

## Cultural Diversity in *Who Fears Death*: Teaching Representation through Fantasy Literature in the Intercultural Classroom

**Keywords:** representation, didactics, intersectional theory, intercultural classroom, fantasy, young adult literature

**Abstract:** In the following discussion, the focus will be on how one can use fantasy literature to talk about representation, norms, and cultures to help students get intercultural knowledge through discussions on stereotypes and intersectionality. With examples from the novel *Who Fears Death* by Nnedi Okorafor, the text breaches both difficult and sensitive subjects that can be discussed to make certain issues less alien for the reader. It is important that readers get the right tools to form deep relationships across cultural borders, and the fantasy genre is a great tool to use to bridge the gap between different cultures since the genre creates an arena for intercultural meetings where “the other” is in focus, which reduces the alienating aspect of different cultures and identities.

It was not long ago that the new cast for the Harry Potter sequel *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* play was released and the outrage was enormous on social media. This was because the character of Hermione was to be portrayed by a person of African descent, even though the character’s skin color was never brought up in the books. J.K. Rowling’s response to this was, “I had a bunch of racists telling me that because Hermione ‘turned white’—that is, lost color from her face after a shock—that she must be a white woman, which I have a great deal of difficulty with, but I decided not to get too agitated about it and simply state quite firmly that Hermione can be a black woman with my absolute blessing and enthusiasm” (qtd. in Fashingbauer). The same outrage was directed toward the possibility of James Bond being played by a non-white person, or potentially a female, not to mention the hate talk around the new *Ghostbusters* movie that featured an all-female cast. This is nothing new; increased debates when beloved characters and franchises are modified in regards to gender, ethnicity and

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sexuality are common. In this essay, I examine the manner in which one can use fantasy literature to talk about representation and how students can improve and challenge their understanding of cultures, norms, and stereotypes. I focus in particular on sexual and gender minorities in young adult literature, by reading the novel *Who Fears Death* by Nnedi Okorafor (2010).

*Who Fears Death* is filled with subjects that range from everyday aspects to heavier subjects that can cause discomfort for some readers depending on their background. *Who Fears Death* takes place in a post-apocalyptic, futuristic version of Sudan where the protagonist Onyesonwu (Igbo for “Who Fears Death”) struggles with the prejudice against her for being an *Ewu*, that is, a child produced from rape. She goes on a mission to confront her mother’s rapist, the Nuru Daib, who is a powerful sorcerer, with her own magical powers. The book thus includes themes such as weaponized rape and female genital mutilation.<sup>1</sup>

*Who Fears Death* is an epic fantasy book that takes place in a post-apocalyptic Africa. There are modern elements, such as technology and survival tools like capture stations, featured in the story that are mixed with the haunting and primal desert and desert towns that stretch over the lands connected to “the Seven Rivers.” The protagonist, Onyesonwu (Onye), is of both Nuru and Okeke descent after her Okeke mother was brutally raped by a Nuru man. A child born of both races is referred to as *Ewu* and is believed to be evil by nature because they are produced under violent circumstances and are thus seen as outcasts and troublemakers.

During the first few years of Onye’s life, she and her mother live as nomads in the desert before they finally settle in the town of Jwahir. It is located far from the West, where the Nuru still ravage and hunt down Okekes who refuse to be diminished to slaves. Onye grows up as an outcast, yet she is loved by her mother and her step-father and it is not until she goes through the 11<sup>th</sup> rite that she finds a group of friends. The 11<sup>th</sup> rite is a transition ritual from childhood

to adulthood, but girls are still not considered fully adult until they marry. The rite is performed by the female city elder “The Ada,” who says, “You’ll become child and adult. You will be powerless and powerful. You will be ignored and heard. Do you accept?” (Okorafor 41). The rite is for volunteers and is a bonding experience where the girls go through female genital mutilation. It is during the ritual that Onye’s powers, for the first time, are exposed, and she enters “the Wilderness,” the place where the souls of the dead exist. While in “the Wilderness,” she feels threatened by a being that will haunt her throughout the book. Attending the rite with Onye are Luyu, a strong-willed rebel who does not back down from a challenge; Diti, a conflicted gossip girl who follows tradition; and Binita, who is damaged from years of sexual abuse by her father. After going through the rite together, the girls form an intimate friendship and no longer socialize with their old friends. For the first time Onye has a group of friends to confide in, yet prejudice against her being Ewu is still present in the clique.

Onye possesses the power to transcend into the Wilderness and shape-shift into various animals that she encounters. During this time of newly awakened power, she meets Mwita, another Ewu, who starts to teach Onye small things that enable Onye to control her abilities. However, when Onye finds out about Aro, a town elder and master sorcerer, she is determined to become his student. Mwita insists that it is a fruitless endeavor, but Onye refuses to give up; after years of trying, she is finally accepted for the trial that determines whether she will be allowed to learn the mystic points. She passes the trial and starts her rigid training. Mwita takes on the role as Onye’s healer and life partner despite his envy of her magical powers.

Onye’s main reason for her persistence was that she feared for her life because of the being in the Wilderness, who turns out to be her father, is constantly threatening her life through dreams and the Wilderness. While practicing seeing distant places, a piece of news from a storyteller visualizes in Onye’s mind and her thoughts travel to the West, where “the rainwater showed [her] ripped oozing flesh, bloody erect penises, sinew, intestines, fire heaving chests,

mewling bodies engaged in evil” (Okorafor 161). With the realization that genocide is still actively happening in the West, Onye is enraged with the Nurus. Mwita, for the first time, tells Onye about how he came to Jwahir; that he, an Ewu, was a product of love, but since this was illegal, his parents were killed. Mwita later had to grow up with his Nuru aunt and was eventually accepted to be the student of the great Nuru magician Daib. When the Okekes came in a rebellion, he fled out into the desert where he was captured by Okeke rebels that forced him to become a child soldier by subjecting him to torture and abuse. He was too afraid to run away, even though he had the power to become insignificant. He states that, “It’s not as simple as you think. Here is sickness on both sides. Be careful. Your father sees things in black and white, too. Okeke bad, Nuru good” (Okorafor 166). The vision of the West makes Onye decide that she should go and, at least, try to do something to stop it, as well as kill her father. It is quickly revealed that Onye is the one who is prophesized to rewrite the Great Book, and together with Mwita, Luyu, Diti, Binta and Fanasi they begin their journey towards the West.

### **Fantasy Literature in the Intercultural Classroom**

*Who Fears Death* will be analyzed in relation to an intersectional framework to demonstrate how one can breach subjects of representation, cultures, norms, and stereotypes through fantasy literature in the classroom. *Who Fears Death* brings up concepts, themes, and problems from several ethnic, sexual, and gender perspectives. It is a book filled with issues that exist in parts of the world today, even in more progressive countries.

These issues are sensitive to bring up in today’s multicultural and intercultural classrooms, where students have a variety of experiences in their respective backgrounds. One does not, of course, have to use this exact book in the classroom; one can offer a few different alternatives where trigger warnings are issued depending on the matters that are predominantly

present in the books. However, even though these are sensitive issues, Okorafor still narrates them in a lyrical prose when entering harsh subjects, which may bring a dissociation from the horrors that the characters experience. For example, Onye can transcend into the Wilderness when subjected to horrors or painful moments, and this ability to dissociate from reality is something that is common in victims of abuse and rape and it works as a defense mechanism (Brown). This is also a common phenomenon among children and young adults; that they “check out” when they feel overwhelmed because they cannot handle what is going on. Brown continues to write that, “Women describe dissociation as a numbing or a spacy feeling. They either don’t feel something OR they are too spaced out to do much about it. In the middle of a traumatic event, spacing out and numbing is a good thing. This type of dissociation is not only related to women or children.” In *Who Fears Death*, Mwita’s power is somewhat of a physical manifestation of dissociation. He can make himself insignificant so that others do not see or notice him. However, even though he has this power, he was still too afraid to use it to flee from the Okeke rebels who kidnapped him and forced him to become a child soldier and fight the Nurus.

*Who Fears Death* offers the opportunity to have a conversation with students about the perception and representation of rape in the context of the present-day conversation about rape culture. Thus, after Onye’s mother Najeeba’s rape in the desert, Najeeba arrives back home and finds her husband still alive; “That was him, not his ghost. Najeeba wanted to say ‘Ani is merciful’, but the goddess wasn’t. Not at all. For, though her husband was spared, Ani had killed Najeeba and left her still alive” (Okorafor 23). Her relief that her husband was still alive quickly turned to shame when he realized what had happened to her. Najeeba collected the things that survived the Nuru attack on the village and went out to the desert once again, where she stayed until she and Onye settled in Jwahir. In this instance, readers can discuss what Okorafor might mean by the sentence “Ani had killed Najeeba and left her still alive,” as well

as the ensuing shame she feels when her husband, in despair, tells her to cover herself up, and further integrate this in contemporary discussions of rape culture.

Another aspect readers can analyze and discuss is that of female genital mutilation. Okorafor portrays the rite in a problematic way, where she emphasizes both its positive and its negative side. The negative is that it is a way to control women's bodies and hinder them from reaching sexual climax. The ceremony is a brutal act, yet all the girls must attend the rite voluntarily or it will not be performed. The girls do attend it voluntarily for different and cultural reasons. For example, the sexual abuse that Binta suffers from her father is not taken seriously because she is not yet an adult. When she goes through the rite she suddenly gets a voice and rights. Furthermore, the scalpel used in this ritual has juju (magic) connected to it, so that every time any of the characters are starting to get aroused, they are overwhelmed with a searing pain throughout their body. This intimate rite is oppressive towards female sexuality, yet it is also a bonding experience. Onye, Luyu, Binta, and Diti go through one of the most intimate and life-changing rites together and it bonds them in a way none of them expected. Through this oppressive act, they come out stronger as a unit. Later in the novel, they all express feelings of regret for going through the rite and Onye manages to reverse the juju and reinstate their clitorises, after which the group slowly starts to break apart. I argue that readers can approach this conversation from two different perspectives. The first is about ethics and morality, and in this case one can also compare it to male circumcision. Are there similarities and differences in how and why these two medical procedures are applied? The second approach would be to invite a comparison of childhood-to-adulthood transition rituals from different parts of the world, and the differences and similarities that exist within these rites. One can also think about what negative cultural reasons there are for the girls going through the ceremony.

Another important aspect of *Who Fears Death* is the religious text "The Great Book," featured predominantly throughout the novel. It is the text that everyone (Nuru, Okeke, Ewu)

are expected to follow and it is inspired by Igbo culture and traditions that still exist today. However, there are also a few similarities to, for example, Christianity and the Christian prophet Jesus. For example, Onye finds out that it is prophesied that she would rewrite the Great Book, in order to make a significant change in the world. She travels East with her band of friends and travels through the desert, occasionally visiting towns to restock. However, these visits never seem to end well when someone in town figures out Onye and Mwitá are Ewu. In one town, the residents begin to attack and drive out the group. Binta steps in between the residents and Onye and tries to negotiate, and ends up being killed for doing so. Onye curses the whole town and turns everyone blind.<sup>2</sup> However, Onye did deprive the town of their sight for a reason; she did not want to show them the horrors of the West, the vision she showed the group, but instead wanted them to see darkness, since they were blind to the world around them. In the end, Onye sacrifices herself and dies a martyr's death, much like Jesus in the Bible. With the death of Onye, the story's main change begins to happen, and Okorafor writes,

As we were walking back to Onyesonwu's body, my sister yelped. When I looked at her, she was floating an inch off the ground. My sister can fly. We would later find out that she was not the only one. All the women, Okeke and Nuru, found that something had changed about them. Some could turn wine to fresh sweet drinking water, others glowed in the dark, and some could hear the dead. Others remembered the past, before the Great Book. Others could peruse the spirit world and still live in the physical. Thousands of abilities. All bestowed upon women. There it was, Onye's gift. In the death of herself and her child, Onye gave birth to us all. This place will never be the same. Slavery here is over. (413)

The two sisters remove Onye's body and give her the funeral pyre that she deserves, and the last sentence in the book reads, "it was the most we could do for the woman who saved the people of the Seven Rivers Kingdom, this place that used to be part of the Kingdom of Sudan" (Okorafor 413). It is thus suggested that her death opened the eyes of the people of the Seven Rivers Kingdom and gave them hope for the future through abilities and true sight. To discuss this in the classroom one can ask oneself, "Why were women the ones who benefited from Onye's sacrifice? Could men also be affected by this in some way? And can one see similarities from other cultures where a figure of hope or a prophet of some kind performed a deed that would change how people view the world?"

*The transformative approach* aims to make basic changes in the curriculum that enable students to view concepts, issues, themes, and problems from several ethnic, sexual, and gender perspectives and points of view (Banks 188-190). The approach is wide and filled with possibilities but it may, at times, be hard to find the right tools and questions to broaden readers, and one's own, point of view on the world, other cultures and traditions. Much as in many famous fantasy novels, it is the young who spark the uprising against injustice and corruption, in this case, the unjust traditions and world-view that oppress people without them even being aware of it. However, it is difficult to say how far this lack of awareness goes, since *Who Fears Death* is written from a first-person narrative. The only adult character in the book who, from page one, is dissatisfied with how The Seven Rivers Kingdom is run is Najeeba. Other adults have their views challenged by Onye. For example, Aro (Onye's magic teacher) is forced to reconsider his stance on not teaching women the magic points, and Ada (town elder and performer of the 11<sup>th</sup> rite) is forced to reconsider her stance on the juju of the 11<sup>th</sup> rite scalpel when Onye questions it. Onye is, unknowingly, working from the basis of a democratic philosophy when she demands to be heard, accepted and loved even though she is both woman and Ewu. Onye is also the predominant force in Mwita turning away from his misogynistic



views of being an alpha male and moving towards accepting that Onye is stronger and prophesized to be the force of change. Initially he tries to keep Onye away from magic and from Aro, and when Onye is accepted Mwita feels resentment because she passed the trial and he did not. It also takes a long time for him to accept that his skill lies in healing, unlike Onye, whose skill is based in nature and, if wanted, destruction.

In the beginning of *Who Fears Death*, much of the world is structured on binary oppositions, and everything that falls in between these oppositions is unwanted or ignored. Some of the predominant binary oppositions are; dark/fair, masculine/feminine, tradition/rebellion, hate/love, and nature/nurture. However, the further Onye gets on her journey, the more these binary oppositions become blurred. The Okeke are viewed as dark and Nuru as fair, while Ewu are not viewed as individuals at all until Onye, through actions and rumors, starts to get noticed and appreciated, yet still hated by some. Traditional masculine and feminine roles also become obscured throughout the story. For example, Mwita becomes the nurturer of the group, while Onye becomes a force of nature. Also, Luyu is described as braver than her male peers. Furthermore, when Onye tells the group that she can undo the juju of the 11<sup>th</sup> rite, Luyu proclaims, “I don’t care about you putting your hands on me. Anything to enjoy intercourse again. I don’t have time for marriage” (Okorafor 244). Luyu is shameless when it comes to her sexual desires and does not apologize for it. She is not shamed by the others either, except when she sleeps with Fanasi, who is still married to Diti. Luyu also breaks the tradition by refusing marriage; yet, she still does pray to Ani and utter nostalgic wishes about feasts. Furthermore, Onye modifies traditions through rebellion, for example when she is finally accepted by Aro or when she, as an Ewu, goes through the 11<sup>th</sup> rite. Thus, as Stuart Hall argues, binary oppositions are essential when doing a superficial comparison, but they are redundant and over-simplified (Hall 225). By highlighting these binary oppositions and how they are

challenged—which results in blurred lines—the students can develop a greater appreciation and understanding of individuals differences.

### **Representation and the Circuit of Culture**

Hall's discussion of the *circuit of culture* focuses on how representation goes into identity, identity into production, production into consumption, consumption into regulation, and regulation into representation (Hall xviii). Three of the most sensitive subjects of representation are ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. For example, as The Critical Media Project reports, ethnically “non-whites” are typically typecast as primitive, violent, and illegal, whereas “whites” are portrayed as civilized, stable, and rational. If a person who identifies with a non-white ethnicity constantly sees negative portrayals of their own community, it will create a negative circuit of culture. Therefore, positive representation is essential, so that individuals can feel that they matter as well, and this will also develop into a greater understanding and appreciation of differences when being different is no longer seen as negative. For example, when the character Commander Lexa was introduced in the TV-series *The 100* (2014-ongoing) the LGBTQ community quickly became involved because it was a complex, queer character who was also a woman in a power position. When she later got killed off in a horrible manner, social media overflowed with outrage because, once again, popular culture resorted to the *bury your gays* trope (Williams).

In regards to *Who Fears Death*, there is, generally, a positive circuit of culture since the novel consciously problematizes the subjects mentioned above. It is not a question of binary oppositions, but instead it is about complex representations that follow the circuit. Identity is, as stated, a social construct that evolves and changes throughout an individual's life and people usually have more than one identity depending on the context or group one is situated in at a

given moment. However, most people have a few characteristics that never change within their identity. The predominant ones are related to race and ethnicity, since one cannot change one's skin color without the aid of medical science or as an effect of specific illnesses. It is because of this that representations of different ethnic backgrounds are so important, especially in the intercultural classroom. There are a lot of positive representations of 'white' people of all genders and their different identity characteristics. In *Who Fears Death* the issue of ethnicity is a complex and compelling, subject. There are three non-white ethnicities presented, of which each is suffering from some form of oppression. The Nuru, who anthropologically are the dominant in the classificatory system, are oppressed by The Great Book. For example, they are not allowed to socialize with Okeke in any other way than the prescribed master-slave relationship. This becomes apparent when Mwita tells his backstory, according to which he, an Ewu produced from love, is born and both his parents are murdered for their interethnic relationship. This can be connected to modern history in different parts of the world, and it is a perfect subject for readers to get more acquainted with. The Okeke are "naturally" inferior to the Nuru and are subordinate in the classificatory system, and lastly the Ewu are the "other," the ones who everyone else rejects. In this instance, Ewu identity is based on the fact that they feel unfairly treated and they are strongly aware of the common view of what an Ewu is. Both Onye and Mwita constantly struggle when interacting with Okekes and Nurus to not give them reason for their negative beliefs. The product of their identity is to challenge racist and sexist hierarchies in society. When readers consume the work, they get a view of these aspects that regulate and indicate that it is possible to be strong and vulnerable at the same time, which then forms the basis of creating representation, and this representation, in turn, can contribute to modifying an identity.

The concept of the circuit of representation is closely linked to Alkestrand's theories on the importance of intersectionality, alienating ability, and democratic views. *Who Fears Death*

is built on democratic views, as the characters challenge the establishment to force a change so that everyone can live in harmony. Through recovery (retaking the fantasy world), they instigate a revolution against injustice and corruption (Alkestrand 21). However, they only do this within the group, as with many other quest-fantasy books. They do not get much help on their way, except when they run into The Red People, a nomadic tribe that travels with a desert storm. Finally, as in a common trope, it is up to the prophesized protagonist to end the sickness of the world. Other examples abound. In the *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), it is up to Harry, with the aid of his friends, to destroy the horcruxes created by Voldemort in order to kill him. In Sarah J. Mass's *Throne of Glass* series (2012-ongoing), it is up to Celaena to find the strength to overthrow and kill the King to bring peace to the realm. In *Who Fears Death*, it is up to Onye, with the aid of her friends, to destroy the sickness of The Great Book. Here, the protagonists not only have to fight the evils in their respective world, but they must also fight their own inner demons in order to prepare for the final task. The main struggle for Onye is to be seen and heard, and the main difference here is that she is "the other" and thus tries to create a forum through interaction, where she can initiate a dialogue so that people will not see her as an alien. Since Onye is the subject of racist discourses from both Okeke and Nuru, instead of gaining knowledge of the alien world, she tries to make her own world and identity seem less alien to "the others" by not succumbing to the thoughts and ideas people have about Ewu-people. This is a good starting-point for creating a discussion about people from other cultures and how one should not resort to prejudice. If this discussion takes place in the classroom, I suggest one should include issues of both ethnicity and gender. For example, Mwitia has more freedom than Onye because he is a man and this goes for all the men in the book. Women have restrictions imposed upon them, irrespective of their ethnicity. There are other intercultural similarities between the Nurus, the Okekes, and the Ewus, and one should try to identify these similarities

and try to connect them to aspects of life that one is familiar with. This can be transferred to how one confronts “the other” in everyday life.

Alkestrand brings up three different approaches of intersectionality that I discuss here. *Structural intersectionality* is, for example, how minorities experiences of certain events can be perceived differently depending on who experiences it (108). When Najeeba comes home from the desert after she and the other Okeke women have been raped, she is instantly shamed by her husband and, essentially, thrown out of the home. Okorafor writes, “An Okeke woman will *never* kill a child kindled inside of her [...]. However, custom dictates that a child is the child of her father. These Nuru had planted poison” (21). Najeeba was violated in the worst possible way and was then forced, through tradition, to leave her home and live in shame, for she, a rape victim, was carrying an Ewu-child. An aspect of this that can be brought up in a classroom is how victims of rape are treated in different parts of the world and if there are differences between ethnicities and cultures. *Political intersectionality* is about identities intersecting with oppression, domination, or discrimination. All marginalized people are included within this approach and a lot of the focus is on feminism and anti-racist movements (Alkestrand 108). It has already been established that Onye is, in many ways, a feminist since she fights and—in the end—saves all women from oppression by rewriting *The Great Book*. She also works against oppression and discrimination of Okeke and Ewu’s on her journey.

The last, and most important, approach is *representational intersectionality*, a significant tool for the didactic work in the intercultural classroom. This approach defines how social constructs are created when a category such as “black woman” is placed in a cultural setting (Alkestrand 108). In terms of representation, there are a lot of different varieties in *Who Fears Death* and some of them have been approached several times in this discussion. These varieties will be more closely connected to the fundamental values of the intercultural classroom. It is about how people of color tend to be undervalued much more frequently than

white people in popular culture, especially women and gender-nonconforming individuals. If a teacher aims for the classroom to be a safe zone for all readers, no matter their background, it is important to be aware of the issue of representation, as well as the lack of it. On a personal note, when in school, the required reading was of the classics and no discussion or analysis on representation of gender, ethnicity, or sexuality was present. Back then, one had to turn to television to find interesting and complex representations of women with which one could identify. Today, it is easier to find literature which contains the characteristics one wishes to read about through sites such as Goodreads and social media. As a teacher, it is much easier to find relevant books to use in the classroom that bring up issues such as representation, alienation, and democracy. To connect this back to *Who Fears Death*, the book has both female and male characters of color who are complex, strong, sensitive, and possess a wide range of other characteristics that challenge the stereotypes of non-white ethnicities. One interesting character who has been overlooked so far is *the Ada*. She is an empowered woman who has the respect of the community and is well educated. She is married (to Aro), yet lives alone; she is content with her life and she is a complex character who blends tradition with modernity. For example, the Ada is connected to tradition because she is still highly involved in the 11<sup>th</sup> rite ceremony, but she is also modern because she makes her own luck and happiness. The Ada is progressive because of her role as an elder and yet living apart from her husband since she wants to own her independence and live by her own set of rules without the expectation of being a normative wife. This, with everything else that has been brought up in this discussion, is an interesting discussion topic; i.e. how much tradition and modernity are interrelated. This issue can also be seen in relation to the rest of the characters. For example, Mwita is a traditionalist when it comes to relationships and the hierarchy of genders (even though he is forced to change his way of thinking), yet modern in the sense that he, as a male, takes on tasks that are typically associated with women, such as nursing duties, or the fact that he weaves when he is stressed.

As discussed, the novel both challenges and gives different views on the Seven Rivers Kingdom. It is about giving the students the ability to reflect on their own personal views through a different cultural setting. For example, Onye is a rebel at heart. First, she rebels by going through the 11<sup>th</sup> rite that her mother disapproves of. Secondly, she rebels by challenging the whole system that the world is built on in order to find her place in the world, the core of her personal identity. This identity is developed through meetings and interactions with people who hate her for being Ewu. Through these interactions, she finds a self-worth that manifests itself in her magical abilities. She is a noble predator who can interact with people even though there are boundaries that should not be possible to break.

In the classroom, this can be applied through the different approaches and perspectives mentioned earlier in this essay. One important aspect that has not been discussed in this essay so far is that of students' influence on the literature that is chosen. As a teacher, one can still set requirements in terms of characteristics such as genre (fantasy) and protagonist (youth), then the students can come up with a few examples of titles and one can add them to a list with pre-determined titles. This will enable students to feel heard and help them to make decisions, both of which are connected to the ethical and environmental perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

Most countries today have a great mixture of cultures, traditions, and religions. It is thus of the greatest importance that the literature and social environments are breeding grounds for positive and reflective subjects that will enable a safe environment by and for everyone. By using fantasy literature, one can discuss and analyze cultural, sexual, gendered, traditional and religious differences with some distance from reality that may enable readers to take in and understand aspects and issues that they might not otherwise understand. Young adult fantasy

often has a theme of rebellion that is aimed towards non-democratic views that include racism, xenophobia, sexism, and homophobia, as well as adults viewing youths as insignificant. It also nearly always portrays young protagonists who go through issues that are relatable for young readers. This in turn can act as a motivator for younger students to analyze the issues and connect them to reality. Depending on what fantasy text one decides to work with, there will be many different approaches and perspectives one can apply that will bring the issues at hand to focus in a didactic and democratic way.

Fantasy as a genre is a significant tool for bridging the gap between different cultures, since it creates an arena for intercultural meetings where “the other” is in focus, which reduces the alienating aspect of different cultures and identities. The varying representations can be problematic or positive and it is important to highlight this when reading a fantasy novel; that it is not a representation but a fictionalized reality with inspiration from real-world issues.



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<sup>1</sup> In her "Acknowledgements" section, Okorafor states that the 2004 AP news story by Emily Wax, titled "We want to make a Light Baby," about weaponized rape in the Sudan, created the passage-way through which Onyesonwu started to form (Okorafor 420). Wax's article is about the Arab militia attacking, raping, and abusing African women to create white babies, since they believe or say that Africans are ugly and are only good as slaves. These Arab militiamen are referred to as "Janjaweed" and the article claims that the event can be compared to genocide.

<sup>2</sup> By contrast, the Bible contains a story according to which Jesus gave a man his sight back.