen, and it is actually encouraged and seen as a natural part of life, but it needs to be kept outside of public life, and the Gethenians should not be caught thinking about it at all outside of kemmer. Le Guin uses the dualistic view on sexuality on the part of Genly and Estraven as a literary device to question the norms existing in the world of the reader. Traditionally, throughout history female sexuality has often been seen as purer and more innocent as compared to male sexuality. As Andersson (2020) highlights, women's sexuality, similarly to the Gethenians', has been mostly seen as something manageable that can be ignored because it is generally considered to be nearly non-existent without a man awakening it. This means that women, like the Gethenians, could theoretically live their life without being ruled by their sexual needs. Besides, female sexuality has always been portrayed as something bad that only has negative connotations, which is a notion that Le Guin questions in the novel by presenting a more feminine version of sexuality as the norm, implying that masculine sexuality is rather undesirable, Andersson (2020) suggests. In a way, men's predatory and lustful sexuality, as sociologist Michael S. Kimmel defines it, has been justified by the fact that men have been typically seen as slaves to their own sexual desires. In a sense, their needs were assumed to take over completely, causing them to have no control over their actions. However, Le Guin's work stands out as a groundbreaking novel because the author manages to present the reader with a new perspective on the generally-acclaimed masculine sexuality by introducing the characters of the perverts and having the Gethenians despise them precisely because of their constant kemmer and strong desire to always have sex. As a result, on Gethen, being constantly driven by one's sexual desires is weird, unnatural, and functioning as a major obstacle in life because the perverts are deemed to be not trustworthy while control, instead, emerges as a desirable quality. Véronique Mottier explains that during the 1960s and 1970s, a sexual revolution accompanied the second wave of feminism since feminists strongly associated personal freedom with sexual freedom, and therefore advocated for a sexual liberation that originated a new view on sex (reported in Andersson, 2020). On Gethen, sex seems to have reached the potential that the sexual liberation movement was asking for, Andersson (2020) argues. Everyone has the right to sexual pleasure and to refuse any sexual advances while having their choices respected, so that forms of sexual assault such as rape can finally cease to exist.

Science fiction as a genre of possibility has been truly used by the author as a way to expand the commonly accepted norms of sexuality. In particular, in this novel Le Guin presents the reader with a view on sex and sexuality that is completely different from the reader's actual reality. Nowadays there are still many ongoing debates regarding the general definition of gender and what it is that creates one's gender. Some people still argue that gender identity is directly linked

to one's biological sex, which would technically make Gethen suitable for a bigender identity since as an androgynous creature, he has both male and female sexual characteristics. However, scholars have been working on another theory of gender that was mainly promoted by Simone de Beauvoir and envisions gender as a social concept that is constructed by human beings and learned as a behavior. According to this theory, gender appears to be still very much present in the novel, that is why Andersson (2020) states that claiming to have created a society without gender is a very bold thing to claim. Many scholars seem to agree on the fact that Le Guin did not manage to fully erase gender. For example, Ritch Calvin argues that 'A combination of linguistic choices and a general underrepresentation of the feminine creates an overtly masculine version of androgyny, which reinforces the idea that the masculine is somehow more neutral than the feminine' (quoted in Andersson, 2020, p. 10). In other words, the novel has been mainly criticized for the use of the pronouns "he" / "him" to refer to the androgynous characters and for their masculine rather than neutral representation, all resulting in rendering the female experience invisible while fostering the patriarchal idea that the male experience is universal. The use of male pronouns, for example, affects the supposedly perceived gender neutrality of the Gethenians. For Genly, a man coming from a patriarchal planet where the male experience is seen as default, it is natural to use the pronoun "he" or to call the people he meets "men". What makes Le Guin's choice of words problematic, however, is that the masculine is used as the norm no matter who the speaker is, causing the Gethenians to be perceived as men rather than genderless or mixed beings, Andersson (2020) points out. The combination of linguistic choices is problematic because the pronouns used imply that the masculine would somehow be considered more neutral than the feminine, and therefore more suitable to represent a universal experience, which means that the already dominant male experience emerges strengthened rather than questioned by such linguistic choices, and the female experience, again, is completely erased. As Andersson puts it:

> The female part of the menwomen is completely erased on a linguistic level, in a way that makes it seem deliberate while also distracting the reader from seeing a world truly without gender. [Moreover] feminine traits and appearances are almost non-existent, again causing an overrepresentation of the men, in the menwomen. (Andersson, 2020, p. 13)

Andersson (2020) points out that the problem thus may be caused by the lack of a new, gender neutral pronoun. Indeed, "he" is just as specific as the feminine pronoun "she" but within patriarchal societies, the assumption is that the masculine equals the universal. Besides, Genly seldom comments on the appearance of the Gethenians unless it is to state that they look more feminine than he expected. As his standard way of being is the male appearance, he does not notice someone else's appearance when it meets his norm of a neutral gender expression, which is

masculine. The only exception is Estraven, who is perceived as more feminine than masculine. In short, Le Guin manages to present a non-binary and fluent notion of gender, but only to a certain extent.

Throughout the novel, the reader is taken into Genly's personal journey of discovering gender as something more than simply two separate ends of a spectrum. Since he comes from a binary society where only two genders exist and it is normal to put people into one of the two boxes corresponding to the male or the female identity, at first Genly tries very hard to gender the Gethenians. As Genly explains in the novel, 'My efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own' (Le Guin, 1976, p. 10). As a result, when the Gethenians project a gender identity that does not match with their physical appearance or simply project what Genly would think of as a mix between male and female, he finds it difficult to deal with such a confusing situation. In particular, it is the fact that Estraven is neither completely feminine nor masculine that negates his perception of what gender should be. Anyway, Genly spends the entire book trying to unpack his biases, as Chambers (2018) illustrates, and ultimately manages to understand and accept Estraven for what he is, that is to say a person without gender who simply is. As Genly puts it in the novel, 'And I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man' (Le Guin, 1976, p. 121). What is interesting to highlight is the fact that Genly appears to be unable to fully accept Estraven's lack of gender until he develops some sort of empathy for Estraven that makes him see that it does not matter that he lacks gender. As Andersson (2020) points out, the interpersonal connection between the two of them is presented as something that matters more than the way they identify themselves. Judith Butler (2004) also highlights that emotional connection is essential in the debate of gender equality as she claims that it is necessary to put an end to the traditional practice of merely presenting theory in order for real social change to take place. In other words, she believes that convincing someone to change their belief system and question what they think is true takes more than theory. This is why even though Genly had read many notes about Gethen and the customs of its inhabitants so as to be prepared to face the situations that he might have encountered, when he finally travelled there, he initially kept believing that his view on gender was the right one since his version of reality reinforced it. Simply reading a book did not change that. However, when he starts meeting the Gethenians, learning their ways of life, and especially building relationships with them, then it is possible for him to really question his beliefs. In a way, by using Genly as an extension of the reader, Le Guin presents the reader with a plausible way to challenge one's own values and possibly adopt a more open view on gender. Gender might not be erased completely on

Gethen, but the fictional planet functions as a utopian future world of possibilities that might trouble the reader's habitual way of thinking, which was part of Le Guin's goal both for this specific novel and for science fiction as a genre. In particular, in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin explores different notions of gender and sexuality by introducing an androgynous race that challenges the limitations of the norms defining such concepts as we are used to. Because of these limitations defining what we think we know about gender and sexuality, it is extremely difficult to create a completely new view on the two subjects. However, the main objective of the book does not have to be creating a completely new possibility, but simply led us to question or revise the possibilities that already exist, presenting a new perspective on a current issue. The whole story leads the readers to really question their assumptions about gender, sex, and identity. Nowadays, because of the complex gender discussion that is actually taking place in most western societies, we may not struggle as Genly did to accept that different notions of gender exist, especially the younger generations who are growing up in the middle of this discussion, but it is important to remember that the novel was published in 1969, when ideas about gender fluidity and queer sex were far from mainstream. Le Guin's depiction of androgyny was groundbreaking for the time she was writing it because the conversation on gender and sexuality was very different then, and as Chambers (2018) points out, the conversation was altered precisely by this book. Le Guin's ultimate triumph with this novel, thus, is the impact it had on the genre of science fiction because she managed to introduce the idea that sex and gender have no default templates in nature in a literary field that has been exclusively reserved to white straight men for most of its existence.

Moreover, with this novel she breaks with the tradition of the white space explorer in science fiction by inserting a black envoy as the main character who travels to another planet and a number of people of color, the Gethenians, who are described as 'yellow-brown or red-brown' by Genly (Le Guin, p. 21. These people live in the mysterious planet of Gethen that hosts a human race that is extremely evolved from a political and cultural point of view. In fact, people of color in the novel do not represent the primitive or alien race to conquer that is usually associated with the dark skin color but rather an advanced and refined species to emulate and learn from. However, what is interesting is that the reader's attention is never really placed on the characters' skin colors, so it can take a while to identify them as members of minority groups. For example, the fact that Genly is black can only be assumed because of the description of his skin color as black or dark, and this happens through some kind of casual identification that was strongly desired by the author because in this way she could introduce the issue of racial difference but in a way that does not make any difference for the novel because Genly's skin color is not relevant for the outcome of the story (Mishan, 2009). In short, the reader is led to identify himself/herself with a black person because he/she does not realize

immediately that the hero has a dark skin but, at the same time, Le Guin's choice of not saying anything about Genly's race explicitly can be interpreted as an example of tokenism, that is to say the practice of making a symbolic effort to be inclusive, in this case by including minority characters whose race does not affect the story, only to show that you are doing what is expected to be fair in order to make it seem that you support a minority group that is treated unfairly in society.

2.3. A new legacy of science fiction tropes: Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993)

Another drastically different science fiction writer as compared to the white founding fathers of the genre is Octavia E. Butler, who not only is a woman, but an African American woman. She was the first African American woman writer to gain access to this white-dominated field. According to Klein, 'it is by virtue of her skin color that she was able to bring something different to the genre' (Klein, 2020). This means that even though she used some of the common conventions of the genre in her work such as time travel, alien races and dystopian futures, she wrote about them with an original and unique perspective. In a way, it seems that the color of her skin was precisely what made it possible for her to radically change the science fiction genre. Butler was born in Pasadena, California, in 1947, and she came from a very poor family. Thanks to her mother's sacrifices, she was able to attend university in spite of the fact that she had a learning problem that later turned out to be dyslexia. She wrote dystopian novels exploring themes of black injustice, global warming, women's rights and political disparity, which were ignored at the time she wrote them. Her work, though, includes some of the most influential stories and books in the science fiction genre that continue to have an impact and reflect the world we live in today. By the mid-1980s, Butler began to receive critical recognition for her work, which not only explored fantasy but also the real human experience. In 1984 she won the Hugo Award for Best Short Story for *Speech Sounds*. That same year, her short story *Bloodchild* won the Nebula Award for Best Novelette. She was the first black woman to receive both awards, which represent the highest honors in the science fiction and fantasy genres. In 1995, she received a "Genius" grant from the MacArthur Foundation, a very prestigious fellowship that is awarded to extremely original and dedicated writers, allowing them to receive a monthly sum of money for five years as a form of investment in their future work. She was the first and only science fiction writer to be awarded such grant, until black speculative fiction writer N.K. Jemisin was also awarded it in 2020.

Butler was part of a small group of black science fiction writers who managed to get their work published at a time in history when white male writers were dominating the field. She has often been called the mother of Afrofuturism, an indefinite genre combining science fiction, fantasy, and

history to imagine a free future through the eyes of black people. It has been called a movement, a genre, a cultural aesthetic, but most importantly, Afrofuturism is evidence of the fact that black people exist in the future. In fact, it is something more than just introducing and linking technology or futuristic inventions to African American values and ways of life. Anyway, the specific terms defining the Afrofuturist cultural aesthetic may not have been widely established when Butler was writing, but her work certainly has impacted the movement, influencing decades of film, television, literature, art and music. Mark Dery is the author and culture critic who coined the term "Afrofuturism" in his 1993 essay "Black to the Future," which was published in a 1994 anthology called *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*. In this essay, he claims that:

> Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future – might, for want of a better term, be called "Afrofuturism". (Dery, 1994, p. 180)

Ytasha L. Womack is another leading scholar on Afrofuturism who has written a more recent critical work entitled *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. In this study, she describes Afrofuturism as an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation. She also reports Ingrid LaFleur's words, an art curator and artist who defines Afrofuturism as 'a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens' (Womack, 2013, p. 9). In short, Womack comes to the conclusion that Afrofuturism is

> both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory. Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it's a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques (Womack, 2013, p. 9).

When Dery was writing at the end of the 20th century, he had already pointed out how the notion of Afrofuturism could be perceived as a quite troubling concept by asking the following questions:

> Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? Furthermore, isn't the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers – white to a man – who have engineered our collective fantasies? (Dery, 1994, p. 180)

However, throughout his essay he comes to the conclusion that a genre that is based on 'close encounters with the Other – the stranger in a strange land – would seem uniquely suited to the concerns of African-American novelists' (Dery, 1994, pp. 179-180). Precisely for this reason, he

begins his work by wondering 'Why do so few African Americans write science fiction?'. In his view, only Samuel R. Delany, Octavia E. Butler, Steve Barnes, and Charles Saunders had chosen to write within the genre conventions of science fiction at the time. According to him,

> This is especially perplexing in light of the fact that African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies. Moreover, the sublegitimate status of science fiction as a pulp genre in Western literature mirrors the subaltern position to which blacks have been relegated throughout American history (Dery, 1994, p. 180)

Nowadays, some critics recognize that Butler's work has proven to be prophetic (Anderson, 2020). For example, in the Parable books that she began writing in 1989, Butler took inspiration from the news to create a near-future dystopia in which societal collapse is predicated on factors such as climate change, gun violence, and late capitalism, therefore resulting in a sort of warning about where the US and humanity in general might be heading. Butler wrote two books in that series. It seems that she had even planned to write four more books, but she ultimately found the whole story to be too depressing and thus abandoned the project so as to write what became her last book, *Fledgling*, a vampire novel that was published in 2005. The first book in the series is *Parable of the Sower* and it was published in 1993. It is a post-apocalyptical science fiction novel that deals with issues such as climate change and social inequality. It was the winner of multiple awards, including the 1994 *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year, and it has been adapted into a concert performance and a graphic novel. The following novel is *Parable of the Talents*. It was published in 1998 and it is set five years after the events of the previous novel. It won the Nebula Award for Best Novel in 2000. During a speech she delivered at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Butler said that *Parable of the Talents* 'was a cautionary tale, although people have told me it was prophecy. All I have to say to that is: I certainly hope not' (Aguirre, 2017). Similarly, in a Throughline episode of the "Imagining New World series" from NPR dated February 18, 2021, it is reported what follows as evidence of what Butler thought of her works:

> These novels are not prophetic. These novels are cautionary tales. These novels are, if we are not careful, you know, if we carry on as we have been, this is what we might wind up with. You have to think about what kind of world you want to live in, and I don't think there's a person alive who would want to live in the world that I've written about. But we can arrange it. The problems that I write about are problems that we can do something about. That's why I write about them. (Throughline, 2021)

Parable of the Sower has been critically acclaimed by many scholars as a pioneering work in the genre of science fiction because it represents the most profound changes Butler's writing led to. First of all, the novel stands out for having a main character who not only is a woman, but also black.

In fact, Butler distinguished herself early on by including black female protagonists into her work, which was an anomaly in a field that had been traditionally dominated by white male writers. Named Lauren Oya Olamina, the protagonist is an African American teenage girl who can feel the pain of others because she suffers from a condition known as "hyper empathy" or "sharing". This condition, which has provided her with the uncontrollable ability to feel the sensations she witnesses in the people around her, seems to be due to the fact that her mother abused drugs during the pregnancy. The story begins in 2024, when the US society is particularly shaken by issues such as climate change, wealth inequality, and corporate greed. Lauren thus lives in 'a not so distant future where capitalism and its materialistic mentality have transformed America into a third-world nation eating itself away from the inside,' Gregory J. Hampton (2005, p. 67) explains. Throughout the novel, Lauren will need to leave her home, so she is the protagonist of a coming-of-age novel that takes the form of a journal kept by the protagonist herself. In fact, it is through her journal entries that the reader is allowed to participate in the narrative. According to Carme Manuel, 'Olamina is Butler's prototypical heroine – an independent woman who tries to control her life' (2004, p. 120). On July 20, 2024, the day of Lauren's fifteenth birthday, she writes a brief journal entry describing a prophetic recurring dream which reminds her that the security which she and her community depend on is false and fleeting:

> I'm learning to fly, to levitate myself. No one is teaching me. I'm just learning on my own, little by little, dream lesson by dream lesson. Not a very subtle image, but a persistent one. I've had many lessons, and I'm better at flying than I used to be. I trust my ability more now, but I'm still afraid. I can't quite control my directions yet. I lean forward the doorway. […] I can see that I'm going to miss the door and hit the wall beside it, but I can't stop or turn. I drift away from the door, away from the cool glow into another light. The wall before me is burning. Fire has sprung from nowhere, has eaten in through the wall, has begun to reach toward me, reach for me. The fire spreads. I drift into it. It blazes up around me. I trash and scramble and try to swim back out of it, grabbing handfuls of air and fire, kicking, burning! Darkness. (Butler, 2012, pp. 8-9)

Lauren has grown up in the remnants of a gated community in Robledo, California, that is surrounded by a wall that should keep the inhabitants of Robledo separate and protected from the outside world, which is a place of abject poverty where homeless and mutilated individuals live. This wall is a socially constructed border that functions as a marker of economic difference. The Robledo community places a strong value on the land and the people inhabiting it, so Hampton explains that 'Because the land is defined by a seemingly privileged few, the land defines those few as "haves" and everybody outside of its walled boundaries as "have-nots" and less than those within the walls' (2005, p. 62). Anyway, precisely because the wall is more abstract in its function than a solid brick wall, it results in being a symbol of false and temporary security for the people living in Robledo, Hampton (2005) argues. In other words, the wall is ineffective. As the heroine of the novel, Lauren is able to understand that the differences in terms of class that act as borders between the community

she belongs to and the people living outside of it have been socially constructed by her community itself, therefore she is able to realize that she must leave her community and go beyond the wall in order to survive. In fact, Lauren is certain that society will continue to deteriorate and the community will no longer be safe, so she secretly prepares to travel north, as many other people who look for rare paid jobs are doing. Lauren privately develops her own new belief system, called Earthseed, based on the idea that "God is change" is the only lasting truth, and that human beings should "shape God" in order to save themselves. When Lauren is eighteen in 2027, the community's security is broken by an organized attack by the outsiders. Most of the community is destroyed, and people are murdered, including Lauren's family. In the meantime, Lauren travels north, disguised as a man, with two survivors from her community. She gathers many people along her journey and begins to share with them the Earthseed religion, which she has started developing into a collection of texts known as *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*. She believes that humankind's destiny is to travel beyond the deteriorating Earth and live on other planets, so that Earthseed functions as a sort of preparation for such destiny.

Another characteristic of the novel that adds to Butler's contribution to the science fiction genre has to do with the way she portrays the future. The first thing to underline is the fact that in her criticism against her own cultural, social, economic, and political moment, the author gives shape to an imaginary future that is actually more based on a sort of redressing of the past than a building of a new and different future (Carme Manuel, 2004). In particular, even though the country portrayed in the novel has become a horrid world that needs drastic transformations in order to be saved, what Lauren fosters through the belief system she spreads throughout her journey is readaptation, or better what she calls change. In other words, the solution presented in order to make survival possible has more to do with a way of adjusting to the new conditions than building a utopian society from scratch. Moreover, it is important to notice that what really strikes the reader is not the bleak landscape of horror described by the author, but the way she articulates that vision. In fact, science fiction used to be typically connoted by a specific depiction of life in the future as characterized by the presence of robots and other technological inventions such as time travel or extraterrestrial beings standing for the "other" in general. From the 1960s onwards, the interest for technology started to be related to the way the presence of robots could influence our conception of humanity, focusing in particular on what makes the difference between human beings and androids. Butler's work, however, is even more different because she presents 'the concepts of time travel and life in the future by creating characters who live in worlds where evolution is not robotically or technologically influenced' (Hampton and Brooks, 2003, p. 71). Besides, her work allows the alien to be imagined outside of the traditional definitions of the term because she presents 'unique ways to imagine and ultimately to understand

the body and its plethora of identities' (Hampton and Brooks, 2003, p. 71). As the novel demonstrates, in the future world portrayed by Butler, the issue of alienation exists, more profoundly, in the hearts and minds of individual characters. In an interview with Rosalie G. Harrison, Butler said that in the standard science fiction novel the 'universe is either green or all white' (quoted in Hampton and Brooks, 2003). In such literature the extraterrestrial being or alien is used as a metaphor and literal embodiment of the other. Butler, on the other hand, locates highly visual or non-visual identities at the center of her novel and forces the reader to face the notion of "otherness" as more than just a metaphor or a simple allusion. In addition, the characters are portrayed as exploring and even celebrating the "other" rather than distancing themselves. Science fiction is thus used as an effective tool to open the imagination of the readers to the construction of "otherness" as a concept by painting the fantastic as rather similar to the realistic. Gregory J. Hampton and Wanda M. Brooks (2003) argue that Butler entered a genre that was still being defined by the imagination of its white male contributors, and nonetheless she managed to challenge the most commonly accepted characteristics of the field. Through her reinterpretation of the issues of alienation and marginalization, for example, Butler has forged a path in a genre that is particularly suitable for African Americans' experience. The genre of science fiction, thus, emerges as the new frontier for African American literature that might lead to a more critical view of the past and a future that might finally dismantle the concepts of alienation and marginalization, therefore reinterpreting the meaning of "otherness" while demonstrating both the flaws and strengths in human behavior.

Gregory J. Hampton (2005) identifies Lauren's new religion as an ideology focused on the acceptance of change and difference as what leads to renovation. This ideology values life over any kind of material or physical gain, primarily because it acknowledges the fact that what is material is temporary and can be destroyed, besides the fact that it can even lead people to destroy life in order to obtain its material value. As Butler said:

> Human beings are intelligent, but also they are hierarchical. And hierarchical tendencies are a lot older than their intelligence, and the hierarchical tendencies are sometimes in charge. We do seem sometimes much more interested in one-upping each other, one-upping one country over the other, than in doing ourselves some long-term good (Throughline, 2021).

In fact, Lauren teaches that material gain is not the primary objective of human society because it is potentially dangerous and finite, as were the worldly possessions of the Robledo community such as their houses. As a result, the struggle to compete for limited material resources such as land and minerals is necessarily going to cease and, together with it, its methods of identifying the "haves" and "have nots." In other words, the previously existing methods of identifying the body for the mere purpose of constructing oppressive hierarchies will no longer be applied. According to

Hampton (2005), the abandonment of a materialist ideology predicated by the Earthseed religion might be really beneficial for humanity. As he puts it:

> the absence of material worship will undoubtedly affect how we as humans value the differences within the boundaries of the human race. Darkness of complexion may not continue to serve as a marker for certain stereotypical and false attributes such as laziness, sexual potency, or untrustworthy behavior. The female gender does not necessarily have to be associated with the physically weak and rationally substandard. (Hampton, 2005, p. 71)

The Books of the Living clearly states that 'all that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change. God is change' (Butler, 2012, p. 8). This means that change is absolutely powerful because it is malleable and perpetual. Thus, Hampton (2005) illustrates that if people accept the malleability of their situation and embrace the inevitable fact that everything changes, the notions of difference, or at least the identities commonly associated with differences, might become less intimidating. In this way, all the national, racial, gender, and class identity boundaries will possibly cease to exist. The issue of identity and power has been deeply explored by Butler throughout her work by portraying different types of bodies and showing how the identities placed on them change, therefore resulting in either death or rise to power. Through Lauren's Earthseed community, Butler outlines a particular belief system that advocates the end of oppression, and, more importantly, promotes the survival of a community despite oppression, as Hampton (2005) highlights. Ayana Jamieson, the founder of the Octavia E. Butler Legacy Network, a global community that celebrates Butler's life and work while creating new works inspired by her legacy, points out that the peculiar thing about her books is that even though they tend to be based on rather pessimistic views about the future, there is always hope at the end. As she puts it:

> There is always this open-ended possibility that even if things look bleak right now where we're standing, it's not magically all going to get better, but we're still going to be together. We can still choose to do things that will add to our collective survival instead of just whatever is supposed to be our individual bounty of the things we've acquired and the things we've amassed, that there is another way to be in this world. And that's what I find so healing and transformational. (Throughline, 2021)

In fact, Butler uses the genre of science fiction as a powerful tool for social reform. Lauren, in particular, emerges as a heroine who struggles against a system of thinking and oppression which threatens both herself as a woman and the entire community she belongs to. As Butler herself declared, she decided to write about issues of power and oppression mainly because as a black woman living in the US, she felt that she did not have any power at all. Growing up, however, she realized that what really matters is not simply having power, but rather what it is possible to do with it (Throughline, 2021).

2.4. Walidah Imarisha and Adrienne Maree Brown: a collection of visionary fiction

Walidah Imarisha and Adrienne Maree Brown are two mixed-race women writers and activists who are part of a growing group of Butler's "children," – writers, scholars, activists who see themselves as her spiritual descendants and look to her as a leader, acting as a guide for their literary and social work (Throughline, 2021). Much of their work and worldview, in fact, are inspired by Butler's writing. Brown even co-hosts a podcast known as "Octavia's Parables" with Toshi Reagan. In 2015 Imarisha and Brown co-edited *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, a collection of twenty short stories and essays about social justice written by both writers and organizers who explore the legacy of Butler's work. Before they began working on this project, Brown was doing Octavia Butler Emergent Strategy sessions. The idea behind those sessions was to collectively read one of Butler's book and then come out with lessons that might help current movements for social change to shape the future we want to live in. At the same time, Imarisha was working on the idea of "visionary fiction," a term she developed to refer to the kind of speculative fiction that can help us challenge existing power dynamics and build new just worlds, as Joe Macaré (2015) reports from his interview with Imarisha. In the previously mentioned Throughline episode of the "Imagining New World series" from NPR, Brown explains that 'visionary fiction writing is a practice we can use to imagine and prepare for future together, to generate the ideas that we want to see more of in the world,' and according to her, this concept perfectly applies to Butler's work. In fact, Butler gives us readers the practice, and then she gives us case study after case study of our imaginary futures, showing us how we will behave (Throughline, 2021). According to Brown, the approach that Butler used of looking at the world and observing what was happening around her so as to project it into the future seems to answer the following questions: 'what happens if this state continues? What happens if we don't address the things that matter?' (quoted in Throughline, 2021). In particular, her novels tend to address a couple of more specific questions such as: 'What happens if we don't turn our attention to the climate crisis? What happens if we don't really, really contend with our comfort with inequality, with hierarchy?' (quoted in Throughline, 2021). As Imarisha herself states in "Rewriting the Future: Using Science Fiction to Re-Envision Justice," an article that she posted on her blog on February 11, 2015, 'This is precisely why we need science fiction: it allows us to imagine possibilities outside of what exists today.' Moreover, she believes that justice movements desperately need science fiction because of the fact that we tend not to envision what could be, or as she puts it, 'We forget to mine the past for solutions that show us how we can exist in other forms in the future' (Imarisha, 2015). According to her, social justice movements can benefit from visionary fiction because it might function as a way to practice their process in building new possible worlds. However, Imarisha carefully points out that this does not mean that visionary fiction can actually

provide social justice movements with a concrete solution for achieving their aims, but it can still be helpful for exploring different possible outcomes that will then be achieved through sustained mass community organizing. With the concept of visionary fiction, thus, Imarisha wants to put together all the imaginary worlds that might help organizers and social activists to actually build new worlds. As she explains, 'This term reminds us to be utterly unrealistic in our organizing, because it is only through imagining the so-called impossible that we can begin to concretely build it' (Imarisha, 2015). In other words, according to Imarisha, it is necessary to free our imaginations in order to build new realities because in this way we are actually going to question everything we take for granted. In fact, she believes that it is only by recognizing that nothing is fixed and everything is stardust that we will have the strength to get rid of anything we want to. In her blog, she paraphrases Indian author Arundhati Roy with the following words: 'other worlds are not only possible, but are on their way – and we can already hear them beating' (Imarisha, 2015). Both Imarisha and Brown believe that the collection of visionary fiction they put together functions as a vital space for any process of decolonization because it implies the decolonization of the imagination, which according to Imarisha (2015), is the most subversive and dangerous decolonization process of all since all the other forms of decolonization depend on it.

In her interview with Macaré (2015), Imarisha explains that both Brown and herself believe that by creating an anthology of sci-fi and speculative fiction written by organizers, activists and change-makers, they are continuing the genealogy of visionary change that Butler originated through her work. This is why they named the collection in honor of her. In the introduction to the anthology Imarisha explicitly says that: 'Changes will occur that we cannot even begin to imagine. […] We believe that this is what it means to carry on Butler's legacy of writing visionary fiction' (Imarisha and Brown, 2015, p. 2). As she further explains to Macaré,

> When Adrienne and Brown got together, they realized that the principles of visionary fiction – centering those who have been marginalized; operating and imagining within a history of resistance; seeing identity and especially intersecting identities; highlighting change from the bottom up not the top down; exploring change that is collective, decentralized – were embodied so powerfully in Butler's books, and is in fact the first place in science fiction many of us saw these principles in practice (quoted in Macaré, 2015).

The title of the anthology, *Octavia's Brood*, plays on Butler's *Lilith's Brood*, a collection of three science fiction novels published between 1987 and 1989. The anthology contains short stories from people who have dedicated their lives to making change. The stories included explore a broad range of current social justice issues such as climate change and immigration, and they all aim to fuel the global quest for social transformation. Contributors include established fantasy authors such as Sheree Renée Thomas and celebrities such as LeVar Burton, best known for playing Commander

Geordi La Forge from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, as well as emerging writers and activists, many of whom had never written fiction of any kind before, let alone science fiction. While interviewing Imarisha, Macaré asked her to explain why the mix of established authors and first-time writing activists was important for the collection and she replied by saying that 'We firmly believe that all organizing is science fiction, and that organizers and activists are sci-fi creators' (quoted in Macaré, 2015). As she also illustrates in her introduction to the anthology,

> Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction. Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds – so what better venue for organizers to explore their work than science fiction stories? That is the premise of the book you hold in your hands (Imarisha and Brown, 2015, p. 3).

By opening the introduction with this declaration, Imarisha demonstrates her awareness that some people in the field of science fiction will most certainly ask whether the stories presented in the anthology can be really considered as science fiction works, therefore implying that social activists writing such stories may not be really creating actual science fiction. However, she claims that the belief that lies at the heart of the whole anthology is that all organizing is science fiction because whenever we talk about a world free of white supremacy and patriarchy where everyone has food, clothing, shelter, quality education, we are, indeed, talking about a world that does not exist yet. Nevertheless, the very same action of dreaming up such a world means that we can start building it into existence. In this sense, what activists and organizers have in common with science fiction writers is precisely the fact that they both are engaged in the process of imagining a better world. In a way, therefore, social justice appears to be an appropriate and particularly suitable theme for science fiction. By bringing together a group of social activists, most of whom had never written science fiction before, Imarisha and Brown expand the boundaries of science fiction into what they rightly call visionary fiction. Besides, the anthology also includes non-fiction pieces such as an essay by political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal and an essay by visionary black horror writer Tananarive Due. In "Star Wars and the American Imagination," Abu-Jamal demonstrates how the reason behind the cultural resonance of the *Star Wars* movie had to with the connection that it was possible to make between the rebel-imperial war in the movie and the actual political rebellion in the real world, when the American public tended to embrace and identify with a story about a group of rebels fighting their imperial overlords. In "The Only Lasting Truth," Tananarive Due deals with recurring themes in Butler's work, such as change and adaptation, basing part of her examination also on her personal relationship with Butler. Imarisha and Brown decided to include some essays in the collection in

order to add examples of explicit analysis together with the visionary stories offered. As Imarisha explains to Macaré,

> It is important for us to imagine our own futures and dreams, but we also have to engage with and think critically about the mainstream sci-fi that is being put out, because all too often folks use sci-fi as escapism and do not think about the political framework they are taking in as they watch or read it. (quoted in Macaré, 2015)

Butler's work played a fundamental role in the lives of many of the writers contributing to *Octavia's Brood* because she was the first science fiction writer they read that finally introduced to the genre a number of characters that looked like them, Imarisha points out (reported in Macaré, 2015). More importantly, those characters did not appear as the usual marginalized characters, but rather as central protagonists of the stories. For this reason, Butler's literary work was fundamental in inspiring the collection. Her work includes countless examples of central characters that have been traditionally marginalized in our society such as women, people of color, and even trans people of color. Moreover, in Butler's novels they are placed at the center of society, therefore making it possible for visionary communities to emerge. Similarly, throughout their stories, the contributors demand that we see those who have been marginalized not as victims but as leaders and recognize that their ability to live outside acceptable systems is essential to creating new, just worlds. By doing this, social liberation finally appears to be possible, and in this respect science fiction plays a fundamental role as a genre because it allows us to question, challenge, and re-envision everything all at once. Imarisha (2015) explains that the science fiction stories writers create always have something to do with real issues affecting the world they live in, namely racism, gender oppression, privilege, power, and injustice, even though they use fantastical worlds as the setting of their novels. This is what Butler meant when she said, 'There is nothing new under the sun' (Imarisha, 2015). However, Imarisha (2015) claims that what Butler was able to show us through her novels is that it is possible to identify new suns that might offer us infinite opportunities to re-envision our current world. Anyway, Imarisha recognizes that 'we are not fighting a single-issue oppression system – we are fighting a white supremacist hetero-patriarchal capitalist system (word up to bell hooks) – so our response must be holistic and all-encompassing' (Imarisha, 2015). Macaré (2015) points out that the genres of science fiction and fantasy have often been accused of focusing on just one specific kind of hero, namely cis, straight and male, who epitomizes the concept of heroic individualism. However, these genres can potentially function as vehicles for expressing the power of those who tend to be marginalized because of their identity when they introduce them as protagonists of collective actions that end up achieving transformative justice. According to Imarisha, this effect is possible because

science fiction ‘is the only genre of writing that allows us not only to discard the limits of reality, but demands it of us’ (quoted in Macaré, 2015). As she further explains,

> It allows for a stepping out of the rules people think they know, and an opening up to infinite possibilities and different viewpoints. […] Imagination is not the purview of the powerful. In fact, it is often the thing that has allowed oppressed people not only to survive, but to change their conditions, and the entire world (quoted in Macaré, 2015).

Following up Imarisha’s introductory call to envision and enact better worlds through the work of science fiction, Brown ends the collection with a description of what such action looks like through social organizing and fiction writing workshops. In the outro she tells the reader what follows:

> We see ourselves as part of a growing wave of folks connecting science fiction (or what we are calling visionary fiction) with social justice. Science fiction is the perfect “exploring ground,” as it gives us the opportunity to play with different outcomes and strategies before we have to deal with real-world costs. (quoted in Kathryn Allan, 2016)

Brown calls science fiction “an exploring ground,” pointing to the very possibility of the genre of functioning as a sort of laboratory to try new strategies and visions for what is possible to achieve in the future using the tools and beliefs that we have today. As Imarisha explains to Macaré, ‘We want to not only share the stories in the collection; we want to create space for folks to practice visionary fiction themselves, to collectively ideate’ (quoted in Macaré, 2015). In this vein, they developed numerous sci-fi visioning workshops that allow people to first-hand engage with social change and science fiction by focusing on a social issue and collectively trying to create a world they can explore it in. Imarisha has also been working on a new project with social worker and organizer Morrigan Phillips. The project, known as *People’s Encyclopedia 2070*, is based on an idea Imarisha had after writing an entry on Ferguson for the encyclopedia, describing the fatal shooting of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown on the part of a white police officer, which took place in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014. The idea is that people will be allowed to write encyclopedia entries as if it was the year 2070, and major social change had happened. In this way, they will be contributing to a sort of wiki page that people can submit their entries to, making it possible to actually see the kind of futures that would be built upon the changes they dream of making. As Imarisha puts it, ‘We are dreaming new futures as historical fact, claiming the future and the right to shape it as ours’ (quoted in Macaré, 2015). Then, what remains to be done is just going out and making it happen, as Macaré (2015) comments.

With their collection of visionary fiction, Imarisha and Brown aimed at exploiting the potential of the genre of science fiction not to simply describe social conditions, but to promote social change. 'If we want to bring new worlds into existence,' Brown argues, 'then we need to challenge the narratives that uphold current power dynamics and patterns' (quoted in Matthew Irwin, 2015). Yet, according to Irwin (2015), the real power in *Octavia's Brood* is not in imagining alternative worlds, but in realizing alternative thinking, reconstituting resistance and self-determination as ways of being now, rather than as strategies for a later utopia. Macaré (2015) points out that as bleak as some of the futures imagined in the stories presented in the anthology are, all of them contain some measure of hope. In fact, Imarisha states that one of the principles of visionary fiction is precisely that even though it is realistic and dreadful, it is ultimately hopeful, or better 'Hopeful that change can happen' (quoted in Macaré, 2015). According to her, Butler's novels are definitely a great example of such principle because Butler explores the intersections of identity and imagination, all those grey areas having to do with race, gender, class, oppression, resistance, inequality, and most importantly hope. In the previously discussed *Parable of the Sower*, for example, she portrays a devastating and terrifying near future full of brutality, but coming together as a community allows people to actually build new societies within it. Nowadays, popular culture seems to be particularly interested in dystopian stories, while the stories presented in *Octavia's Brood* tend to portray a utopian future or, at the very least, a society in which certain injustices and inequalities do not exist anymore. Anyway, Imarisha claims that:

> The reality is, there will never be a true utopia (in the way it's defined popularly as this perfect society) as long as there are humans there, because we are messy, we are complex and contradictory, and we will continually need to re-envision, recalibrate and re-center our ideas of what justice, what freedom, look like. Conversely, we believe there are no true dystopias, as long as there is one human alive who can hope and can imagine a new world. (quoted in Macaré, 2015)

According to Imarisha, it is important to keep offering this kind of more positive visions to the reader (Macaré, 2015). Similarly, in her acceptance speech of the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters at the 2014 National Book Awards, science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin said:

> Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technology to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need writers who can remember freedom – poets, visionaries – realists of a larger reality. […] Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the art of words. (quoted in *The Guardian*, 2014)

The idea of remembering the dream of freedom is especially dear to Imarisha and Brown because they both descend from enslaved black people who dared to dream a world without chattel slavery at a time when everything in their life told them it was a fantasy, and nonetheless 'they claimed the right, the responsibility and the privilege of dreaming new realities into being for each of us', Imarisha points out (quoted in Macaré, 2015). As she puts it in her blog:

> My coeditor Adrienne and I, as two black women sci-fi scholars, carry this in our hearts always, because we know that we are living science fiction. We are the dreams of enslaved black folks, who were told it was "unrealistic" to imagine a day when they were not called property. Those black people refused to confine their dreams to realism, and instead they dreamed us up. Then they bent reality, reshaped the world, to create us. (Imarisha, 2015)

This led her to realize that, in a way, 'We are their science fiction dream. All people on this planet who come from oppressed communities are walking science fiction' (quoted in Macaré, 2015). As a result, Imarisha and Brown gave birth to a collection of visionary fiction as a way of realizing their ancestors' imaginings, looking up to Butler as she was the first African American woman who embarked on a similar project. As Imarisha writes at the end of her introduction to the anthology,

> At a retreat for women writers in 1988, Butler said that she never wanted the title of being the solitary black female sci-fi writer. She wanted to be one of *many* black female sci-fi writers. She wanted to be one of thousands of folks writing themselves into the present and into the future. We believe in that right Butler claimed for each of us – the right to dream as ourselves, individually and collectively. But we also think it is a responsibility she handed down: are we brave enough to imagine beyond the boundaries of "the real" and then do the hard work of sculpting reality from our dreams? (Imarisha and Brown, 2015, p. 5)

2.5. Octavia Butler's Brood: young African American women's recent contributions to YA Science Fiction

Throughout the centuries, many women have turned to utopian fiction as a way to imagine subversive strategies to overcome social disparities. Speculative fiction, in fact, can be used as tool a for practicing such strategies and envisioning possible responses to current and future catastrophes. English scholar Alessa Johns argues that utopian writing has been crucial for women for three reasons:

> First, gender equality has never fully existed, so it must be imagined if it is to become. Secondly, given women's limited political, economic and social clout, we have turned to utopian fiction as a cultural mode that allows them to make a different future comprehensible to the largest possible audience. Thirdly, utopianism offers a socially viable way of expressing deviance in a form that mirrors the writer's own situation (quoted in Ruth Kelly, n.d.).

Kelly (n.d.) then further expands the reasons proposed by Johns by adding that utopian science fiction is vernacular and accessible. Therefore, unlike other literary genres that might be considered too high, science fiction lends itself to be appropriated by its readers, by those who never would have imagined they could actually become writers. In a way, Kelly (n.d.) believes that the traditional classification of speculative fiction as "low" literature and its well-established tradition of fan fiction are precisely what allows the genre to be used in potentially interesting ways. In particular, she shares French feminist writer Helene Cixous' view, claiming that technology allows fan fiction and other writings to be disseminated quickly and cheaply, therefore avoiding in part a major obstacle in women's effort to inscribe femininity, namely what she defines as 'the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the craft, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs' (quoted in Kelly, n.d.). Kelly then reports Johns' belief that utopian literature allows women to dream about their future. In fact, it facilitates the imaginative speculation necessary for generating new liberating strategies in a patriarchal world while feminist and subaltern strategies are constantly thwarted by reactionary political and social forces. Similarly, Cixous argues that 'writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures' (quoted in Kelly, n.d.), since it allows women to get rid of the actual history and focus on achieving freedom.

The American literary landscape of the 21st century, however, is especially defined by the novels and voices of African American women writers, so much so that 'it's a fact that a high percentage of the best books that have come out in this century have been written by Black women authors' (Audible Editors, 2021). Moreover, women of color have produced some of the most revolutionary works of literature and have even won the biggest awards available. With a number of novels focused on race and gender inequality, these women have changed American science fiction literature forever. All too often, though, when reading science fiction scholarship, Butler is typically presented as one of the few African American women writers in the field that is worthy of consideration. It is undoubtedly true that black women have not yet been fully represented in speculative fiction, but newer writers such as Nnedi Okorafor, N. K. Jemisin, and Chesya Burke are pushing things in a fresher direction, and they are not alone. In fact, it is thanks to both rather well-known writers such as the above-mentioned authors and an emerging class of YA science fiction and fantasy black female writers that the genre is gradually changing, all of them being African American women who do not meet the profile of the old favorite sci-fi writer. In particular, despite those women who have become staples in the genre and whose work has had a significant impact on speculative fiction over the years, namely Octavia E. Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, and Nisi Shawl, the bounds of

science fiction and fantasy are finally been expanded by a group of quite young YA female writers of African descent. Authors such as Butler, Hopkinson, and Shawl built the foundations upon which YA science fiction lives, but this emerging group of YA African American women writers is definitely revolutionizing the genre. It goes without saying that this new wave of black female YA science fiction authors is not supported by everyone in the reading and publishing community. However, the most striking thing is that their stories often appear on bestseller lists and are even adapted to the big screen.

It is important to analyze the work of these emerging writers because their novels are capturing the heart of those black teenage girls who previously thought that changing their names or wishing they were whiter and not African would help them to be included in American society. As Zamamdoda explains, 'What these black women are doing to change that is ignoring the "natural" progression of representation by simply writing themselves into the world they portray' (Zamamdoda, 2019). Seeing yourself existing in the future can be a transformative experience for young black women because 'When you see yourself in the future, you know you have a future,' as Okorafor said in an interview with KPBS (quoted in Zamamdoda, 2019). This is a simple yet powerful truth that has been traditionally limited to a certain group of people. Representation has always been lacking in YA science fiction novels which typically focus on the coming-of-age experience of a white boy. That is the reason why it seems to be rare to see YA sci-fi sections in bookstores or libraries stocked with anything other than books about white characters and Western-style magic. These recent fantasy novels, instead, feature strong black girl protagonists who navigate fantastical worlds and universes with their supernatural powers, and that is not all. It is even likely that they will make use of black magic, especially since African witchcraft and voodoo are included in many of the stories. In fact, the recent exploration and reevaluation of African people with their customs and traditions through the lens of fantastical elements are currently exposing the readership to African culture in science fiction, highlighting its uses and its legacy in comparison to other traditions that have often felt threatened by it, Zamamdoda (2019) argues. When talking about their work, most of these African American women seem to share a deep feeling of love for the fantasy genre that, unfortunately, has often been plagued by the impossibility to see characters that looked like them in the stories they read. As a result, they all mention the lack of visibility as what led to their writing careers. Many black female authors are thus publishing YA fiction that ranges in subject matter, but sharing one common goal: to expand what it means to see black teen girls as fully-developed characters. They are writing books in which black girls take the lead as extremely brave warriors, for example, instead of playing the secondary roles requiring little agency that were typically assigned to them in previous works. Therefore, this group of authors is actively challenging the mainstream notions that the readers

may share in imagining what is possible for a black girl, particularly in YA science fiction. Even though the genre lends itself to the magical, fantastical and strange, black girls were not likely to be portrayed as superheroes, witches or warriors before. Nowadays, instead, there seems to be more space for YA African American female authors to portray black teenage girls in a range of roles. As black YA books continue to shift narratives and provide necessary commentary on race and social justice politics, these recent books spark a much-needed conversation and ignite a movement where anything is possible for a black girl. As Professor Stephanie Tolliver puts it:

> If I saw a black girl in a story at all, we were suffering from a life of slavery, enduring racism and fighting for our civil rights, living a life of poverty and struggling to survive, dealing with psychological trauma and physical violence, or disappearing into the background as a wise-cracking secondary or tertiary character. I was never the hero, the zombie slayer, or the magic wielder. I was not allowed to have *that* dream. (Tolliver, 2019)

Current YA science fiction novels written by black women authors, thus, are opening up new possibilities for African American teenage girls, challenging the literary conventions of a genre that has historically limited the telling of stories involving black protagonists. As Tolliver (2019) claims, these authors are actually attempting to realize a dream that has been deferred for far too long.

3. REWRITING THE FUTURE THROUGH *THE GILDED ONES* AND *PET*: BEING ABLE TO IDENTIFY THE REAL MONSTERS

3.1. The importance of fantasy for Namina Forna and Akwaeke Emezi

Despite the general trends that are typically dominant in the American publishing industry, in the past few years YA fantasy has been experiencing a renaissance of diverse stories that challenge the mainstream conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality thanks to the contribution of new voices, namely African American women and transgender authors, who have opened wide the door for other minority writers to share their perspective and see themselves as the hero of their story. The most remarkable aspect that this evolution in storytelling has brought about has to do with the increasing number of teenage readers who have been able to actually see themselves represented in fiction for the first time. In this respect, a special contribution has come from contemporary black writers such as Namina Forna and Akwaeke Emezi. Both born and raised in Africa, they moved to the US because of political instability and started their writing career as early as early as in their thirties.

Namina Forna is a 35-year-old Sierra-Leonean American YA writer and screenwriter. She was born in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, and she moved to Atlanta, Georgia, when she was 9 years old. In Sierra Leone, her family was privileged. Her father was a politician and her mother had her own law practice. When she was six, Forna's parents divorced and her mother moved to the US, where she had to restart her legal education at Georgetown University. Initially Forna remained in Africa with her sister, father and grandmother, but after the Sierra Leone Civil War began in 1991, friends and political allies of her father started disappearing, so he decided to send both his daughters to live with their mother in America. In the US, Forna attended Spelman College, a historically black women's liberal arts college in Atlanta, and she later attended the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts in Los Angeles, California. In an interview with Larissa Irankunda held on February 19, 2021, Forna talks about her experience in film school, focusing in particular on the final exhibition where she had to showcase her work, trying to convince a selection of agents and managers to produce it. Forna remembers this final phase of film school as a devastating experience because the agent she talked to clearly stated that nobody was going to buy her work since it was not in line with what the industry was looking for at the moment. In other words, black movies were not selling. As Forna puts it, 'It made me feel in that moment that it didn't matter how good you were. All that mattered was your skin color and your gender. And the fact that I was a black woman? Nobody would give me a chance' (quoted in Irankunda, 2021). After that experience, it was clear to Forna that as a woman of color, accessing the film industry was as difficult as accessing the publishing industry.

Forna's first YA fantasy novel, *The Gilded Ones*, was published in 2021 as the first book of a trilogy called *The Deathless Series*. The second book, *The Merciless Ones*, was published in May 2022. *The Gilded Ones* is centered around Deka, a black teenage girl who is ostracized from her village once her blood runs gold during a ceremony for acceptance that every girl is required to undergo so as to prove the purity of her blood, therefore determining whether or not she is fit to become a member of the society. In Deka's world, women whose blood runs gold are marked as impure, so they can choose to either die or join an army of impure girls who fight for the Emperor against the deathshrieks, monsters that are invading the empire. Actually, women who bleed gold, known as "alaki," are semi-immortal beings that are characterized by unique strength and speed as compared to regular humans, but the patriarchal society Deka lives in has branded them as demons. As Forna revealed in an interview with Stephanie Long held in November 7, 2019, she wrote the first draft of *The Gilded Ones* already during the second year of film school, but then she went through a very long publishing journey because she kept receiving several rejections until 2019. The publishing environment was so difficult to access for a black woman writing about black teenage girls that from the time she started writing the novel to the time she finally found a publisher it took twelve years. As she puts it,

> It's unbelievably frustrating the ways these barriers of accessibility have been put in place. And it's so harmful. Because people really don't understand the power of stories: they can shape minds, they can shape cultures, and they can have a ripple effect in shaping society as a whole. So if you always put out this certain default of whiteness being the "normal," and not wanting anything else, it creates this harm – and honestly trauma – that's perpetuated between people. It becomes this thing where it's like, I can't see myself as the hero of a story because I never saw myself in the first place. And then we end up internalizing the idea that we're not enough. That we don't *deserve* to be the heroes of our own stories. And that is the danger of having only one narrative. (quoted in Irankunda, 2021)

As Forna recalls, for over a decade, people told her to give up because she would never be a writer, but she finally made it and *The Gilded Ones* soon became a *New York Times* bestseller, making her known as the Toni Morrison of YA fantasy, according to the feminist digital media and entertainment website *Refinery29*. Just a week after the novel's release, the movie and television production company Makeready announced that it had signed Forna to write the script for a film adaptation with Misha Green as a producer.

Forna's life experiences played a crucial role in shaping the world and social system she created in *The Gilded Ones*. As she explained to Farrah Penn in an interview held in May 20, 2021, growing up in Sierra Leone during a time of war, immigrating to the US, and attending Spelman College were all foundational to the book. Because she grew up in a violent social context where women often were brutally assaulted, there were so many things that she wanted to understand about life, namely what it meant to be female, or to present as female, and why women were so often

marginalized while being told that it was for their own good. According to Forna, the value of *The Gilded Ones* lies precisely in the fact that it provides the safety of discussing all the questions that she herself as a teenager was asking through the lens of fantasy (Long, 2019). What inspired her to write the story of *The Gilded Ones* is the fact that she spent her childhood and teenage years questioning and rebelling against gender norms. When she went to Spelman College, she took women's studies classes, which finally provided her with the answers she was looking for to write the book because she discovered that all the things she had issues with were part of a system. Forna came up with the idea that would later become *The Gilded Ones* precisely at Spelman College. The idea was based on the simple evidence that women are typically seen as objects, regardless of their origins. As Forna illustrates,

> *The Gilded Ones* is very much a feminist book, and one of the things it talks about is the commodification of women, i.e., the way women and femme people are often looked at as objects with commercial value rather than human beings. (quoted in Penn, 2021)

In this vein, Forna decided to write a novel where women literally bleed gold, a metaphor intended to represent the commodification of women. At the beginning of the novel, having gold blood is introduced as a very negative experience because impure women are banished from their village and forced to fight monsters if they want to survive. Moreover, they are bled for the gold that runs in their veins, which is a very impactful way of representing the fact that women's bodies across the world are monetized and commercialized. Throughout the novel, Forna examines the concepts of femininity that she has developed growing up as a woman, both in Sierra Leone and in the US. Sierra Leone is a very patriarchal country and, as such, it requires its female inhabitants to do certain things as women. For example, Forna herself would have undergone female genital mutilation in order to become a purer woman if her parents had not prevented it. When she was told she was going to move to the US, she deeply believed that things were going to be different because she thought of America as 'the shining beacon' (quoted in Long, 2019). However, once she settled there, she realized that everything was the same because 'anywhere across the world, you can't escape being a woman' (quoted in Long, 2019). In other words, she understood that some things happen just because you are a woman, it does not matter where in the world you are. As she told Lauren Puckett-Pope (2021), in Georgia she experienced episodes of sexism too, especially when together with her female classmates, she was slut-shamed[2] for wearing low-cut tops, or when she was forced to change out of

[2] Slut-shaming is the practice of criticizing people, especially women and girls, who are perceived to violate expectations of what is typically recognized as female behavior and appearance. Examples of slut-shaming include being criticized for violating dress code policies, namely dressing in alleged sexually provocative ways.

a tight pair of pants so as not to tempt her male classmates. For this reason, as Forna puts it, '*The Gilded Ones* is a book of my anger about being a woman' (quoted in Long, 2019).

Since she was a child, reading was Forna's escape. As she told Long, through reading, she was able to ignore the atrocities of the civil war she grew up with in Sierra Leone. In particular, the very fact of disappearing into those imaginary worlds that are typical of speculative fiction is what kept her sane in spite of what was happening around her. Through her fantasy novels, therefore, Forna wishes to do the same for all the children across the world, 'so they could disappear into my work for however long it takes and they'll be safe while they're there,' as she puts it (quoted in Long, 2019). As she further explains,

> I think particularly for kids and for people who, like me, grew up in places and times when it's not safe, fantasy provides you that escape. It provides you that place where nothing can happen while you're there. I want to hold people in my world and give them what all my favorite authors gave to me, because I don't know how I would have lasted without fantasy. (quoted in Puckett-Pope, 2021)

Forna also found the same kind of comfort in fantasy once she came to the US. Being an immigrant, she was unaware of the racist views and attitudes that are widespread in America. Because she came from Africa, that is a place where everybody is black, so the color of a person's skin is not recognized as a factor that discriminates people, she was unaware of the importance of race. Therefore, understanding the way racial dynamics worked in the US took her a long time, and in the meanwhile, reading provided her a safe space. According to Forna, in fact, fantasy works as a safe way for people to examine social issues because it allows them to talk about sensitive subjects as if they were not real (Long, 2019). As Forna illustrates,

> For me, when I came to America, there was this rewriting. The American understanding of Blackness, I did not have it. It was only when I came to America that that title was put upon me, and it had a set of expectations along with that. (Puckett-Pope, 2021)

As a result, when she first arrived in the US as a 9-year-old child, she found herself having to go through a process of learning and understanding what American racism was that really shocked her belief system. For example, Forna remembers that when she began attending school in Georgia, her teachers could not understand why even though she was from Africa, she owned nice clothes and objects. To them, this was perceived as a contradiction because people of color were generally expected to be poorer than white people. In a sense, Forna had to realize that while in Sierra Leone she had grown up in luxury, in America she was suddenly poor. As she explains to Irankunda, coming from outside of the US, she tended to believe in the myth of American meritocracy according to which 'as long as you are good, as long as you try your very best, you can do it' (quoted in Irankunda,

2021). Yet, that was not the case in reality. Quite the opposite, once she came to the US, she started doubting herself according to American racism because 'That's the gaslighting America does' (quoted in Puckett-Pope, 2021), and it was only when she started attending Spelman College that she was finally able to rewrite that gaslighting.

Similarly to most contemporary female authors, Forna was mainly drawn to write fantasy novels because as a black woman, she has never been able to see herself represented in a fantasy book (Long, 2019). When she was a child, her grandmother used to tell her stories about strong black women. However, growing up, she noticed that western literature, instead, lacked black female heroes, and she wanted to change that, which is the primary intent behind *The Gilded Ones*. As she says in "A letter from Namina," a short letter that is included at the end of the novel,

> After all, the world we live in right now is not so different from the world in my book. These are dire times – times that call for heroes. In *The Gilded Ones*, I hope I've created heroes that can be all of us. To every person reading this book, know that you are the hero of your own story. You can make things happen, and you can change the world. Choose to change the world for good. To all my teen readers, know that this is a world I've created for you. If you can't find yourself anywhere, find yourself here. (Forna, pp. 414-415)

According to Forna, speculative fiction represents the heroic tales of people of culture, so the position that fantasy literature reaches as a product of a specific culture in a way determines the way people see themselves as members of such culture (Long, 2019). In other words, the lack of representation of people of color is extremely problematic because it implies a negative connotation to be associated with black culture.

Akwaeke Emezi is a 35-year-old Nigerian Igbo and Tamil writer who identifies as non-binary transgender[3]. Their father is Nigerian and their mother grew up in Malaysia after her parents immigrated from Sri Lanka. Emezi was born in Umuahia and raised in Aba, Nigeria, and they moved to Appalachia, United States, when they were 16 years old. They gained major recognition for their debut novel *Freshwater* in 2018, which explores their Igbo heritage through a semi-autobiographical story. Emezi's first YA fantasy novel, *Pet*, was published in 2019. It was originally designed to be a trilogy, but it was only followed by a prequel, *Bitter*, which was released on February, 2022. *Pet* has been named one of *Time* Magazine's 100 Best Fantasy Books of All Time and it received the Stonewall Book Award, which recognizes achievement in LGBTQIA+ literature. The protagonist is a black transgender teenage girl, Jam, who lives in a utopian town called Lucille. In this fictional world, adults refuse to acknowledge the existence of monsters because they firmly believe that angels have defeated all of them. One day, Jam cuts her hand on a razor blade embedded in one of her mother's paintings, which is a canvas with sharp objects incorporated within, and her blood gives life

[3] They use the pronouns they/them/their.

to Pet, a furry, gold-feathered, faceless creature with goat legs and ram horns that her mother had painted. Throughout the story, Jam will be informed that Pet has come to life so as to hunt a monster that is still living in Lucille, and it needs Jam's help.

In an episode of the *First Draft Podcast* hosted by Mitzi Rapkin on May 31, 2022, Emezi discussed the importance of modern, inclusive novels in changing the way young readers see things in the world. In particular, Emezi highlighted the importance of including diverse characters in romance novels because the very fact that they can see themselves represented through a number of characters that actually get the happily ever after that is typical of romance, does change their actual belief in a happily ever after since it opens up a series of possibilities for them too. In an interview with Sasha Bonét held on March 16, 2018, Emezi pointed out that people typically tend to consider their reality the center of the world and anything else that deviates from it is perceived as a threat, therefore leading them to react in hostile ways to all those realities that are other than their own. For this reason, Emezi states that 'My work is about inhabiting realities that people don't consider real or valid' (quoted in Bonét, 2018). According to Emezi, the power of speculative fiction as a genre lies in its ability to build different types of worlds, and that is the reason why they started reading fantasy books in the first place, that is to say to escape the reality surrounding them during their childhood in Nigeria, which was characterized by a harsh dictatorship and frequent riots. Nowadays, as they put it, 'I'm still the kid trying to read about fantasy worlds to get away from this one' (quoted in Bonét, 2018). Significantly, *Pet* has been published by Make Me a World, an imprint of Random House Children's Books that is committed to exploring and offering all the possibilities of contemporary childhood. As the description of the imprint included in the novel itself says,

> We strive to imagine a universe in which no young person is invisible, in which no kid's story is erased, in which no glass ceiling presses down on the dreams of a child. Then we publish books for that world, where kids ask hard questions and we struggle with them together, where dreams stretch from eons ago into the future and we do our best to provide road maps to where these young folks want to be. We make books where the children of today can see themselves and each other. When presented with fences, with borders, with limits, with all the kinds of chains that hobble imaginations and hearts, we proudly say – no. (Emezi, p. 3)

Emezi too wishes to write YA novels so as to provide teenage readers with the answers they are looking for in real life. In *Pet*, for example, Jam is portrayed as a curious teenager who wants to know more about the society she lives in, especially as regards the alleged existence of monsters. The adults surrounding her, however, do not seem willing to share their knowledge with their children, hiding behind the excuse of protecting them. Jam's teachers, in particular, only vaguely answer her questions, limiting themselves to mentioning religious books with reluctance because they do not want to influence their students. As a teacher once tells Jam, 'If you really want to know, […] there's always the library' (Emezi, p. 14). Similarly to all those teenagers who do not understand why adults

are hesitant to talk about sensitive issues with them, Jam keeps wondering '*Why can't they just tell me*[4]?' (Emezi, p. 14). In order to satisfy Jam's desire for knowledge, Emezi introduces the character of Ube, a librarian who helps Jam and her best friend, Redemption, learn about the angels' revolution and the monsters. As he tells them when they ask for his help,

> Now, I want y'all to know that y'all's parents may not be too hot about me showing these to you, being as you made young and whatnot. But all this was material suitable for kids your age back then, feel me? And if you come here looking for information, I'ma give it to you. That's what I do. Ain't no grown-up in the whole of Lucille grown enough to tell you you don't deserve answers to your questions. You understand? (Emezi, p. 149)

The library, therefore, is portrayed as a place of knowledge, possibly implying that books played the same role in the author's life, both as a child who grew up in Nigeria in a war time and as a transgender of color in the US.

3.2. The role of African culture, traditions and ideals

Both in the case of Forna and Emezi, it is important to highlight that because their writing is influenced by their ethnic origins, they contributed to the renovation of science fiction as a genre that has always been closely connected to western culture and its association with modernity and the future by inserting their African culture and non-western epistemology. *The Gilded Ones* and *Pet*, in particular, differ from mainstream YA fantasy in that they incorporate West African language and traditions. Both authors, in fact, are including their African heritage in their works, first of all by giving their characters unusual names that often recall the customs of people of African descent.

As regards *Pet*, Emezi conjures their African culture by introducing types of food, clothes, and music that are typical of such culture. What is interesting, besides, is that they make reference to them in their original language, without translating it. Jam's father, Aloe, is often portrayed while cooking traditional African dishes, for example. One of the most representative scenes is the moment when he is described as 'standing at the stove, barefoot and in a rumpled jalabiya, stirring a pan' and 'Jam could smell the saltfish buljol he was making' (Emezi, p. 74). 'Aloe spooned out some buljol on a plate, sprinkled finely chopped shadowbeni as a garnish' (Emezi, p. 74). The "jalabiya" is a typically white full-length garment with long sleeves that has its origin in Egypt, but it is traditionally worn in Northern Nigeria where there are many Muslims. Saltfish "buljol" is a salad dish that is usually eaten at breakfast, Meinhilde (2016) explains. Originating in Trinidad and Tobago, it consists of chopped salted cod, onion, tomato, peppers, and chilies. "Buljol" is a corruption of the French "brûle gueule," which means "burn mouth." "Shadowbeni," popularly known as "chadon beni" in the

[4] Italics is used to visually represent the fact that Jam is expressing herself through sign language.

English-speaking Caribbean, is a type of herb with a strong, pungent scent and flavor that is extensively used as a garnish and to dress various foods in Caribbean cooking since it grows naturally throughout most Caribbean islands. In another occasion, Aloe is described as 'frying plantains in slanted golden slices' (Emezi, p. 173), which are a staple of Nigerian cuisine. In particular, he is making "dodo," which is the way the plate is called in Yoruba and refers to fried sweet plantains. In terms of clothes, Malachite, Redemption's mother, is depicted as wearing a 'batik apron' (Emezi, p. 99). As "The Craft Atlas" (n.d.) illustrates, 'batik is a technique of wax-resist dyeing applied to whole cloth.' The cloth is then mainly used for skirts, jackets, and aprons. A tradition of making batik is found in various countries such as Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Nigeria. Like the Javanese batik, which is the best-known and most developed in terms of technique, the batik of Nigeria is made of different traditional patterns that correspond to the region they originated in. However, in all of Africa, where batik was originally imported by Dutch merchants from Indonesia, paste made from starch or mud is used as a resist instead of wax. Emezi draws on her cultural traditions also through music. For example, Jam's mother, Bitter, who uses to paint while listening to music, is described as 'playing ragas […], haunting things full of sitar and table and sarod' (Emezi, p. 32). Indian classical music is based on the ragas, which are scales and melodies that provide the foundation for a performance, Scaruffi (2003) explains. Similarly to jazz music, this type of music allows for a great degree of improvisation. As a result, each performance of a raga is different. The goal of the raga is to create a trancey state that stimulates a mood of ecstasy. In fact, Jam's mother usually plays ragas while she is painting so as to immerse herself in her art. The sarod and the sitar are part of the most popular instruments in Hindustani music. The sarod is known for a deep, introspective sound that contrasts with the sweet, reverberant sound of the sitar. Tabla is played for maintaining the metric cycle as set by the various compositions. Emezi became familiar with raga music because of her mother's origins. In particular, they remember a specific evening raga that their uncle used to play every night in Malaysia and that they included in *Blesi*, a short that was released in 2014. Another type of music that Emezi includes in the novel is 'soca music' (Emezi, p. 86), the genre that Jam uses to listen to. Soca artists combine the Afro-Caribbean rhythms of traditional calypso, one of the most enduring Caribbean music genres, with the music of India and dancehall beats that gained popularity in Trinidad and Tobago during the 1970s, as the MasterClass staff (2022) illustrates. The word "soca" is a combination of soul and calypso. A specific type of soca music is raga soca, which fuses traditional soca with Jamaican dancehall beats and instrumentation, most notably electric bass and electronic drums. Like raga soca, another type of soca music that draws on the traditions of Jamaican dancehall is Afrosoca, but it also leans heavily on the Afrobeat tradition that thrives among Nigerian musicians based in Trinidad and Tobago. Other than culture and traditions, Emezi also includes in

the novel some words and expressions that are typical of Nigerian languages. An example is 'Abeg' (Emezi, p. 173), which is a Nigerian Pidgin term for saying please. Another example is the expression "koro-koro eyes," which is an instance of repetitious phrases that are especially common in Nigerian Pidgin. It refers to something that is obvious or glaring in the open, so it means to have a clear vision. In fact, when Aloe says 'Looking at it with my own two koro-koro eyes as it's standing in front of us' (Emezi, p. 57), he means that he saw the creature with his very own eyes. Finally, when he says 'Ewela iwe, eh? We didn't know' (Emezi, p. 27), he is telling Deka not to be angry in Igbo language.

On the other hand, *The Gilded Ones* is also an African-inspired fantasy. In particular, Forna drew inspiration from her upbringing in Sierra Leone and her West African culture. Considering the setting of *The Gilded Ones*, the novel is set in a fictional world that is based in large part on Sierra Leone, so it is a sort of fantastical version of Forna's homeland. As she wrote to Sarah Ducharme, a teacher and librarian who reviewed the novel,

> While I did not base *The Gilded Ones* on any single African culture, I was mainly influenced by Sierra Leonean culture, which is my native culture, as well as Nigerian culture, which is partly what I am descendent from. In particular, the fictional city of Hemaira is a mix of the ancient city of Benin, in what is now Nigeria, and Freetown, Sierra Leone, which is where I'm from. The walls of Hemaira are based on the walls of Benin, while the topography of the city – all the mountains and lakes – are based off Freetown.' (quoted in Hoiseth, 2022)

Set in landscapes inspired by West Africa, the story involves a number of characters that represent the cultural diversity of Otera, the fictional region where the action takes place. As Ducharme explains, Otera is a Japanese word meaning "temple" (quoted in Hoiseth, 2022). The kingdom consists of four provinces organized into two large islands and a group of smaller islands. The largest island is cut vertically in half by the N'Oyo mountains and it presents a large desert in the south, the Nibari Desert. According to Ducharme, the name of the mountains may be inspired by the Oyo state of ancient Nigeria (quoted in Hoiseth, 2022). The second largest island includes the Northern and Eastern provinces, which are characterized by snow-capped mountains and forests. Deka lives in Irfut, in the North, and the monstrous deathshrieks she has to fight against are mainly located in the south, deterred by the high mountains surrounding her home. In building this fantastical world, Forna was deeply influenced by the stories of long-ago African civilizations that her father and her grandmother used to tell her as a child. Besides, her country itself appeared to be magical to her. As she recalls, it was made of 'mountainous tropical rainforest bordered by endless beaches' (quoted in Penn, 2021). As she further illustrates,

> I could see whales sometimes from my veranda when I looked out, and there were always parrots at my house, and monkeys would sometime swing by. So I grew up thinking that Sierra Leone, and Africa, by extension, was this magical place. And I wanted to reflect that in my work, which is why the world of *The Gilded Ones* looks the way it does. (quoted in Penn, 2021)

As regards the cultural elements of Otera inspired by Forna's African heritage, they include language, religion, symbolism, social structures, and rituals. First of all, it is important to highlight that the novel is steeped in African tribal practices and customs. The inhabitants of Otera are represented as strongly connected with their religious beliefs. In general, they pray to an Infinite Father called Oyomo. Oyomo is a made-up word which borrows from Yoruba words in Nigeria, Forna explained (Hoiseth, 2022). Oyo is a town in the southwestern Nigeria and Oya is the third wife of Shango, who is an Orisha, that is to say a deity worshipped by the Yoruba people of West Africa. In the novel, Oyomo is represented by a "kuru," that is a symbol of the sun. In present-day Nigeria, Kuru is the name for a group of villages in the central region of the country. For what concerns the language of the novel, it is based on Forna's tribal language, Temne, as well as Krio, which is a West African Pidgin English that also borrows from French, Arabic, and a number of African words. Forna, in fact, is of the Temne tribe in Sierra Leone. In *The Gilded Ones*, she decided to use some words from the Temne language, and even certain symbols and traditions. An example is the word "alaki," which is the label given to girls like Deka whose blood runs gold. "Alaki" is a Krio word that means useless or unwanted, and is probably Arabic in origin. Another example is "Warthu Bera," the name of the complex where the warrior girls live and train together, because in Temne the word for girl is "wath bera." Furthermore, the name of the city of Hemaira may be inspired by the Arabic word that sounds similar, meaning reddish color. In terms of traditions, Forna makes reference to "owareh," which Deka refers to as a southern board game that her mother loved to play. Oware is considered the oldest mancala game in the world. As the webpage known as "Mancala World" (n.d.) shows, it is a two-player turn-based strategy game board usually played with small seeds or stones and rows of holes in the earth. It is believed to be of Ashanti origin and it is played in different parts of Africa. In addition, Forna introduces the use of "assegai" in battle, that is to say long wooden spears tipped with sharp onyx blades that were commonly widespread all over Africa before the introduction of firearms (Tabalia, 2020). Furthermore, Deka's mother uses "tozali" to line her eyes and protect them from the sun. In Nigerian languages, it is a sort of eye cosmetics that works as a black eyeliner. Other than cosmetics, Forna also introduces the practice of carving tribal scars to mark people as members of a certain tribe, as well as ritual scars, the latter used as evidence of a certain ceremony. Finally, one last cultural element that is especially present in the novel are masks, which represent West African culture in general. As Ducharme illustrates, in Sierra Leone there are special masks for every occasion, and each mask has a specific meaning (Hoiseth, 2022). Similarly, in the novel there are masks for various purposes. For example, the courtiers wear masks to show their submission to the emperor the same way women wear masks so as not to offend the eyes of Oyomo. Another type of masks that is widely used in the novel are personalized helmets to wear in battle.

In short, Forna wanted to set the novel in an African society that sort of mirrored the society she grew up. In a similar vein, Emezi wanted to include a number of elements that could be associated with their African culture. Both novels, thus, offer a window onto a landscape and culture that may be unfamiliar to some readers and, at the same time, they show a reflection of the personal heritage of other readers that usually tend to be excluded from fantasy, namely people of African descent. Moreover, both novels question western epistemology and its focus on binarism by offering a non-Western world view that tends to emphasize the connection of people rather than division. In fact, the protagonists are not alone in their hunting experience. Contrary to western-based fantasy novels that typically portray the great deeds of a single hero who manages to defeat the enemies just with his own hands, Deka and Jam reach their goal thanks to the help of their friends. Besides, once they win over the monsters, they clearly state that they rely on the help of their community for spreading the truth and preventing other people to suffer in the future. In this way, the authors are bringing in a sense of community that unites human beings and goes beyond the differences, exactly as they do by introducing diverse characters the reader is led to identify with because of what they have in common rather than classifying them as "other" because of what marks them as different. As a result, readers can feel as if they are tied together into a personal experience that involves many people of different ethnic backgrounds who can recognize themselves as part of a larger community because of the experiences they share as humans.

3.3. African heroines challenging the stereotypical gender representation of science fiction

The Gilded Ones and *Pet* challenge stereotypical gender roles in fantasy worlds by introducing diverse characters and situations. In fact, both novels have a black teenage girl protagonist who represents the heroine of the story. On the one hand, *The Gilded Ones* introduces a 16-year-old black female protagonist named Deka who is born and raised in Irfut, a small village in the Northern provinces where people treat her like a stranger because of the color of her skin, which marks her as a Southerner. In Irfut, the Southern provinces are considered as the home of the hated tribes that in the past conquered the North and forced it to join the One Kingdom, now known as Otera. As Deka puts it, 'All everyone else ever sees is how different I look from them' (Forna, p. 16). Her difference is further highlighted when she is officially deemed impure by the Ritual of Purity, but in spite of simply portraying her as a hopeless character, Forna makes her join an all-female army of superpowered women who are trained to fight against the monsters that are invading their land. In this context, she is no longer ashamed of what she is because she learns that 'No matter my origins, there is worth in what I am' (Forna, p. 184). As a warrior, Deka is supported by a shapeshifting animal

called Ixa, a horned creature that usually looks feline but is able to transform into a gigantic monster when it has to protect her in the battlefield.

Through the character of Deka and the other alaki warriors in general, Forna challenges a number of stereotypes that are typically associated with women. In particular, Tonisha Kimble (2021) claims that the author writes against the b-word stereotype that functions as a way to trap women in patriarchal systems. As Forna puts it, 'Any time a girl does anything that goes against the acceptable norm, she's called that word as punishment' (quoted in Kimble, 2021). In the novel, Forna uses the b-word a few times so as to show its insidiousness, especially when common soldiers, villagers, and even the Emperor hurl abusive words at the alaki because they believe that women do not belong in the battlefield. Examples of such words are 'filthy bitches' (Forna, p. 396), 'unnatural bitch' (Forna, p. 403), and 'demon-whores' (Forna, p. 219). Another widespread stereotype that Forna challenges in the novel is the angry black woman, which again functions as a trap, and it is carefully crafted so as to target a specific group of women, that is to say black women. In other words, the angry black woman stereotype has profoundly racist implications because as Forna illustrates,

> To be an angry black woman is to be a loud, aggressive and unfeminine person, and, ironically, you don't have to have any of these characteristics to be labeled an angry black woman. All you have to do is be black, female, and exist, and you will be seen as this. (quoted in Kimble, 2021)

In a way, this stereotype works as a means that keeps black women in their place because their being angry is used as an excuse for justifying the impossibility for them to reach a higher position in life. As Kimble (2021) points out, Forna extremely hates this stereotype because it prevents her from claiming her anger as a black woman. If she does not want to be labelled an angry black woman, then, she cannot express her anger. Yet, according to her, anger is a positive feeling because it allows to understand that there is something wrong that needs to be addressed. Nevertheless, girls are often thought that the very fact of feeling anger is a problem, so they tend to grow up hiding that emotion or masking it as a more acceptable form of manifestation such as sadness or depression. As Forna puts it, 'My hope is that girls learn to listen to their anger, and to treasure it, because it is a protective emotion' (quoted in Kimble, 2021).

Unlike typical fantasy characters who are generally depicted as flawless, Forna introduces teenage girls who are all dealing with trauma on some level. Deka and Belcalis, for example, very clearly suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is a disorder that usually develops in people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event (Fadwa, 2021). In the case of Deka, in fact, she undoubtedly experienced a very traumatic situation when she saw her blood running gold and everybody abandoned her, including her father. Moreover, still, she experienced a number

of even more traumatic events when she was locked in the cellar where she was tortured in the worst possible ways by the elders of her village. As Kimble (2021) points out, Forna focuses on a group of girls who have been cast out from society because of an alleged mark of impurity, so that even though they are only in their teen years, they have already gone through countless painful experiences. Forna describes many different instances of physical acts of violence towards the girls that are intended to expose how brutal and depraved a patriarchal society can become. *The Gilded Ones* has been often described as a violent book precisely because it shows various examples of horrifying things that are done to women in order to get them to comply with the dominant ideology. Violence, though, is there for a purpose. As Forna puts it, 'I wanted to show, through a fantastical lens, the horrors that women and girls undergo across the world' (quoted in Fadwa, 2021). Throughout the novel, thus, Forna shows what it means for young women to exist in an extremely patriarchal society, what happens if they do not conform, and what kind of traumas can arise from that, but most importantly, she focuses on how they can fight back.

Throughout the novel, Deka undergoes a deep evolution as a character. At the beginning, she is presented as a delicate, insecure, almost coward girl, but during the novel, Forna portrays her growth into a young woman who becomes aware of her strengths. As Forna explained to Penn (2021), the idea for writing Deka as the protagonist of the novel came from a dream she used to have about a girl in golden armor. At first she had imagined Deka 'as a Buffy-like character, already questioning and powerful from the womb' (quoted in Penn, 2021),[5] but this kind of depiction did not feel true considering the harsh circumstances she was supposed to find herself in. As Forna puts it, 'It felt like a trope, rather than a character' (quoted in Penn, 2021). As a result, Forna decided to initially portray Deka as a docile young girl who allows other people to define her in her place, simply because she grew up indoctrinated in a system that forced her to be so submissive. However, as she grows up throughout the novel, she realizes how much the short-sightedness of the society she was part of has been affecting her, and she is finally able to figure out who she truly is and find her own voice to define herself, which has been a personal struggle for Forna herself too, as she reveals to Irankunda (2021). In fact, once she moved to the US and she was no more a child, she had to unlearn almost everything she had grown up learning. Besides, she had to learn how to assert herself and find her place in the world as a black woman, given that everything appeared to her as being geared to ensure that people of color never found a way to take up space. Anyway, Forna admits that it was really

[5] Forna is referring to the protagonist of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, an American TV series based on the film of the same name, which was written by Joss Whedon and came out in 1992. The protagonist, Buffy Summers, is the latest in a line of young women known as "Vampire Slayers", the "Chosen Ones" who are chosen by fate to battle against vampires, demons, and other dark creatures.

painful to write Deka's experience because she is actually put through a lot of trauma in the novel. Accordingly, 'It took a lot to write Deka's mental state truthfully without being sensational or exploitative' (quoted in Penn, 2021).

On the other hand, *Pet* presents a 15-year-old black transgender girl named Jam who hunts a monster that is hiding among the inhabitants of her town together with her best friend and a fantastical creature named Pet. Emezi does not go into much detail about Jam's physical appearance. We only know that when she was ten, Jam received an implant with the blockers and when she was thirteen, she received a hormone implant, described as 'a tiny cylinder nestled in Jam's upper arm, administering estrogen to her body' (Emezi, p. 27). Her mother, then, taught her how to do breast self-exams and talked to her about fertility options, and when she was fifteen, Jam decided that she wanted surgery. Her father told her: 'You know you're still a girl whether you get surgery or not, right? No one gets to tell you anything different' (Emezi, p. 28). Anyway, Jam always had her family's full help and support because her parents understood from the very beginning how important it was for her well-being to go through the surgery. As the novel says, 'She didn't have to wait to be considered an adult for her wants around her body to be acted on' (Emezi, p. 28). Emezi, thus, really challenges the mainstream depiction of YA fantasy heroes by introducing as the protagonist of their novel a black transgender girl who is totally supported by her parents and community, giving her an ordinary life where she can enjoy her existence without being constantly put in serious danger. As her father says, 'It wasn't like how it used to be, back when the world was different for girls like her' (Emezi, p. 28). In this way, instead of writing a book about black trans people dying, Emezi gives Jam a life where death is not even a risk for her.

Similarly to Forna, Emezi also distance themselves from the perfect heroes that are typically found as the protagonists of YA fantasy novels. Jam, in fact, is portrayed as a neurodivergent teenager who communicates in several different ways throughout the novel, from verbally to non-verbal signing and mental communication. In particular, Jam mainly speaks verbally with her mother while she tends to use sign language to communicate with nearly everyone else. Significantly, we learn that as a toddler, Jam refused to speak and, instead, she used her body to communicate, that is why her parents taught her to sign. However, when she was three, she used her voice for the first time to insist that she was a girl when someone had complimented her for the thousandth time by calling her 'such a handsome little boy' (Emezi, p. 27). Because of her ability to use body language, Jam is able to understand what the people around her communicate through their bodies. As she points out once in the novel, 'They had such loud conversations around her even when they weren't using their words, as if she couldn't understand all the other kinds of languages that didn't need sound' (Emezi, p. 77). Notably, Jam is able to understand the language her parents speak with their eyes, for example when

they express their worry after acknowledging the presence of Pet. Jam, besides, is able to communicate telepathically with Pet. She can hear its thoughts into her mind and the creature, in turn, can read her thoughts. Rather than speaking out loud, it speaks directly into Jam's head. All these different types of communication are graphically represented in the novel through different textual formats. Verbal language is visually expressed through the traditional format while sign language is graphically represented in italics and telepathic communication between Jam and Pet is conveyed through a flux of words without inverted commas.

3.4. The courage to see the unseen

From both *The Gilded Ones* and *Pet*, it emerges that the female protagonists are capable of seeing things that the world would rather keep hidden. As regards *Pet*, the novel takes place in a utopian American future, after a revolution carried out by angels has rendered the fictional town of Lucille a supposedly monster-free city. Both at home and in school, all the children have been taught that angels removed all the monsters from America and the world is now completely safe. As it is stated at the beginning of the novel, 'Angels could change the world, and Lucille was proof' (Emezi, p. 14). Lucille, the birthplace of the revolution, is thus portrayed as a utopian symbol of the peacefulness that the angels have been able to achieve, with 'justice rising like a sun over the hill in a loud morning' (Emezi, p. 94). The town is inhabited by African American people from all across the diaspora and racism, anti-gay, and anti-trans hatred are now relics of the past. As Emezi points out, Lucille as a town is based on the kind of towns that Toni Morrison used to write about in her books, meaning that as a black quasi-utopian town, it represents a little world in itself where all the people of African descent live together (Bergado, 2019). Jam's family, for example, is West African and West Indian, and Redemption's family is black American. Anyway, when Jam accidentally conjures Pet from her mother's painting, she finds out that there may still be a monster in her town, and to make matters worse, it is hidden in her best friend's house. Jam's parents bluntly refuse to believe that a monster could still exist in Lucille and claim: 'This is a new Lucille. We're safe. There are no monsters' (Emezi, p. 61). They nevertheless admit that it is not the first time that a creature emerges from Bitter's work because it already happened when they were a little older than Jam. Anyway, they immediately end the conversation by saying that 'It was a different time. There were monsters to hunt; that part was understandable. But Lucille has changed. This one has to have the wrong place' (Emezi, p. 76). In short, they believe Pet must be mistaken and they ask Jam to send it back from where it came since she is the one who gave it life. Bitter even believes that it might have taken advantage of Jam's feelings towards Redemption in insinuating that the monster is hidden in his house so as to persuade her to let it stay. Anyway, as Bergado (2019) asks, 'How do you save the

world from monsters if no one will admit they exist?'. According to him, this is one of the central questions of the novel, and as Emezi told him, it was precisely the issue they wanted to deal with. Referring to the kind of attitude that is typically widespread in the US, they point out that

> Here, people aren't really acknowledging what was happening around us, they're not really looking directly at things. So I wanted to tell a story where a young person is in the middle of that, being challenged to look directly at a problem without the support of the other people around her and as a young person, how do you deal with the problem if no one else will look at it. (quoted in Bergado, 2019)

Later in the novel, Pet will explain to Jam that she does not have to blame her parents for not believing her because they are adult humans. As it puts it, 'Younger ones have fewer blocks about belief' (Emezi, p. 127), and that may possibly reflect Emezi's own view in this respect. Jam, however, corrects her parents' belief by pointing out that *'There are no* free *monsters in Lucille,* [especially] *that we know of'* (Emezi, p. 30). As a consequence, she only pretends to obey their request and starts hunting the monster. She tells Redemption about Pet and the hunt, but she omits the detail concerning where the monster might be hiding. Since adults are not willing to help them, Jam and Redemption go to the library to look for information about how monsters look like. During their research, they find pamphlets on child abuse from before the revolution and Redemption realizes that Moss, his 7-year-old younger brother, displays signs of a child who has been abused. In particular, he has many bruises on his body that Redemption naively thought were caused by skateboarding. When they speak to Moss, he is only able to depict his abuser with a drawing. He draws a picture of a hibiscus flower to name his abuser, Redemption and Moss' uncle Hibiscus, a former angel and respected citizen. Redemption's parents do not believe him when he tries to inform them about the abuse, maintaining that there are no monsters left in Lucille, as all the adults in the novel. They refuse to see the drawing as something more than just a drawing because in their view, monsters are not real anymore. Jam, Redemption, and Pet then make Hibiscus confess to his crimes. At first, Pet is eager to kill him, but Jam manages to convince it to leave Hibiscus alive as an example for the town. After a hearing, Hibiscus is taken away for rehabilitation together with his wife, Glass, who was aware of the abuse and did nothing to stop her husband. Shocked from their blindness, angels begin to implement programs to ensure that other monsters might not be hiding in Lucille and Pet returns to where it came from after making Jam promise that she will not be afraid.

The novel opens with the following letter to the reader by Christopher Myers, the creative director of *Make Me A World*:

> Dear Reader, They don't make evil like they used to. Politicians make policies putting children in cages and allow big companies to pour poison into our air and water. But they will say they are just doing it to support business, and that we'll all reap the benefit of the poison eventually. There are people who scream their hatred to the skies, burn torches and mock those who are different from themselves. Even they have their excuses,

> usually something about protecting a "way of life." There are no villains anymore. On television, in movies, villains are easily recognizable. The bad guys wear long dark robes and have no noses, or wear tight-fitting suits and have red eyes. There is something comfortable in this idea, that when you see evil, you will know it. That it cannot be hiding in the everyday faces of people you ride the bus with, or go to school with, or share a sandwich with at lunch. Hannah Arendt, the political philosopher, coined the phrase "the banality of evil" – that evil is very often "terrifyingly normal." She knew, as many who have suffered do, that the worst things can happen in the blandest of places – between the lines in a textbook omitting large swaths of history or in the hushing of a child who has something important to say. All these things are done in the name of keeping our worlds safe, consistent, banal. (Myers, 2019)

Appearance versus reality is one of the central themes of the novel, according to Berglind (2019). Throughout the narrative, in fact, the author teaches Jam, Redemption, and the reader alike that things are never quite what they seem. As Myers puts it, 'Akwaeke examines the journey that evil has made, from monstrosity to mainstream, [asking] us readers to reconsider our monsters, to look past the comforting illusions and, along with Jam and Redemption, hunt for the true villains in our midst' (quoted in Emezi, p. 10). In *Pet*, angels and monsters are not introduced as supernatural heroes. They rather refer to good and evil humans, as Berglind (2019) points out. Angels, on the one hand, represent the revolutionaries who banned guns, abolished prisons, prosecuted and rehabilitated corrupt police officers, and removed statues of slave-owners and racists. As the novel says, 'The angels believed and the people agreed that there was a good amount of proper and deserved shame in history and some things were just never going to be things to be proud of' (Emezi, p. 12). In the first pages, the novel details the accomplishments of the revolution and recalls the countless people who died because of violence or social inequality before the revolution, namely the people without access to health care and the people killed in wars or natural disasters. Monsters, on the other hand, represent all the evils, systemic inequalities, and instances of injustice that keep existing in American society. These labels, though, evoke stereotypes about what monsters and angels look and act like. Emezi's aim, instead, is that of exploring a more complex notion of morality, focusing in particular on the fact that looks can be deceiving. For example, when Jam wants to find out more about angels and monsters, she examines some pictures in religious books portraying angels as terrifying creatures: 'eyes filled with licking flames even as they looked out from the page, armored faces that weren't faces, wings full of mouths, wheels of reddened eyes, four-headed forms that weren't even vaguely human' (Emezi, p. 22). Jam is quite shocked by this depiction and wonders

> if real angels looked like this, then what did that mean for the angels in Lucille? Did it mean people didn't really know what they were talking about when they said angels in the first place? Angels weren't supposed to look like this. They were supposed to be good, and how could something good look like this? (Emezi, p. 23)

As can be seen, Jam's reaction is due to her firm belief that angels must be good, innocent, and righteous, all positive characteristics that are traditionally translated with beauty in visual terms. However, as her mother tries to explain her, 'Good and innocent, they not the same thing; they don't

wear the same face' (Emezi, p. 24). In fact, angels are not necessarily innocent creatures because they too had to do questionable things sometimes to keep the city safe. As Bitter concludes, 'Angels aren't pretty pictures in old holy books, just like monsters aren't ugly pictures. It's all just people, doing hard things or doing bad things. But is all just people, our people' (Emezi, p. 25).

Though several characters openly warn Jam that she cannot trust things are as they appear, it takes first-hand experience for her to learn and accept it. For instance, Bitter tells her daughter that 'Monsters don't look like anything, doux-doux. That's the whole point. That's the whole problem' (Emezi, p. 23), meaning that it is extremely difficult to identify who is or is not a monster. Anyway, it takes a great amount of effort on the part of Jam to realize that 'Pictures could be flat-out lies, [they] could be misleading' (Emezi, p. 25). It is only later in the novel, when Redemption too claims that monsters must look like something, otherwise it would be impossible for them to know what they are, that Jam signs *'Maybe it's not how people look, it's what they do?'* (Emezi, p. 117). Similarly, Pet warns Jam that

> Your knowing, you think it gives you clarity, sight that pierces. It can be a cloud, a thing that obscures. […] Some of the things you know are not true, it said. You have to learn that things might not be real, even if they look familiar. (Emezi, p. 110)

Therefore, Pet encourages Jam to see "the unseen" but at first, she is unable to identify the monster. Pet thus makes her reflect by asking her the following question after she has spent some time in Redemption's house: 'Did you find nothing because there was nothing or because you didn't want to find anything?' (Emezi, p. 111). As Pet suggests, 'The first step to seeing is seeing that there are things you do not see' (Emezi, p. 86). As it further explains,

> If you do not know there are things you do not see, it said, then you will not see them because you do not expect them to be there. You think you see everything, so you think everything you see is all there is to be seen. […] There is the unseen, waiting to be seen, existing only in the spaces we admit we do not see yet. (Emezi, p. 87)

For example, when Jam and Pet walk outside in the street, people cannot see it, even though it is visible, which is something that makes Jam doubt even whether it is actually real or not. As Pet illustrates, 'I am an unseen. They can only see you, the one they know to see' (Emezi, p. 109). Jam and Redemption, instead, are able to see Pet precisely because they are willing to see it and believe in it. In this vein, Pet tells Jam 'Your job is to find out more, and all you have to do is be willing to see, to admit that there are unseens waiting to be seen' (Emezi, p. 89). In a way, as Jam puts it, 'It would be like having new lenses put into her eyes' (Emezi, p. 96). Pet then tries to reassure Jam by saying that it is fine to be afraid because fear is human and, undoubtedly, it would be easier if nothing had changed and everything was still pretty and safe as the adults maintain. It thus describes the

utopian town of Lucille as 'A pool of water with the moon reflecting in it…who would want to throw a stone and break the picture?' (Emezi, p. 111). Unfortunately, however, the point is that

> the truth does not care about what you want; the truth is what it is. It is not moved by want, it is not a blade of grass to be bent by the wind of your hopes and desires. […] The truth does not change whether it is seen or unseen. […] A thing that is happening happens whether you look at it or not. And yes, maybe it is easier not to look. Maybe it is easier to say because you do not see it, it is not happening. Maybe you can pull the stone out of the pool and put the moon back together. (Emezi, p. 112)

In a way, Pet understands Jam's difficulty in believing the truth because 'Humans take too long to see the truth' (Emezi, p. 196) and it is there precisely because 'they fail, they have already failed, they will fail some more' (Emezi, p. 196). Besides, Pet recognizes that it is the only one admitting the possibility that there might be a monster in Lucille, but as it tells Jam, 'You can choose to believe me or not to believe me. The truth does not care. The thing that is happening will happen whether you believe me or not' (Emezi, p. 113). For this reason, it suggests Jam not to think about what she hopes for, but rather what is actually happening, and what she wants will change accordingly. When in the end Jam manages to identify the monster, it is clear, indeed, that the monster-free world is proven to be an illusion and the sense of safety proclaimed by the adults is revealed to be false. As Pet had warned already at the beginning of the novel,

> Also, the problem is, when you think you've been without monsters for so long, sometimes you forget what they look like, what they sound like, no matter how much remembering your education urges you to do. It's not the same when the monsters are gone. You're only remembering shadows of them, stories that seem to be limited to the pages or screens you read them from. Flat and dull things. So, yes, people forget. But forgetting is dangerous. Forgetting is how the monsters come back. (Emezi, p. 31)

According to Berglind (2019), Lucille ultimately works as a warning against having too much faith in utopian movements and ideals since they might lead to believing that monsters do not exist anymore. Actually, being successfully able to bring down the monsters does not solve the problem because not all monsters look like monsters. Therefore, the most important thing is to avoid stereotypes that might be misleading and focus on identifying who a person really is. As Forna puts it, 'What I'd love for my readers to take from this is an embrace of healthy skepticism. *The Gilded Ones* is about questioning the world around you and seeing it for what it really is' (quoted in Fadwa, 2021).

As regards *The Gilded Ones*, the novel takes place in a dystopian future where deathshrieks usually attack the villages near Ritual day, trying to steal away impure girls. When the monsters attack Irfut the day of Deka's ritual, she discovers she has a terrifying ability because she manages to send them away. The elders of her village lock her up in a cellar and try to kill her, afraid of her power: not only does her cursed, golden blood make her inhuman, she is even able to control the deathshrieks.

As it turns out later in the novel, the elders have always known that she is an alaki, but as they put it, 'That one is unnatural, even for an alaki' (Forna, p. 53). In fact, even though they know that alaki are able to heal their mortal wounds through a process that is known as "the gilded sleep," they try to kill her through beheading, burning, and drowning, which are typical examples of alaki's final deaths, and yet she refuses to die. One day, a mysterious woman comes to save her from torture, proposing her to join a special regiment of the emperor's army made of alaki and jatu, female and male warriors respectively. Because of the white, glowing gloves that the woman wears, Deka names her White Hands, but she is actually known as the Lady of the Equus. Her job is to find the creatures the empire deems impure, undesirable, and dangerous, namely the alaki. The alaki are taken to the training grounds of Hemaira, which are all overseen by White Hands. Once there, they will find a number of teachers called "karmokos" who will serve as their guides. The training ground Deka is assigned to is the Warthu Bera. During her staying in Hemaira, Deka learns that her abilities go beyond what is common for an ordinary alaki. Specifically, she is not only able to perceive the deathshrieks' presence, but she can also hear them as they are approaching. Moreover, she is able to command them through a sort of demonic voice emerging from her throat when she finds herself in their presence. When she commands them, however, her voice sounds deeper and her appearance changes, making her seem non human. For example, her eyes change color and become black. While training at the Warthu Bera, Deka learns how to enter the combat state, 'a state of heightened senses when you're halfway between sleep and waking, halfway between this world and the next' (Forna, p. 202). As White Hands illustrates, 'When you enter the deep combat state, you can see what others can't, feel what others can't – become faster and stronger than is normally possible for an alaki. This is the state you will use to develop your voice' (Forna, p. 202). Deka, then, learns how to control her ability so as not to use all of her energy and get exhausted. In particular, White Hands formulates a series of meditation moves that allow Deka 'to direct my energy through my veins like little rivers of power, all of them at my command,' as Deka puts it (Forna, p. 265). Her power, thus, keeps growing more and more, and as White Hands explains, every time she uses it, it changes things around her. One day, for example, during a raid while Deka is telling the deathshrieks to show themselves, her skin leathers, looking just like a deathshriek's. As a result, Deka starts doubting whether she is a sort of deathshriek herself. In fact, she seems to be able to understand the deathshrieks, even though they do not speak Oteran. They talk about a Nuru who does not care about them because she betrayed them for the humans and now is going to destroy them. Besides, when she approaches them to try to have them speak to her, she perceives an expression of betrayal on their faces. Even more surprisingly, when a deathshriek once runs towards her in battle, Deka is confused by the fact that it appears to be female, but as she says, 'They're all male, that's what we've been told. That's what we've always

seen' (Forna, p. 353). Moreover, Deka seems to recognize the deathshriek as a previous alaki who used to fight with her. As the deathshriek clarifies,

> We're one and the same! When an alaki dies her final death, she is reborn as a deathshriek! The emperor knows that. That's why he's using you to kill us. He's using you to destroy your own kind. He wants us all to die, for ever this time! (Forna, p. 354)

Thus, Deka understands that the deathshrieks are not the real monsters and that is why they keep attacking the villages. In a way, they can smell the golden blood of their alaki sisters, so they try to rescue them. As Deka recalls the time when the deathshrieks attacked her village during Ritual day, she realizes that 'Those deathshrieks did everything they could to rescue me, but I commanded them to leave, thereby dooming myself to that cellar. I was the agent of my own suffering' (Forna, p. 377).

As Deka keeps reflecting upon the deathshrieks' true nature, she understands why all the corpse piles she and the other alaki found in the deathshriek nests were always filled with male adults. They never found women or girls, not even their remains. When she finds herself in a nest again, she decides to carefully search it and, as she finds out,

> This new part of the cave has been shaped by human hands – that's immediately apparent from the grandly carved pillars and ceiling, the blue stone on the floor. That's not what shocks me, however. The colossal statues do. There's one at each of this chamber's four corners, and they are all women, from a different Oteran province. Their features are distinct, as are the clothes they wear. There's a wise-looking Southerner in flowing robes, her face angular and shrewd; a gentle Northerner in her furs, body as round as her smiling face; a warlike Easterner, scaled armour covering her from head to toe and wings on her back; and a motherly Westerner, belly round and fertile, a welcoming look in her eyes. (Forna, p. 239)

Deka consequently comes to realize that every deathshriek nest is in fact a temple of the Gilded Ones, meaning that they are the ones who have been worshipping them as goddesses. As a child, Deka was taught that the Gilded Ones were four demons who destroyed the ancient kingdoms until all the provinces united together for protection forming Otera, the One Kingdom. On the contrary, however, White Hands illustrates that

> The Gilded Ones were never demons. They were goddesses. They ruled Otera until their own sons rose up against them. The jatu desperately wanted to rule Otera, so they imprisoned our mothers and killed us, their sisters, along with all our children. They thought they had succeeded in wiping us out, the traitors, but our mothers used the last of their power to thwart them. With their last free beaths, they rendered us alaki truly deathless by giving us the power to resurrect as even fiercer creatures – deathshrieks. And then they created the Nuru, the one creature that could exist between the alaki and the deathshrieks. The one daughter who could free them all. (Forna, pp. 369-370)

White Hands confesses to being 'the Firstborn. Fatu of Izor, member of the house of Gezo, true empress of Otera' (Forna, p. 366). She tells Deka that her mother was an alaki too. In particular, she was a Shadow, a special kind of alaki that is gifted with the artful skill of subterfuge. Deka already suspected it because while training at the Warthu Bera, she had learnt that her mother was pregnant at least a full month before she met Deka's father, so it was impossible for her to be his natural child. Besides, she remembers that White Hands gave her a golden seal containing four stars, which is the same symbol that was engraved on a necklace that her mother used to wear, now turning out to be the emblem of the Shadows. White Hands explains to Deka that she originated from a golden seed that was kept by the Gilded Ones. The seed was hidden in White Hands' belly until she found Deka's mother. Deka's mother tried to protect her, but she was caught making arrangements to save her from the Ritual of Purity and she was sentenced to the Death Mandate. As Deka realizes,

> I understand now why I see so much more clearly in the dark than others, why I don't need food or water to survive, and my tolerance for pain is so much higher than the usual alaki's. The Gilded Ones gave me all the abilities I would need to survive in a world primed to kill me. (Forna, p. 386)

Deka also finds out that the emperor is White Hands' cousin and he actually is a true jatu, a male descendant of the Gilded Ones. The true jatu are the ones who buried alive the Guilded Ones in the mountains because according to them, they were 'Demons in the flesh, despite their celestial appearance' (Forna, p. 395). As the emperor illustrates,

> From time immemorial, we the jatu have vowed to protect Otera, so we imprisoned them and made sure they would never rise again. Never again would women rule Otera – this was the task of every emperor of the house of Gezo. (Forna, pp. 395-396).

As Deka comes to know, all jatu are mortal but they are characterized by greater strength and speed as compared to the alaki, their sisters. Yet, because they were fewer in number, they pretended to have lost their power and they gave ordinary human soldiers the same name, jatu, so as to create confusion. This allowed them to hide in plain sight while observing the alaki preparing for the final fight. The human recruits knew nothing, so they were exploited exactly as their female comrades. Most of the teachers in Hemaira, instead, knew everything about the secret revolution that White Hands had been planning. Some of the girls knew too, for example the Nibari twins, Adwapa and Asha. In fact, the Nibari tribe is described as living in the mountains of the remotest Southern provinces where people do not worship Oyomo, but rather an alleged secret god that used to be worshipped from the time before the four provinces became the One Kingdom. As Adwapa illustrates, 'The Nibari have always worshipped the Gilded Ones. Even after the Death Mandate, we held fast to

our beliefs. My sister and I have been waiting for this moment all our lives' (Forna, p. 388). At this point, Deka feels profoundly guilty. She describes her feelings as follows:

> I can't imagine how she must have felt, knowing all this time what the deathshrieks were but pretending otherwise, looking on and even joining in as we slaughtered them. Same with White Hands and everyone else who was part of this hidden rebellion. Their guilt is my own, an acid pit in my stomach. (Forna, p. 391)

Deka feels primarily responsible because her ability to command the deathshrieks was used to render them motionless and defenseless so that the other warriors could kill them. However, she now tries to focus on the fact that all the evil she has done by commanding the deathshrieks to their death, has been done for a purpose. In a way, it was essential to achieve the real end White Hands had been struggling for throughout her whole life. The idea of freeing impure girls from the Death Mandate and forming the alaki regiment was all her doing and, in this way, she saved the lives of countless girls. As Deka puts it,

> Now more than ever, I understand how cunning White Hands is, how meticulous she's been in her planning. She used the emperor to free her kind from the Death Mandate by promising him we would slay the deathshrieks, and instead began moulding them into an army – an army that fights at our side, now that they understand the truth of their heritage. Till our empire is free of the monsters… I understand now what she was talking about, understand who the true monsters are. (Forna, p. 383)

In other words, the true monsters are the jatu, the men who created the Death Mandate against the alaki and wrote it into the Infinite Wisdoms to give it legitimacy. White Hands' plan has always been to bring together all the alaki and gather enough power to enact a rebellion against the men who overthrew the Gilded Ones and illegitimately ruled Otera oppressing women.

When Deka finally learns the truth, she regrets not having been able to see the true monsters before. As she puts it, 'This whole time, I thought I was the hero, the righteous saviour, here to liberate Otera from the deathshriek scourge. But in reality I was the destroyer – a monster who falsely thought she was destroying monsters' (Forna, p. 311). The emperor plays with her sense of guilt as he says 'How beautiful it was to use you against the deathshrieks – *you*, the very instrument the Gilded Ones created to destroy my kind. Instead, I used you to slaughter theirs' (Forna, p. 396). He even calls her 'Murderer of your kind' and 'The great betrayer' (Forna, p. 396). Obviously Deka can only feel revulsion and disgust while thinking about all the deathshrieks she commanded to their deaths, but she manages to stand up to the emperor and declares:

> I will end this on my terms – not just for me but for every other woman he and his kind have ever brutalized and abused. No matter what he says, I will never forget what he did – what all of them did. (Forna, p. 397)

Thanks to the teachings she received at the Warthu Bera, she is able to defeat the emperor. In particular, she learnt how to anticipate the enemy's movements, how to pretend to be weaker than she actually is, and most importantly, how to discern her own infernal armor when it is disguised as some other object. Because of her training, then, she notices that the emperor is wearing a crown made out of her own blood, which makes her realize that he aims at killing her. As Deka announces,

> The emperors of Otera made a crucial mistake in dealing with our kind. They taught we alaki to suffer, but they also taught us to survive – to conquer. And we will use those lessons. It's time to take up our swords once more. Otera may be vast, but we intend to take back every last inch of it. It's time to reclaim the One Kingdom and make it ours again. (Forna, p. 412)

In fact, as Deka puts it, 'They called us demons, even though we are the daughters of goddesses' (Forna, p. 382), and as she encourages her alaki sisters, 'Today is the day we free ourselves from the jatu's lies' (Forna, p. 382).

3.5. Faith against dystopia

Despite being surrounded by adults who are unable or unwilling to see the truth, *The Gilded Ones* and *Pet* portray two young heroines who hope for a better future and act on this hope. *The Gilded Ones*, on one hand, shows a dystopian world because it deals with countless examples of violence against women. As Forna admitted to Irankunda (2019), her upbringing undoubtedly informed her writing and the way she sees the world. As she puts it,

> I think I grew up with an expectation of violence. Because when things are happening to your family members, you hear it, you know it, you see it, and you feel it in your bones. So I grew up very fearful, and always grew up with that understanding of the evil that people can do. I grew up with that violence sort of in my face. (quoted in Irankunda, 2019)

In the same vein, she claims that 'if there were actual Alaki that lived in this world, these things that I wrote in my book would happen, I have no doubt' (quoted in Irankunda, 2019). As a result, she wrote *The Gilded Ones* based on her own understanding that we live in certain systems that determine the way we think about ourselves and the social structures that order our life chances. In the dystopian world she imagined, she shows what such a system looks like and how people behave through an extreme application of the same patriarchal rules governing the society she belongs to. In the imagined world of Otera, the teachings of the Infinite Wisdoms are designed to subjugate women and justify their oppression. Every girl knows by heart the following words: 'Blessed are the meek and subservient, the humble and true daughters of man, for they are unsullied in the face of the Infinite Father' (Forna, p. 10). As Deka says in the novel, having to recite these words every time she enters a temple, for example, works as a constant reminder that 'Woman is the Infinite Father's greatest gift

to mankind' (Forna, p. 24). In fact, on the fourth day, women were created to be helpmeets to men, subservient to their desires and commands. According to this patriarchal ideology, women are prevented from doing a number of everyday activities such as simply running. Women are not allowed to run in Otera because 'Light and graceful are the footsteps of the pure woman,' the Infinite Wisdoms cautions (Forna, p. 139). Therefore, 'any girl caught walking faster than a sedate pace is whipped for her insolence' (Forna, p. 139). As Deka further illustrates,

> The Infinite Wisdoms forbids running, as it does most things that don't prepare girls for marriage and serving their families. Girls can't shout, drink, ride horses, go to school, learn a trade, learn to fight, move about without a male guardian – we can't do anything that doesn't somehow relate to having a husband and family or serving them. (Forna, p. 140)

The Ritual of Purity that every girl must attend as coming of age possibly represents the greatest example of female oppression because it aims at proving a woman's innocence just for the sake of determining whether she is eligible to marry and have a family of her own. Besides, it is only once women are proven pure that they will officially belong in the village, and after going through the ritual, they will have to wear masks that they can only remove in front of their family or dearest friends. As Deka puts it, 'Only the Ritual of Purity can ensure my place' (Forna, p. 14). Girls coming from wealthy families might even be sent to a House of Purity where they can spend the whole year before the ritual protected by pillowed halls because girls are not allowed to be near sharp things until they are proven pure. Quoting from the Infinite Wisdoms, 'Despised are the marked or scarred, the wounded and the bleeding girls' (Forna, p. 55). As Deka realizes throughout the novel, there is a precise reason why girls should not bleed a drop before the ritual:

> It's so the impure ones like me don't discover what we are, don't ask any questions before it's too late. It's also likely the reason they don't kill impure girls before the Ritual. Kill an impure girl any other time and her family will protest, the other villagers will ask questions, voice their objections… It's the Ritual that gives legitimacy to the murder. An impure girl is despised by Oyomo, her very existence an offence to Him. Her murder is sanctioned by the Infinite Wisdoms, and who can argue with the holy books? Who would dare even try? All the families can see from then on is the demon that somehow invaded their bloodline. (Forna, p. 55)

When Deka goes through the ritual and her blood does not run red, indeed, she is imprisoned and subjected to the Death Mandate imposed precisely by the Infinite Wisdoms. When White Hands offers her a possibility to survive by joining the emperor's army, initially Deka is not willing to believe her because since she has been branded impure, she is convinced that nothing will change her fate. White Hands then makes her reflect upon the fact that 'While you cower here in misery, those elders sell your gold to the highest bidder so nobles can make pretty trinkets from it. They enrich themselves off your suffering – parasites, quite literally draining the blood from you' (Forna, p. 47). The answer to Deka's question, 'What would I gain from it, other than an eternity of painful deaths

on the battlefield?' (Forna, p. 47), is absolution. 'Fight on behalf of Otera for a period of twenty years, and you will be absolved, your demonic nature cleansed. You will be pure again' (Forna, p. 48), White Hands says. At that point, Deka suddenly feels hopeful because if she can be pure, then she can have a future, and she thus decides to accept the offer.

However, Deka has so internalized the teachings of Oyomo that once she settles in Hemaira, she initially feels that she has failed as a woman. As she points out, 'I'll never wear a mask now, never be able to adorn myself in the sacred coverings of purity' (Forna, p. 79). Moreover, she is especially upset when her hair is completely shaved because 'The Infinite Wisdoms states that a woman's hair is her greatest pride, the source of her gracefulness and beauty' (Forna, p. 118). As she puts it, 'As of this moment, I'm truly nothing more than a demon, my last claim to femininity stripped away' (Forna, p. 118). Other than feeling bad because she is not observing the teachings of the Infinite Wisdoms, Deka is struck by the fact that in the Warthu Bera there are female commanders and teachers because 'The Infinite Wisdoms forbids women from working outside the house except in service to their husbands and families' (Forna, p. 103). In particular, the training grounds are overseen by Shadows who work as female spies. As one of the karmokos says when she welcomes the alaki in the Warthu Bera,

> From now until you leave this training ground, you will work harder and feel more pain than you ever have felt in your life, until we mould you from the weak, useless girls that you are into warriors – defenders of Otera. Conquer or Die, this is our motto here. (Forna, p. 121)

Deka is shocked by the powerful voice of the woman. As she explains, 'I've never heard a woman speak like that, never heard such authority coming from a female throat' (Forna, p. 122). When she is forced to run for the first time, she is afraid of the happiness she feels. As she describes her feeling, 'I've never felt this happy before. Never felt this free' (Forna, p. 140). Just for a moment, she starts doubting the teachings of the Infinite Wisdoms, wondering whether they were actually trying to show women how to live righteous lives or, instead, they were meant to cage them. In spite of that, she immediately remembers that 'The way of the faithful is trust and submission, [so] All I have to do is submit and have faith' (Forna, p. 141). In fact, she feels guilty and says 'It's not right, the euphoria I felt while running. I must cast it from my thoughts' (Forna, p. 141). As a result, at the end of the novel Deka still has the same kind of shocked reaction when she enters a temple of the Gilded Ones and her eyes are drawn to the carvings portraying female figures. As she describes them,

> Column after column shows different women doing things – *being* things – I've never dreamed possible: priests, elders, scribes, all the things men are. My anger builds as I realize how thoroughly my mind has been poisoned that I would be shocked to see women in these positions. (Forna, p. 390)

Growing up in Irfut, she could have never even imagined that women could actually behave like men. However, she finally admits that being in the Warthu Bera changed her because it allowed her to realize that she had been taught 'to believe so deeply in the Infinite Wisdoms only to eventually be caged in by its never-ending commandments and finally betrayed by the horrors of the Death Mandate' (Forna, p. 377). She thus comes to acknowledge the limitations imposed on her life by the Infinite Wisdoms and, speaking to the other alaki, she says:

> Our whole lives, we've been taught to make ourselves smaller, weaker than men. That's what the Infinite Wisdoms teaches – that being a girl means perpetual submission. That's how it was back in Irfut, me always accepting everything because I thought it was Oyomo's will. Was it Oyomo's will, the village turning its back on me, the elders dismembering me so they could sell my blood? Was it His will for them to cut out my tongue so I couldn't scream? What about all the things in the Infinite Wisdoms, the rules against running, laughing too loudly, dressing in certain ways – all of it His will? The truth is, girls have to wear smiling masks, contort themselves into all kinds of knots to please others, and then, when the death shrieks come, girls die. They *die*. […] The way I see it, we all have a choice right now. Are we girls, or are we demons? Are we going to die, or are we going to survive? (Forna, pp. 154-155)

When the girls are told by the jatu that they have the right to decide whether or not they want to stay in Hemaira, Deka is positively impressed because 'Rights are the domain of men and boys – not women, and certainly not alaki' (Forna, p. 87). Actually, the alaki do not have that much of a choice because if they decide to leave, then they will have to spend the rest of their lives as outcasts, always fearing the Death Mandate. In a way, they are 'giving us impossibilities and calling them choices' (Forna, p. 90), as Deka will later understand. On the other hand, if they decide to stay as warriors, it is unlikely that they will be valued and respected for their choice. As Belcalis drastically puts it, 'We're monsters, and they're going to treat us like monsters. They're going to use us, bleed us, and when they're done, they're going to find whatever our final deaths are and execute as one by one' (Forna, p. 106). Anyway, the alaki are considered to be the emperor's property and they are even marked as such with some sort of cursed gold that has been specifically formulated so as to stick to their skin until they reach their twentieth year of service. Thus, as Deka realizes throughout the novel, 'My kind, we don't have a choice. […] Fight or die – either way, our lives are not our own' (Forna, p. 212). Undoubtedly, they can at least make something of themselves at the Warthu Bera, but still, even though they may be made into warriors and they may consequently be rewarded with absolution, what happened to them after the Ritual of Purity changed them in the most fundamental ways and the memory of it will never disappear. As Belcalis puts it, in spite of the fact that the jatu promise absolution, 'They can never take back the horrors that have already been inflicted on us' (Forna, p. 276). In fact, the scars on the alaki's bodies may even fade, but the memories are forever. For this reason, Belcalis asks Deka to never forget the pain she experienced. As she illustrates,

> They might need us now because we're valuable, might pretend to accept us, to reward us – but never forget what they did to us first. If they did it once, Deka, they'll surely do it again, no matter the flowery promises they give. (Forna, p. 279)

With the same level of despair and mistrust, when Deka discovers that her body changes when using her abilities, White Hands suggests to her to use her power only in the dark so as to make sure that the jatu do not notice her change. As she warns her, 'Never forget: the same gift they praise you for now, they will kill you for later' (Forna, p. 292). As she further explains,

> The jatu, my cousin the emperor, and his courtiers – they'll all love you now, when there are deathshrieks to conquer. The moment that changes, they'll remember that you're a woman. That you're unnatural… That is how they are. That is always how such men are. (Forna, p. 292)

Despite all the evil that the jatu have brought in her life, Deka is determined to train herself and fight for her future. Together with the other alaki, all fighting a world where they are unwanted, despised, and considered less than men, she is going to be finally free, and that is a thought that fills her with hope. As White Hands says,

> The emperors of Otera have oppressed our kind for too long. Proclaimed us demons. But now their turn has come. Once you wake the goddesses, they'll make Otera back to what it once was: a land of freedom, a land where men and women rules equally, where women weren't abused, beaten, raped. Where they weren't imprisoned in their homes, told that they were sinful and unholy. […] You will help us bring those joyous times again. You will help us win freedom for all of us – every last woman in Otera, even the ones who aren't alaki. (Forna, pp. 374-375)

In other words, as Deka declares, 'The world is changing now. We're going to make it change – make it better. We're going to make sure that what happened to us never happens to anyone else again' (Forna, p. 408).

At its core, therefore, *The Gilded Ones* is a story about hope in women's empowerment because it shows many different ways in which women can be abused and oppressed and how they nonetheless are able to rise above that. 'The saving grace for these girls, and one of the most important themes in the story, is sisterhood,' as Kimble (2021) points out. As Forna herself puts it,

> For all the pain in the book, for all the brutality, there is gold in it, especially in how the women relate to each other. I think that for girls especially, there is a tether, a thread that ties us all together. And that's what I hope that people will find in this book: the gold of our relationships. (quoted in Irankunda, 2019)

Female friendships are particularly relevant in the novel because it is Deka's friendship with the other girls what allows her to move forward in spite of the harsh circumstances surrounding her. According to Forna, female spaces can be spaces of incredible healing, and that is the reason why she decided to focus on female friendships in the first place. Therefore, contrary to those books that tend

to portray women in competition with each other, Forna introduces a number of female characters that bind to each other as sisters. As she illustrates,

> I think we're often fed this narrative that women must be in competition with each other – for social status, for men. That has not been my experience with female friendships. My female friends are such a source of support and companionship, and I think this is the experience for most women. But in the media, it always seems to be different. Female friendships are downplayed and overlooked. But not in my work. The true love story is between the girls. (quoted in Fadwa, 2021)

In particular, Deka develops a deep relationship with Britta, who is the first alaki she meets while traveling to Hemaira. From the first moment spent with Deka, Britta tries to get closer to her and comfort her when she cries from her nightmares, for example, but Deka initially is reluctant to open up because she does not want to risk to be betrayed again as it recently happened whit her father, her friends, and all the other people in her village who abandoned her and tried to torture her to death. As she puts it, 'I don't even know if it's possible, if someone, somewhere in this vast world, will ever love someone like me – the unageing, unchanging offspring of a demon' (Forna, p. 132). During her staying in Hemaira, however, Deka notices Britta's loyalty to her and they become inseparable. For example, when Deka finds out about her ability to sense the deathshrieks, she is terrified because it makes her seem like a monster. Britta, instead, tries to make her focus on the fact that it may be useful in raids. As a result, Deka comes to recognize that

> All this time, I've been terrified of my ability. But what if it's a useful weapon – a sword to unsheathe when the situation requires. And Britta saw so easily what I could not, accepted so easily what even my own family couldn't. (Forna, p. 145)

As Deka describes her at the end of the novel, 'She's always right beside me, my guardian and protector. My compass, guiding me whenever I am unsure' (Forna, p. 412). Both Deka and Britta also build a very strong fellowship with the other most talented alaki who, together with them, have been chosen to fight at the forefront of the emperor's armies, therefore creating an actual sisterhood based on their demon ancestors and the golden blood that binds them all together. This relationship starts developing when, once they have been assigned to the Warthu Bera, they are introduced to each other as sisters in blood and arms. As a consequence, they realize that they are all going to face the same horrors in battle, so they could bear it alone or they could band together and help each other, as Deka proposes, because 'If we're to survive the next twenty years, we have to do so together, not just as allies but as friends – family' (Forna, p. 133). They become so effective in killing the deathshrieks they fight against that they become known as Death Strikers. In particular, then, Deka develops an even deeper bond with the alaki who are chosen by White Hands as the strongest representatives of the Warthu Bera. Among all the girls in the Warthu Bera, Deka is chosen because she is unnatural,

Britta because she is strong and loyal, Belcalis because of her rage, and Gazal because of her pain. Together they are prepared for the most demanding raids, the ones where the deathshrieks are more numerous or cunning.

Other than their sisters, the alaki are supported by a number of brothers in arms known as uruni, male recruits who will join them in the battlefield. All the time spent fighting side by side bonds them to their partners in a way that the jatu could have never foreseen, so much so that as Deka points out at the end of the novel, 'They are truly our brothers now' (Forna, p. 411). In fact, once the emperor is defeated, most of them voluntarily decide to remain with the alaki and help them fighting their cause. Among them, Deka develops a sort of love relationship with Keita, the soldier who has been assigned to her as her own uruni. Because of the terrible experiences that Deka has gone through with the men in her village, at first she tends to be wary of Keita and his alleged good intentions towards her, firmly believing that 'Keita will be no different when the time comes. No matter what he does now, he will show his true colours soon enough. They all do' (Forna, p. 89). Keita, for his part, admits that when he first became a recruit, he thought that he would have hated working with the alaki because he believed such girls to be demons, therefore he distrusted them. After some time spent living and fighting together, however, he changes his mind about the alaki. As he says, 'Now, when I look at you, all I can see is my comrades' (Forna, p. 212). Thus, despite his prejudices, he develops a deep respect for Deka and swears his loyalty to her as her partner, holding out his hand as if they were equal. Throughout the novel, he shows to genuinely care for her every time he protects her both inside and outside of the battlefield. As Deka puts it, 'Keita's not like Father and the other men I once knew, the men who abandoned me, tortured me to enrich themselves. I know I can always depend on him to fight for me, defend me' (Forna, p. 305). The most representative example is when he tries to save her once the emperor orders to kill her because she disobeyed his command to fight the deathshrieks. Keita, instead, pretends to know what her final death is and offers to kill her. At first, Deka believes that once again, she is being betrayed by a man but in truth, Keita fakes her death by substituting what is supposed to be her blue blood, the color implying her final death, with a solution made from plants, which turns out to be all part of a plan that Britta had come up with once it had become clear that it was only a matter of time before Deka's abilities were discovered by the emperor, therefore accusing her of being some sort of deathshriek. As Deka recognizes, 'This is the treason against everything he's ever believed in' (Forna, p. 360). Keita explains to her that he once saw her changing aspect while commanding the deathshrieks, but as he tells her, 'nothing will change how I feel about you, Deka… I know you're not a monster' (Forna, p. 361). Accordingly, Deka acknowledges that this means that

> Keita accepts me as I am – loves me. He doesn't have to say the words, but I feel them. I feel them in the way he cradles my severed head so gently, even though the very act of holding it should horrify him. I feel them in the actions he took – the actions that he knew could well have ended his life. He defied the emperor for me, risked death for me – the only one he has. Against all odds, he loves me. (Forna, p. 361)

In the end, thus, Deka is finally able to find both a family and love, that is everything she has been searching for throughout her life, hoping of belonging somewhere. As she highlights, however, the most important person for her is not a man, but rather a woman:

> Besides, I'll always have Britta. The feelings I have for Keita always make me warm, but Britta's the one who's forever there by my side, ready to support me, to push me when I'm being silly, to laugh with me when I need cheer. I've learned many things these past few months, and if there's one thing I know, it's this: Britta is my dearest friend, and my kinship with her is the foundation I stand on. (Forna, p. 306)

Similarly to *The Gilded Ones*, in *Pet* too the author includes a protective friendship between the protagonist and her best friend, in this case a black transgender girl and a black cisgender boy, respectively. In a way, the deep connection between the two characters in the novel works as evidence of hope for a future where black transgender women are not discriminated against by black cisgender men, for example. As Emezi describes the kind of future they wanted to create for Jam, 'this is a wholesome future. This is the kind of future where she can be loved by someone who, perhaps, in a worse and different future, would have tried to hurt her' (quoted in Bergado, 2019). In short, Emezi portrays a better world for all those people of color who, because of their gender identity or sexual orientation, are currently likely to be the victims of hate crimes. As Emezi points out,

> Some people might have difficulty imagining a world where black trans kids are safe, where there are no police, where there are no prisons. So books kind of help you. Or *Pet*, in this case, can help create that window of possibility. If you can imagine it, that's the first step in making it happen. (quoted in Bergado, 2019)

In *Pet*, the sense of hope is also conveyed through Jam's belief in a better future. In this respect, it is important to highlight that once Jam, Redemption, and Pet capture the monster, Pet is ready to kill him, and it is Jam who insists on keeping him alive as a way of demonstrating to all the inhabitants of Lucille that there truly is a monster among them. Pet tries to dissuade her by saying 'You have done the finding, and you have done well, little girl. But you are wrong if you think your people will look. They are cowards. They will not' (Emezi, p. 209). According to it, this is precisely the reason why hunters exist, so that monsters can be found and finished. However, as Jam replies, 'the town will learn nothing this way, the families will learn nothing. They'll keep pretending all the monsters are gone; they won't remember to look for them. They might not believe us' (Emezi, p. 210). Pet then swears that if more monsters were to be found, hunters will be ready to return and hunt them, but Jam want it to understand that people will get hurt in the meantime. She therefore insists

on begging 'You have to give us a chance, Pet; you have to give Lucille a chance to change' (Emezi, p. 211). Pet's answer, though, is completely hopeless:

> Humans do not change! […] Look at your precious Lucille, supposed to be purged, supposed to be safe. […] Look at this man, this angel of yours. Your angels are monsters, your world is corrupt, and you want a chance? You want me to spare him as an example, as a lesson for the people who forgot how to see, who were careless, and now there is a child who has been hurt and I am come with justice and you want me to stay my judgment in the name of a chance? I shall not, I shall not, little girl. I will cleanse, and when another like him comes, another of me shall come as well, and we will cleanse again. (Emezi, p. 211)

Moreover, Pet believes that killing Hibiscus would be the right choice so as to avenge Moss because 'When that child asks, what happened to the man who did this to me, there will be a righteous answer, and it will have been carried out by my righteous hand, and he will at least know that he had justice' (Emezi, p. 211). On the contrary, Jam believes that killing does not help anything and what she tells Pet is 'You're so limited' (Emezi, p. 212). As she further illustrates,

> You're only thinking about this one, this child, this monster, she said. What about the other children? What about the things we could do to weed out harm before it's done to them? If Hibiscus live, if the people hear him say what he did, they'll believe him way before they'll believe me or Redemption. They'll know that they need to look out, to be vigilant. They'll change – they'll watch out for red flags, and it'll be easier to protect those who need protecting. I know you don't believe they'll change, but you're wrong. Lucille was made because people changed, because they did something and they wanted to protect others. But you don't want to give us a chance! You don't want to give us a chance to prevent the monsters; you want to wait until the monsters are full-grown and rampaging, so you and the rest of your kind can swoop in and hunt them and save the day. Except that people, kids, are going to get hurt your way. But you don't care, right? As long as you have something to hunt. You don't care if people get hurt. I think that makes you more of the monster. (Emezi, p. 212)

As a consequence, struck by Jam's words, Pet decides to spare Hibiscus because, as it tells her, 'You have such faith in your people, I will chance it this once' (Emezi, p. 215). As Jam predicted, when angels and adults in general listen to Hibiscus' confession, they find it unbelievable to hear and see one of their own admitting to being something else. At the same time, however, it appears to be working in that once the truth is being placed in front of their very eyes, they cannot but see it. As a result, angels decide to launch new investigations, police missions, and programs that are meant to fix the damage caused by their claiming that the monsters were gone because, as the revolution cry they used when they supposedly freed Lucille says, *'We are each other's harvest. We are each other's business. We are each other's magnitude and bond'* (Emezi, p. 25).[6]

[6] The quote is taken from *Paul Robeson*, a poem dedicated to the African American singer and activist by Gwendolyn Brooks, the first African American author who won a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1950.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the value of YA literature through the analysis of contemporary science fiction novels written by African American women and transgender authors. In particular, it has pointed out the power of speculative fiction as a genre that allows its readers to use imaginary worlds as sites where to deal with delicate issues that it would be difficult to address directly in real life. In fact, among the current trends in YA science fiction, a special place appears to be occupied by social activism narratives that focus on a number of social issues that are currently affecting contemporary American society, namely hate crimes and violence arising from race and gender discrimination. As my work shows, this new trend in YA literature reflects young adults' recent involvement in social justice movements and their commitment to stand up for the rights of minorities living in the US, especially giving birth to a significant body of multicultural and LGBTQ+ literature. Through this research work, ultimately, I have underlined the key role of black science fiction in particular in helping African American teenagers answer their questions about the world and make sense of the society they live in, therefore addressing not only their interests but also their actual needs in their growing up process as young people of color in the US.

All the literary works that I have taken into account throughout this MA thesis are examples of science fiction novels written by minority authors who challenge the conventional features of the genre by presenting different voices and characters, namely in terms of race, gender, and sexuality, therefore opposing the lack of diversity that has traditionally characterized the field. In fact, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* exemplify the success of two women writers who managed to break ground in a white male-dominated literary field, introducing non-white and female characters as protagonists of the story rather than minor characters with stereotyped roles and functions, and dealing with social issues rather than mere science and technology. As a result, a new category of science fiction has developed that distances itself from the kind of hardcore science fiction that used to be typically associated with white male writers and their interest in robots and technological inventions. Female science fiction authors, then, have started using science fiction to explore current issues of society such as race and gender inequality and, as my work shows, the contributions of women of color in this respect have been particularly valuable.

Using science fiction as an exploring ground for the social improvements that it is possible to achieve in the future, for example, Walidah Imarisha and Adrienne Maree Brown launched *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, a collection of short stories and essays dealing with several instances of major social justice issues that are currently affecting people of color living in the US with the aim of supporting and promoting social activism as a successful way to put an end to race-based discrimination. What I found especially interesting is that the authors

contributing to the collection are both science fiction writers and activists, meaning that science fiction as a genre that allows to create better worlds based on imagination does not encourage escapism, as many have maintained, but quite on the contrary is a particularly suitable tool for social criticism and political action. As a consequence, those who share a strong belief in the possibility of a more just world and every day commit to realize it appear to be suitable for fostering change through science fiction writing because that is precisely what the genre is about. In a sense, then, the reader who is truly dedicated to social justice is directly involved in the project and, in turn, he/she is encouraged to participate personally in the world building process in real life. For this reason, social activism narratives in which the authors tackle a precise problem and its consequences for human beings and illustrate an alternative utopian or dystopian world resulting from our decisions should be shared and supported because they have the power to make us reflect upon our actions and allow us to make change in order to reach the kind of world we want to live in.

For what concerns the recent advancements in the field of science fiction that led to the publication of a growing body of YA novels featuring black main characters with key roles, it is important to recognize that YA science fiction in general is an expanding field that has recently started to work on its lack of authenticity thanks to the contribution of an emerging group of female writers of African descent who have decided to begin their literary career precisely because of the lack of representation they experienced as young women of color reading mainstream speculative fiction in the US. As a result, once they grew up, they began writing themselves into science fiction, opening the way for a number of diverse authors who were previously destined to be ignored in the field. In particular, what has emerged from the analysis of the novels that I have discussed in this paper is that the importance of fantasy as a way to question reality and imagine a better version of it is at the very core of the authors' work because it is what saved them from the harsh circumstances they were living in as children. Namina Forna's *The Gilded Ones* and Akwaeke Emezi's *Pet*, for instance, offer new conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality together with a renewed perspective on African heritage, so that other young readers can keep finding comfort in the safety provided by the imagination of a fairer future that is more inclusive. Both novels portray black teen protagonists as fully-developed characters with agency. In fact, they portray a black girl dealing with trauma and a black transgender girl communicating with sign language who act as superheroines in the story because they are the ones who manage to identify the monsters surrounding them, fight against them and actually save the world. In this way, African American contemporary authors are providing new possibilities for all those ordinary teenage girls and transgender people of color who can finally see themselves as the main character of a science fiction book where their culture and traditions are included as key elements in the story.

The message that YA black science fiction seems to be aiming to carry out is that all teenagers have the right to dream, no matter their sexual identity or ethnic origins. In particular, the novels I have analyzed portray the lives of a black teenage girl and a black transgender girl who, in spite of their non-conformity to society because of a number of personal characteristics that make them immediately recognizable as diverse subjects as compared to what is commonly accepted as mainstream heroes in white-authored science fiction, are given the possibility to dream about their future and act according to their dreams. As a result, I came to understand that by including singular characters and stories in a popular genre such as science fiction that is often praised for its ability of depicting alternative worlds where change is possible, contemporary authors are giving voice to more and more diverse teenagers who can see themselves represented in the pages of a science fiction book for the first time, therefore not perceiving themselves as "other" anymore but rather feeling normal and being even able to imagine themselves living in a better world. Representation, thus, emerges as a key element for developing one's own imagination, which is the first step to take in order to start envisioning one's own future.

Another interesting aspect of YA science fiction novels written by African American women and transgender authors that I have identified is that they tend to present change as something feasible. In particular, through the analysis of the novels that I have taken into account, I came to the conclusion that contemporary authors of African descent are exploiting the potential of science fiction to imagine new worlds in order to promote social change in American society. Through the characters involved in the stories they write, in fact, they illustrate how to make a change in real life, therefore using science fiction as a practice ground not only to build better worlds in reality, but mainly to promote alternative thinking so that alternative worlds can thus be realized. Anyway, it is especially relevant that the people who are entrusted with social change in the novels are the teenage protagonists of the story themselves, together with their friends. In fact, young people and diverse teen girls specifically are presented as the ones who beg for a chance to change against adults' resignation because they truly have faith in humanity. Moreover, they are depicted as embodying awareness because they are the only ones who can see the world through a privileged perspective that is not influenced by prejudice, so it allows them to see the unseen and recognize the truth in spite of what the adults surrounding them keep teaching them. In short, it is thanks to singular teenagers that adults will learn how to get rid of their stereotyped thinking and deeply rooted ideals so as to reconsider what they call a monster, for example. In both novels monsters stand for social inequalities and instances of violence that are currently widespread in American society and it is the black girl and transgender girl protagonists who ultimately unmask them, revealing their banality and making adults realize that it is necessary to go beyond appearances.

In conclusion, the most important aspect of YA black science fiction that I have identified throughout my analysis is the persistence of hope, a feeling that is especially embodied by diverse teenage protagonists and transmitted by them to society at large. In particular, even though the novels I have analyzed feature a number of characters who share pessimistic views about the future, there is always hope at the end of the story and it is offered by the black teen girls who wish to spread a sort of utopian imagination that helps overcoming social issues through engagement. Both protagonists, in fact, wish to make all the people around them see the truth with their own eyes so that they will change their views and help each other create a better place. In short, the novels I have dealt with can be described as realistic in their depiction of violence and oppression but ultimately hopeful, not only because of the young protagonists' firm belief in the possibility of building better worlds but also and most importantly because the authors created a world for their singular protagonists in which they are allowed to actually imagine themselves in the future they are trying to achieve. By representing black teen girls and transgender girls with a great confidence in their ability to achieve a brighter future, Namina Forna and Akwaeke Emezi are thus providing actual teenagers of color and transgender teenagers in the US with the tools of imagination and hope that are necessary even just to see their future in a society that too often seems to only hinder them.

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Summary

La mia tesi tratta della fantascienza americana per giovani adulti e del contributo che le donne hanno apportato a questo genere, concentrandosi in particolare sui cambiamenti introdotti dalle scrittrici di colore. Nello specifico, la tesi esamina *The Left Hand of Darkness* di Ursula K. Le Guin, *Parable of the Sower* di Octavia E. Butler, *The Gilded Ones* di Namina Forna e *Pet* di Akwaeke Emezi come esempi di romanzi che riscrivono il perfetto eroe maschio, bianco, eterosessuale ed equilibrato tipico della fantascienza occidentale perché inseriscono come personaggi principali diverse tipologie di singoli individui con le loro peculiarità che tradizionalmente non sono rappresentati nella letteratura europea o americana. I testi introducono quindi la diversità attraverso una serie di caratteristiche fisiche e psicologiche e di elementi linguistici e culturali che non impediscono ai protagonisti di essere gli eroi della propria storia e permettono anche agli adolescenti che appartengono a minoranze di genere o razziali di vedersi rappresentati in un genere letterario che ha la potenzialità di fargli immaginare un futuro migliore nella vita reale.

Il primo capitolo funge da introduzione alla letteratura per giovani adulti e si sofferma sulle fonti di problematicità legate a questa categoria letteraria, le principali direzioni in cui si sta sviluppando e il suo valore sociale. Per illustrare il percorso che ha portato al successo della letteratura per giovani adulti, comincio offrendo una breve storia di questa categoria letteraria che va dalla sua nascita fino al giorno d'oggi, mettendo in luce le fasi di successo e di declino che ha attraversato nel corso del suo sviluppo. Successivamente propongo delle definizioni di letteratura per giovani adulti che aiutino a determinare quali sono le caratteristiche principali del genere, sottolineando le problematicità legate all'uso dell'etichetta "giovani adulti" per riferirsi ad una determinata fascia d'età. In seguito introduco la questione del divieto di leggere i cosiddetti "bleak books" che trattano di questioni delicate quali razzismo, stupro, abuso di sostanze, traumi ed episodi di violenza in generale per sottolineare quanto sia importante per gli adolescenti avere un luogo sicuro in cui esplorare proprio questi temi difficili che fanno parte della loro realtà e potrebbero addirittura riguardarli in prima persona. Nello specifico, metto in evidenza come i giovani lettori siano particolarmente interessati a leggere i libri che affrontano le problematiche diffuse nella società contemporanea, al punto che questo recente interesse ha portato alla proliferazione di romanzi centrati sulla giustizia sociale che mirano a fomentare le proteste che possono portare al cambiamento sociale. Tra i generi preferiti dai giovani adulti, al primo posto c'è la fantascienza con i suoi mondi immaginari che permettono di trattare problematiche attuali da una posizione privilegiata che consente di non affrontarle direttamente nella vita reale, offrendo quindi una forma di biblioterapia. In particolare, la letteratura distopica risulta essere particolarmente attraente per gli adolescenti perché nella rappresentazione esagerata delle realtà distopiche proposte è possibile riconoscere il futuro a cui si

rischia di andare incontro nel mondo reale. Infine, emerge come il valore della letteratura per giovani adulti stia proprio nel suo essere specificamente indirizzata agli adolescenti che si stanno formando come esseri umani e ai problemi che li caratterizzano in questa fase di sviluppo. Si tratta di un genere letterario che permette ai giovani lettori di dare un senso alla realtà che li circonda e per fare questo hanno bisogno di vedersi rappresentati.

Il secondo capitolo è dedicato alla fantascienza e alle scrittrici che hanno rivoluzionato il genere includendo diversi tipi di personaggi che in passato, se presenti, hanno sempre avuto una funzione stereotipata e trattando questioni sociali contemporanee oltre alle innovazioni scientifico-tecnologiche. Per illustrare come le donne abbiano contribuito a mettere in discussione le convenzioni letterarie della fantascienza, ho scelto di utilizzare *The Left Hand of Darkness* di Ursula K. Le Guin, una delle prime autrici bianche ad avere successo in un genere dominato esclusivamente da uomini. Il romanzo, infatti, è un chiaro esempio di come l'autrice desideri mettere in dubbio e ridefinire i concetti di genere e razza che stanno alla base delle nostre relazioni sociali. Il secondo romanzo che ho deciso di prendere in considerazione è *Parable of the Sower* di Octavia E. Butler, la prima donna di colore ad emergere all'interno di un genere originariamente dominato da scrittori bianchi. Il romanzo affronta problemi attuali come il cambiamento climatico e la disuguaglianza sociale e rappresenta le principali innovazioni introdotte dall'autrice nella fantascienza, ovvero la presenza di una protagonista di colore e una diversa concezione del futuro e dell'altro. I cambiamenti apportati da Butler hanno ispirato particolarmente le donne di colore impegnate nel sociale. Un esempio che ho deciso di presentare è la creazione di *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* da parte di Walidah Imarisha e Adrienne Maree Brown. Si tratta di una raccolta di storie brevi e saggi sulla giustizia sociale scritti sia da autori di fantascienza che da attivisti partendo dall'eredità letteraria di Butler. L'idea alla base dell'antologia è che attivisti e scrittori di fantascienza hanno entrambi a che fare con la creazione del futuro, dunque i libri possono fungere da terreno di pratica dove discutere delle questioni sociali attuali e delle possibili strategie da adottare nella realtà per rendere il mondo un posto migliore. Proprio per le innumerevoli possibilità di immaginazione che il genere offre, diverse scrittrici hanno deciso di sfruttare la fantascienza per affrontare questioni di genere come la condizione sociale della donna e proporre degli universi alternativi in cui i diritti umani siano tutelati e rispettati. Recentemente, in America, molte giovani scrittrici di origini africane stanno avendo successo seguendo proprio questa direzione. Si tratta principalmente di scrittrici di fantascienza per giovani adulti che stanno favorendo l'inclusione delle minoranze etniche o sessuali all'interno di un genere che permette ai giovani lettori che sono vittime di discriminazioni di vedersi non solo come eroi, ma anche come futuri adulti.

Il terzo capitolo analizza *The Gilded Ones* di Namina Forna e *Pet* di Akwaeke Emezi, due romanzi contemporanei di fantascienza per giovani adulti scritti rispettivamente da una scrittrice sierraleonese e una scrittrice trans e plurale non binaria nigeriana. Il primo aspetto da sottolineare è l'importanza che gli autori attribuiscono alla fantascienza come genere che permette ai giovani di rifugiarsi in universi alternativi dove sentirsi al sicuro dalla violenza che li circonda nella vita quotidiana. Entrambi gli autori, infatti, sono cresciuti in territori di guerra africani e una volta trasferitisi in America hanno dovuto affrontare innumerevoli episodi di razzismo. I romanzi, quindi, cercano di riscrivere un possibile futuro per tutte le ragazze e le ragazze trans di origini africane che vivono in America. Mentre *The Gilded Ones* presenta un futuro distopico in cui l'oppressione sociale nei confronti delle donne è portata all'estremo, *Pet* presenta un futuro utopico che vede l'America popolata da afroamericani che non disprezzano le giovani trans, bensì le sostengono. Entrambi i romanzi offrono dei mondi immaginari in cui la cultura africana appare come dominante non solo per gli elementi linguistici e le tradizioni inserite, ma anche per il modo di concepire la realtà secondo una mentalità non occidentale. In questo modo, gli autori modificano radicalmente la fantascienza europea e americana, esaltando il proprio patrimonio culturale e permettendo ai giovani lettori che lo condividono di riconoscersi finalmente tra i personaggi dei romanzi. Deka e Jam, le protagoniste, sono una ragazza di colore che soffre di disturbo da stress post-traumatico e una ragazza trans di colore che usa la lingua dei segni per comunicare. Nonostante le loro particolarità, Deka e Jam riescono a trovare supporto da parte di una famiglia che le ami così come sono e a costruire dei rapporti di amicizia profondi con persone che nella vita reale tenderebbero a rifiutarle. Inoltre, sono rappresentate come le eroine della storia che dimostrano di avere la volontà e il coraggio di andare oltre le apparenze, cosa che gli permette di individuare e sconfiggere i mostri che minacciano la società. Al contrario degli adulti che non sono disposti a mettere in discussione le loro convinzioni, le protagoniste incarnano la speranza di costruire un mondo migliore. Tutte le loro azioni sono basate sulla fiducia negli esseri umani e nella possibilità che le persone, una volta mostrata loro la verità, possano cambiare.