(Re)evaluating Young Adult Literature: Contextualizing 'Police Violence' Novels with African American Literature and History

by

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Sammendrag

Denne oppgaven utforsker hvordan det kritiske rammeverket for ungdomslitteratur fremstår begrensende i en analyse av moderne ungdomsbøker. Mer spesifikt fremhever oppgaven hvordan den moderne 'politi-vold' litteraturen ikke passer inn i de tradisjonelle retningslinjene for ungdomslitteratur sjangeren. Gjennom en analyse av identitet og makt i den unge hovedpersonen, argumenterer jeg at veksten karakteren gjennomgår overtrer de tradisjonelle kriteriene for vekst i ungdomssjangeren. Ettersom ungdomssjangeren presenterer restriksjoner for historien, argumenterer denne oppgaven at intensjonene med ungdomsbøkene blir fremhevet gjennom en sammenveving med afrikansk-amerikansk litteratur og historie. Dermed fremhever analysen hvordan rammeverket for ungdomslitteratur ikke klarer å anerkjenne betydningen av historiene. Til tross for den utdypende forklaringen konteksten gir historiene, argumenterer også oppgaven at implikasjonene som blir fremstilt hadde ikke hatt medhold uten veksten tradisjonelt fremvist i ungdomslitteraturen. Dermed argumenterer denne oppgaven at 'politi-vold' litteraturen trenger hovedsakelig ungdomsperspektivet for å fremstille utvikling, men trenger historisk kontekst for å fremheve den utdypende betydningen denne utviklingen har.

Det første kapittelet tar for seg ungdomsboken *The Hate U Give* (2017) som følger Starr i ettertid av mordet på hennes barndomsvenn, Khalil. I en kamp mellom å beskytte egen identitet og snakke ut for Khalil, opplever Starr en personlig utvikling som identifiserer hennes maktposisjon som eneste vitne til mordet. Jeg argumenterer at veksten Starr opplever overskrider rammeverket for ungdomssjangeren som utgjør at betydningen av historien blir redusert. Ved å koble historien til protestromanen og debatten knyttet til bruken av rasetroper, blir overskridelsen fremhevet samtidig som historiens betydning får større mening.

Kapittel to analyserer Justyce sin personlige utvikling i *Dear Martin* (2017). Gjennom hans skriftlige prosjekt med mål om å bli som Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. prøver Justyce å

analysere egen posisjon i et rasistisk samfunn. Ettersom hans utvikling innen ungdomslitteratur mest blir fremstilt gjennom hvordan den interne monologen bidrar til refleksjon og utvikling klarer ikke ungdomssjangeren sitt rammeverk å forstå implikasjonene av handlingene Justyce bruker for å oppnå denne utviklingen. Dermed kobler jeg sammen den historiske bruken av utdannelse og språk innen afrikansk amerikanske samfunn med brevene Justyce skriver for å utdype betydningen disse hjelpemidlene har hatt for afrikansk amerikanske mennesker i kampen mot undertrykkelse.

I det tredje og siste kapittelet argumenterer jeg hvordan *Ghost Boys* (2018) bryter med rammeverket for ungdomslitteratur fra starten ettersom hovedkarakteren, Jerome, blir drept. Med hans død er muligheten for utvikling fjernet, noe som visker ut hovedintensjonen til ungdomslitteraturen. Til tross for hans død returnerer Jerome til den menneskelige verden som et barnespøkelse. Gjennom hans mulighet til å hjemsøke den unge, hvite jenta, Sarah, klarer Jerome likevel å ta tilbake en form for makt ved å kontinuerlig minne de gjenlevende på hans skjebne. Ved å trekke en rød tråd fra lynsjelitteratur til *Ghost Boys*, fremhever oppgaven hvordan bruken av spøkelset spiller en større rolle for å kritisere historien og fortsettelsen av brutal vold mot afrikansk amerikanske barn.

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Introduction

> You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity.
>
> - James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (293)

In the U.S., issues of racism have haunted the nation for centuries. Progress has been illustrated in historical events, such as the abolition of slavery in 1865 or the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, we still encounter similar acts of oppression depicted in the violence executed on Black people through racial profiling, police brutality, and systemic racism interwoven through the prevailing establishment. The shortcomings of the progress towards equal rights manifests itself in the continued police and vigilante brutality displayed in the news media and on social media with depressing frequency. In the last decade, there has been a chilling number of murders of Black people by the hands of, amongst others, police officers, and an alarmingly low rate of indictments towards the accused. Since the death of Eric Garner in 2014, echoes of "I can't breathe" have soared across social media as a haunting ghost shrieking for justice. Once more, in May 2020, the words were brought back with full force as a police officer knelt on the neck of George Floyd, ultimately killing him (Cobb, 2020). These are only two of the many victims of police brutality; nonetheless, they are two of many who sparked worldwide demonstrations and protests against racial prejudice, injustice, and violence against Black people.

The past decade has seen a surge of social protests concerning racial profiling and police brutality against Black people. Fundamental to the protests are the realization of a need to make changes within race relations in the U.S. (Demirtürk, 2019, p. 2). One of the main components of the current iterations of protest is the Black Lives Matter movement, which began in 2013. Black Lives Matter was formed as a reaction to the acquittal of George Zimmerman who shot and killed Trayvon Martin in 2012. Alicia Garza, one of the founders of the movement, states that Black Lives Matter is "an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise" (2018, p. 992). Indicating the contemporary issue and asserting the politics of Black vulnerability, Garza continues to press how the movement stands for "an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression" (p. 992). The creation of the Black Lives Matter movement in light of the current socio-political conditions presents a complex representation of both hope and hopelessness. Contrasting the determination of the Black community and their insistence that, indeed, Black lives matter, the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency introduced a "more overt version of racism in America" (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 203). Similarly, Noel A. Cazenave claims Trump's win as "a victory for white supremacy" as well as a "pretense of democracy" (2018, p. 175), indicating an obstruction in the hope for progress towards justice and equality.

In accordance with the social and political protests, the reaction towards injustice shown in the Black Lives Matter movement has inspired more authors to add similar themes in their narratives. Within young adult literature, a cluster of books addressing police brutality, racial profiling, and the Black Lives Matter movement has been published in recent years, arguably creating a new sub-genre of 'police-violence' novels (Mootz, 2020, p. 63). Many of these books are debut novels published by African American writers "who have turned to fiction as a form of activism" and anticipate that their narratives will "illuminate the persistence of racial

injustice" for a young audience (Alter, 2017). Most of the young adult 'police-violence' novels are portrayals of the young adult's political awakening in the aftermath of an incident of racial profiling or police brutality.

Related to the conception of political awakening portrayed in these young adult novels, the narratives allude to a longer tradition within African American literature illustrating images of politics, protest, and criticism towards racial prejudice and injustice. Adapted to mirror current circumstances, the contemporary young adult literature has arguably used and modified preceding literary strategies and tropes from the African American literary tradition in order to reflect on the history of the current crisis. However, as we routinely categorize these novels as young adult literature, the significances of the allusions decrease because the young adult framework cannot comprehend the implications of the history in relation to the young adult's growth.

In conjunction with the above claim, this thesis will explore the themes of identity and power in three young adult novels and illustrate how they function as literary pieces of activism in light of the Black Lives Matter movement. The selected novels are *The Hate U Give* (2017) by Angie Thomas, *Dear Martin* (2017) by Nic Stone, and *Ghost Boys* (2018) by Jewell Parker Rhodes. All three novels present narratives concerning racial prejudice, police brutality, and political awakening through different strategies of enabling personal voice and power. The three mentioned novels all fall into the genre of young adult literature, and the examination of identity and power in the novels will be strictly related to a critical framework based on identity and power in the young adult genre. Nevertheless, when analyzing the 'police-violence' novel through the lens of young adult literature, the genre's critical framework falls short of capturing the significance of the narratives. Therefore, I argue that the genre of young adult literature limits the implications of the 'police-violence' narratives because its framework cannot sufficiently incorporate the growth of the protagonists. With this, I intend to contextualize the

contemporary young adult 'police-violence' novels with a longer tradition of African American literature, emphasizing the fundamental similarities between the novels and the genres. The main intention of this contextualization is to analyze how the image of identity and power in the young adult protagonist presents more extensive meaning when analyzed in a historical framework.

Before delving into the main analysis of the novels, I will introduce the genre of young adult literature. In this section, I will discuss what has generally been considered common features of the genre and to what extent the genre has previously tackled social issues. Furthermore, the section will introduce how power and identity is used and presented in young adult literature today. Following this, there will be a short introduction of African American literature. In this section, there will be a short historical timeline illustrating the main developments and focuses within African American literature relevant for this thesis. The section also addresses the debate between ideology and aesthetics in the literature and ends with a short conceptualization of the debate on the protest novel. The representation of this debate is added as it is highly relevant when comparing the political aspects of the mentioned young adult novels in context with African American literary traditions.

Young adult literature

Literature written for or about adolescents has existed for a long time; however, it wasn't until after World War II that contemporary young adult literature started to develop. Prior to this, society distinctly separated people merely into groups of 'children' or 'adults,' and terms like 'young adult' or 'teenagers' did not become more frequently used until school reforms extended children's rights for basic education, prolonging childhood into a new period of life: adolescence (Cart, 2016, pp. 4-5; Trites, 2007, p. x). At this point, the adolescent or young adult generally referred to those between approximately the age of twelve to nineteen years old;

however, as Michael Cart describes in his book on young adult literature, the term 'young adult' is "inherently slippery and amorphous" (2016, pp. 3, 5). The uncertainty about the definition of the term 'young adult,' therefore, affects the definition of the young adult literature as the intended audience or protagonist becomes unclear.

Therefore, when trying to explain precisely what young adult literature entails, experts on the subject disagree. Michael Cart asserts how one of the literature's defining attributes rests in its intended audience (2016, p. 3), thus the issue mainly rests on the term 'young adult' itself, as disagreements on who exactly is to be categorized as young adults occur. Many of the suggested definitions ranged mainly between the intended audience being between twelve and eighteen-years-old; however, some were willing to go as far as the early twenties (p. 4). Nonetheless, in 1991, upon agreeing on the definition of the age of young adults, the Young Adult Services Division together with the National Center for Education in the U.S. pronounced them to be those between the age of twelve to eighteen years old (p. 8). Although a clear initial definition of the term was established, still today the audience of the young adult novel is discussed.

Since the 1970s, the young adult genre has experienced several modifications and changes. Entering the 21st century, the genre experienced more crossovers, which was attractive to a more adult audience. Extending the age limit of the audience as well as increasing the length of the novels, made way for more complicated and nuanced narratives (Cart, 2016, pp. 111, 119). With this development, Cart argues how "surely [the term *young adult*] no longer embraces only twelve- to eighteen-year-olds but must now also include nineteen- to twenty-five-year-olds (or even older, […])" (p. 139). Cart further suggests how the literature might even be categorized into *teen* (twelve- to eighteen-year-olds) and *young adult* or *new adult* (eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds) (p. 140). Arguably, referring to young adult literature in

the 21st century, the potential of an extended audience needs to be acknowledged in order to understand the maturation of the literature.

Historically, young adult novels evolved from the Bildungsroman. In short terms, the Bildungsroman can be defined as 'coming-of-age' novels. Roberta Seelinger Trites further elaborates how the Bildungsroman more specifically portrays a protagonist who "comes of age as an adult" (2000, p. 10). In the Bildungsroman, the adolescent has, by the end of the narrative, reached adulthood. Acknowledging this, most of the contemporary young adult novels are not Bildungsroman and engage more with the genre of the Entwicklungsroman. These are novels of growth or development. Simply put, by the end of the narrative of an Entwicklungsroman, the protagonist has experienced some kind of growth; however, she or he has not yet reached adulthood (p. 10). By distinguishing between the coming-of-age novel and the novel of development, we can more easily interpret the connection between power and growth and how the young adult novel is formed by the two. As Mike Cadden asserts, the young adult novel may present a "story of enlightenment through personal struggle and reflection" (2010, p. 310). Thus, insinuating how the growth into adulthood might, in contemporary young adult literature, be replaced by narratives of self-reflection and self-discovery. This distinction becomes relevant when examining power and growth in the young adult novel as we witness what the young adult has learnt through the narrative. Instead of retaining a focus on the successful ending being about reaching adulthood, a majority of the contemporary young adult novels emphasizes what the protagonist has learned and the changes that have taken place. Furthermore, this thesis intends to examine power and identity in the young adult novel from a perspective which connects the novels to a longer history of African American literature. Therefore, the development the protagonists experience symbolizes their growing knowledge of African American history and tradition in relation to awareness of social and racial issues and not necessarily a growth into adulthood.

Nevertheless, not all Entwicklungsromane present equal success within the depiction of personal development. As Barbara White points out, "many adolescent protagonists fail even to gain the knowledge or undergo the change of character required in the initiation story with its much looser definition" (1985, p. 13). However, she further elaborates that they may contain more "emphasis on the conflict rather than its resolution," (p. 14) preventing clear personal growth. In the 1970s, many of the young adult novels published during this period present such narratives. These novels introduced a radical change within the young adult genre by portraying more realistic scenarios. Ultimately, they were categorized as 'problem novels,' usually illustrating stories where the protagonist "grows as s/he faces and resolves one specific problem" (Trites, 2000, p. 14). Since the time frame of these novels usually remained quite short, the protagonist has rarely reached adulthood by the end of the narrative. One of the main examples used when discussing the 'problem novel' is Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974). In accordance with the genre, Cormier's narrative "related to real problems and experiences that adolescents face daily" (Arnett, 2007, p. 126). With Cormier's novel, and similar narratives published at the time, the young adult genre experienced a significant progress within their depictions of political and social issues. Part of *The Chocolate War*'s significance was how Cormier 'dared to disturb the universe' and did just that by "boldly acknowledging that not all endings of novels and real lives are happy ones" (qtd. in Cart, 2016, p. 33). The book imagines a young boy boldly refusing to sell chocolate and thus challenging the status quo. As the protagonist's actions had dire consequences, Cart states that Cormier's narrative "looked alarmingly like the real one we all inhabit and read about in our morning papers and see depicted daily on the evening news" (Cart, 2016, p. 33). Cormier's work ultimately made way for a new body of young adult literature where the authors dared to present more challenging narratives which arguably represented more realistic situations, similar to what real life would present.

However, this highly considered literary trend introduced with the 'problem novel' was rather short lived, and it swiftly took "a less excellent direction" (Campbell, 2009, p. 66). The technique used by Cormier became reused and imitated due to its apparent success; however, the succeeding authors of similar narratives failed to further develop the structure or implement new inventions. Thus, the 'problem novel' came to focus more on a topic rather than telling a story (Cart, 2016, p. 35). Instead of keeping the focus on providing a realistic image of adolescence and society, it was "degenerated into the single-issue problem novel" (p. 35), which would for instance focus on adult-oriented topics such as "divorce, drugs, disappearing parents, desertion, and death" (Egoff, 1980, p. 196). During the 1970s, society witnessed the young adult gaining more of adult's attributes, benefits, and problems. In the haze of such social and environmental developments, seemingly many writers failed to remember the fundamental purpose of the realistic novel, which was not only to portray real-life circumstances and social issues but also people with all their nuance and complexities (Cart, 2016, p. 35). Thus, the 'problem novel,' in contrast to the realistic novel, focused and emerged from the "social conscience" of the writer rather than "[growing] out of the personal vision of the writer" (Egoff, 1981, p. 67). The main themes of these young adult 'problem novels' often ventured around 'typical' adolescent problems related to the "coming-of-age experience" (Arnett, 2007, p. 126), such as "depression, eating disorders, pregnancy, puberty, sexuality, peer pressure, school problems, family relations, drug and alcohol abuse, religion, and ethnic pride" (p. 126). Thus, in an effort to delve into previously taboo subjects and themes of social concern, more important components of the text became neglected. The 'problems' presented became the main focus, and the literature often portrayed "moral instruction" (Campbell, 2009, p. 66) rather than a complex focus on the main characters and the worlds they were living in.

Although the attempt of realistic portrayal within young adult literature seemingly fell short of its initial intention, in contemporary literature we now experience a return to realistic

narratives after a period of experimentations with other genres (Cart, 2016, p. 126). By building on ideas of realistic young adult fiction and the 'problem novel', Roberta Seelinger Trites presents the relationship between power, repression, and young adult literature in her book *Disturbing the Universe*. In her work, Trites asserts that all the patterns typically presented in young adult literature can be linked to one shared theme: issues of power. She further explains how young adult literature is generally viewed as depictions of growth, but she concludes that "growth in this genre is inevitably represented as being linked to what the adolescent has learned about power" (2000, p. x). Trites here argues that the adolescent cannot grow without experiencing different ranges between having power and being powerless and thus learning their place in the power structure. The adolescent needs to understand the "social forces that have made them what they are" and "learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad [of] social institutions within which they must function" (p. 3). According to Trites, the main characteristic which distinguishes young adult literature from children's literature is "the issue of how social power is deployed during the course of the narrative" (p. 2). Thus, one of the characteristics which has become a defining element of the young adult novel is how it "[relies] on adolescent protagonists who strive to understand their own power by struggling with the various institutions in their lives" (p. 8). In this regard, the young adult novel presents images of disruption or obstruction in the daily life of the adolescent character, launching them into a state of disarray as they need to contemplate their position in this new and changing situation. These incidents of disruption may create negative resolutions for the character if they are not able to access or employ their power within the social structures. On the other hand, the disruption might set off a development of personal identity and subjectivity, which may lead to agency, action, and, ultimately, internal power.

The particular ideas of power in the young adult novel presented above will be the main source of scholarship on the subject throughout the thesis. Being a Distinguished Professor

within the field, specializing in children's literature, Trites is one of the few scholars who has published sufficient analyses of power relations in young adult literature suitable for this thesis' examinations. As the genre of young adult literature has not yet experienced sufficient critical scholarship on power relations within the literature, the critical sources available are limited. On themes of power and growth, Trites is seemingly one of few who elaborates on the subject. Although there are other scholars who examine power in young adult literature, I have chosen to rely mostly on Trites as she also focuses on the power relations between the young adult and a governmental authority. In contrast to other scholars who more frequently study the power relations between, for example, the young adult and parents or the young adult and educational institutions, Trites' claims on the subject are more suitable for the study of power relationship in the 'police-violence' novels.

Related to power and growth in the young adult novel, politics also play a significant role in the 'police-violence' novels analyzed in this thesis. Discussing the role of politics in young adult literature, Trites states that it appears more subtly in the literature and that "relatively few novels deal directly with the role of the state in regulating teenagers' power" (Trites, 2000, p. 22). However, the young novels presented in this thesis have a direct link to real life events, portraying actions of violence and injustice similar to previous historical events, and also present opposition in the image of the Black Lives Matter movement. Although most literature can arguably be referred to as embedded with ideologies which are fundamentally based in political opinions due to the author's own sociopolitical beliefs (p. 24), not many young adult novels state explicitly a political issue or case which effects an entire society in the way some of the more contemporary novels are doing. In general, young adult novels more often focus on the complexities of life and society, or "culture in a broad sense," (McGillis, 2010, p. 347). This implies that obvious and clear political issues are not common occurrences in the literature. With this in mind, the novels analyzed in this thesis arguably move past the

constructions of the young adult genre. With its more explicit imagery of politics and protest, the novels fall outside of the established critical conceptions of young adult literature. Therefore, by contextualizing the mentioned young adult novels with a longer tradition and collection of adult literature, or more specifically African American literature, I will show how the novels present advanced narratives and critique of contemporary social issues. This argument does not aim to separate the novels from the young adult genre but aims to provide a further lens to amplify the narratives' significance in light of their comments on our current social and political moment. Contextualizing within African American literature indicates how the young adult genre alone is a limited way of understanding this new sub-genre of 'police-violence' literature.

Power and identity

In the examination of young adult literature, this thesis maintains the majority of the focus on how identity and power is presented in the growth of the adolescent. More specifically, it focuses on how the character's identity and power is changed and formed through social interactions and personal experiences. The purpose of the analysis of identity and power in the young adult novel is to argue for how the young adult narratives present significant and important portrayals of young adults' independence and social awareness. In order to highlight the young adult's transformations related to independence and social awareness, it is necessary to acknowledge how the characters understand their own identity and power. Furthermore, this imagery of growth and comprehension will be highlighted in a contextualization with African American literature in order to more explicitly argue for the relevance and influences of the adolescent's growth. This will also present more clearly how the young adult genre is limiting for some young adult narratives. In order to support these arguments, I will shortly present a brief assessment of the terms identity and power. Here, I will more clearly state how the terms

are defined, how they relate to and are used within young adult literature, and how I use the terms in this thesis.

Understanding power as a form of social control employed by institutions, Michel Foucault emphasizes how "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (1998, p. 93). Furthermore, Foucault defines "power as an organ of repression" (1980, p. 90), highlighting the implications of social control embedded into the term. Additionally, he contrasts two different definitions of power: "contract-oppression schema" and the "domination-repression" model (p. 92). The first definition exists in the belief that all people fundamentally contain a certain amount of power which is willingly given up for the establishment of a government (p. 91); this means it is connected to a juridical system. The second is based on how the individual exists in "a perpetual relationship with force," indicating how the "pertinent opposition" is "between struggle and submission" (p. 92). Stating how the latter of the two schemas have been favored in his work, Foucault also elaborates on how he acknowledges the insufficiency of the definitions. Declaring a need for a more thorough investigation on the notions of repression within the terms, he understands how there is a need to either considerably modify the terms or let them be "ultimately abandoned" (p. 92).

Arguably, the misfortune with Foucault's definitions rests in the rejection of the possibility of an individual possessing a form of personal power. Both definitions proposed by Foucault focus on the lack of personal power in favor of power being something which conspires against them. Therefore, in order to obtain a definition more suitable for a discussion of adolescent power, we can add aspects of subjectivity. Focusing more on the interior power of the subject, Judith Butler asserts a definition based on how external power instantly shapes and makes the individual inferior as "power not only *acts on* a subject but, in transitive sense, *enacts* the subject into being" (1997, p. 13). Arguably, by indicating how power enables

subjectivity, it also inevitably instigates agency. In this sense, Butler's view of power creates a possibility for external and internal power, allowing the potentiality for an individual to access power proactively.

Similar to both Foucault and Butler, Jacques Lacan defines power within a structure of both internal and external power. Focusing on the individual's power, Lacan expresses how the individual itself "is always responsible for [their] position as subject" (qtd. in Fink, 1995, p. 47). Lacan acknowledges the external forces and how the individual is responsible for the role in which society positions her or him. With this perspective of power, the individual obtains an opportunity to engage with their personal power, presenting a more fitting form of the term when analyzing young adult literature. As the adolescent protagonist frequently needs to recognize the surrounding social forces and negotiate with them, Lacan's idea of the individuals' awareness and responsibility of power becomes more illustrative. Similarly, Marilyn French refers to power as being enabled. Stating how "there is power-to, which refers to ability, capacity, and connotes a kind of freedom, and there is power-over, which refers to domination" (1985, p. 505). With this, French employs a power model where the individual has the opportunity to either use their power to do good, or they can use their power to oppress or repress others.

Ultimately, the definition of power used within this thesis rests on a composition of the mentioned definitions. In analyzing power in the young adult novels, I am interested in looking into how the protagonists, who belong to a marginalized group, discover their individual power in the aftermath of a traumatic experience caused by racial prejudice. By discovering the oppression fundamental in the external power surrounding them, the adolescents are enacted and bestowed with a power which ultimately creates subjectivity and agency. These incidents make them aware of their own position and responsibility within society and offer an opportunity to enable their power to do good. As stated by Trites, "power is a force that operates

within the subject and upon the subject in adolescent literature" (2000, p. 7). Consequently, this enhances the idea of power as something which both has the ability to repress and liberate the adolescent. These definitions with a larger focus on the possibility of individual power creates the possibility for the adolescent to engage with and negotiate the surrounding power structures, creating an opportunity to actively shape their own identity and position in society.

Exploring power in young adult literature encompasses examining portrayals of identity and possible identity development, which is the "most formidable task of entering and negotiating adulthood" (Konstam, 2015, p. 17). Developing from children's literature, young adult literature often portrays narratives with the means of educating its reader and as an aid in the process of departing childhood on the way into adulthood (Arnett, 2007, p. 126). Young adult literature often presents images and narratives with issues and adversities adolescents usually and/or naturally encounter in this process. The aim of these novels, then, is to provide the adolescent with "problem-solving strategies that help adolescents deal with their personal difficulties" (p. 126). Combining these notions of the purpose of the young adult novel with its imagery of identity, we distinguish how the literature can bestow its audience with illustrations of how the adolescent's identity may grow when encountering conflicts which obstruct their lives, or more specifically, when encountering extraordinary circumstances relating to fear or loss of life. Such incidents "enable people to redefine their self-concepts, shift priorities, and reduce senseless violence or conflict" (Stringer, 1997, p. 2).

In an effort to define identity, we encounter the complexity of the concept. In general, when referring to a psychological identity which relates to self-image and individuality, it can be defined as "the totality of one's self-construal," meaning how one understands her or his own self based in the interrelation between past experience and definition of self together with how one "[aspires] to be in the future" (qtd. in Weinreich, 1986, p. 307). In this sense, when constructing one's own identity, it is done through a "historical and cultural frame of reference"

(Konstam, 2015, p. 17). Through our experiences and the influences in our environment, our perception of identity changes in accordance with what we have learned. As stated by Ruthellen Josselson, "we are not the same in all regions of our lives" (1998, p. 63), but continually develop our own selves. However, despite the regular development of identity, it does "not necessarily represent a switching of fundamental values" (Konstam, 2015, p. 18) but is more related to responses to experience and environment. Additionally, when regarding the identity development of an individual belonging to an ethnic minority, the process includes determining positive and negative notions and perspectives of the minority group the individual belong to, as well as other groups, hence negotiating the individual's position in relation to the different groups (Phinney, 2006, p. 119). Through association with other ethnic groups, the individual might experience increased awareness of distinctions between them, essentially generating more questions about their own position within the group(s). As a part of creating a "secure ethnic identity," many young people engage with other people and the history and customs of their group to acquire a higher understanding of their identity in context with their group (Phinney, 2006, p. 120).

Furthermore, belonging to a specific group, such as an ethnic minority, "informs the process of identity formation" (Konstam, 2015, p. 20). bell hooks (as cited by Konstam 2015, p. 20) further elaborates on models of identity development, indicating how "discrimination and oppression" initially effects "identity development," and how these notions have been underestimated. In this sense, group identity plays a major role in processing and forming individual identity, and people are "increasingly likely to explore issues related to group identity and the negotiation of self in relation to other groups" (p. 20). If the group in question is one which has experienced or encountered discrimination and oppression, the significance between group identity and the personal identity development is strengthened as they build on each other's experiences and influence each other. In many ways, with regards to ethnic

identity, people seek out their ethnic group due to a strong need to belong to a group (Phinney, 2006, p. 130). This need to belong may be linked to ideas of culture and history but also based in understanding of similar experiences linked to oppression and prejudice.

African American literature

African American literature holds an extensive and diverse collection of texts, within a plethora of genres and aesthetics, expanding over a long time period, dating back to the 18th century. In general, the genre entails literature written by Americans of African descent. Although the literature dates back to the pre-Revolutionary War period, it was not until late 19th century that the literature began receiving something akin to its deserved praise and critical exploration (Graham, 2004, p. 2). Maintaining a focus on the novel for the purpose of this thesis, the literature which falls under this category has endured intense debate; both in the time of the first known African American novel published over one hundred and fifty years ago and now (p. 1). According to Maryemma Graham, within the term "African American novel," there lies a "history of achievement and cultural heritage that raises as many questions as it answers" (p. 1). Further, she acknowledges that dominating these questions are issues of aesthetics and ideology as "conflicting and compatible tendencies in the novel" (p. 1). African American novelists have frequently employed literature to investigate the collective experience of their race, their historical past in context with its failures and success, and also an imagined potential and optimistic future.

Some of the major periods and trends within African American literary traditions extend from the antebellum slave narrative to the Harlem Renaissance – moving then into the critical debate of the realist novel in the 1940s and 1950s, portrayed by, among others, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. Moving into the 1970s and 1980s, the literature experienced a blossoming of authentic and nuanced representations containing a higher focus on Black womanhood. In

the 21st century, we are bestowed with a large variety of texts, spanning over a plethora of genres. One noteworthy contemporary African American author is Ta-Nehisi Coates. Having published mainly nonfiction texts, Coates has in several ways been linked to previous champions of the African American literary tradition and history. When analyzing the young adult novel *Ghost Boys* in chapter 3, the relationship between Coates and previous African American literature will be further discussed.

As the Harlem Renaissance commenced at the start of the 20th century, new possibilities arose for the future of African American literature. Among the examples of this new direction, is the publication of *The New Negro* (1925) by Alain Locke. In this anthology, he presented a collection of texts showcasing the new turn within the literature. This literature had a higher focus on self-expression, indicating an abandonment of propaganda. Further, he introduced and separated the idea of 'The Old Negro' and 'The New Negro'. The first is presented as "a creature of moral debate and historical controversy" (Locke, 1968, p. 3). Locke's definition implies that 'The Old Negro' was a person confined to the historical oppression that originated from slavery and was a product of the archetypal tropes created to enforce oppression. This resulted in 'The Old Negro' ultimately living in the shadow of a truer depiction of themselves. The 'New Negro,' on the other hand, was a person who was able to break free from such dispositions – one who contains self-respect and understanding of her or his own self. This new dynamic opened for the possibilities to unfold art outside of the restrictions of previous oppressive mindsets.

Although the reception of Locke's work seemingly presented optimism for the future of African American art, W. E. B. Du Bois feared this new direction, which was generated from the Harlem Renaissance, as it might make art "apolitical" as Black artists became "seduced […] into a hollow aestheticism – or worse" (Hutchinson, 2004, p. 53). In his controversial essay "Criteria of Negro Art," initially presented as a speech at the NAACP's annual conference in

1926, Du Bois announced that "all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists" (Du Bois, 2015, p. 96). Contrasting Locke's call for abandoning propaganda, Du Bois feared this new direction would "turn the Negro renaissance into decadence" (Aptheker, 1977, p. 79). Offering his assertion of how the literature should function on behalf of the race, Du Bois signified the importance of not choosing between Beauty and Propaganda, famously declaring "I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda" (Du Bois, 2015, p. 96). The division would simply be artificial; this point of view leads to Du Bois stating the opinion that "art should *be* propaganda and propaganda has *become* art" (Trodd, 2015, p. 18). Nevertheless, the younger generation of writers and artists partaking in the image of 'the New Negro' refused to be limited by such criteria. Among the respondents to DuBois' criteria, was Langston Hughes, one of the most prominent writers of the period, who published his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926). Here he argued for an "artistic freedom" which did not pay attention to either black or white restraints "on the black writer" (Byerman, 2011, p. 85) but where the artist is free to produce a narrative in which he was not "afraid to be himself" (Hughes, 1926).

The publishing and response to Du Bois' criteria for 'Negro Art' presents one of the fundamental debates within African American literature. When talking about African American fiction, Keith Byerman notes the dichotomies which have largely defined African American literature for the last seventy years; they consist of the contrasts between ideology and aesthetics, male and female, and traditional and experimental (2011, p. 85). The fundamentals of the debate on African American art presented above echoed through the 20th century, as writers and artists continued to critique and debate each other about what the literature was supposed to entail; the discussion was, in simple terms, about whether or not the literature should be fused by ideology as means for critiquing racial differences and oppression versus depicting more nuanced experiences linked to the aesthetics of the form.

In the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement, the literature made a "call for a new literary politics" (Graham, 2004, p. 6). Moving away from the overtly political narratives, the literature of this period focused on "a recognition of black identity without reducing it to either victimization or essentialism" (Byerman, 2011, p. 92). One of the particularly important features of this turn is the emphasis on the African American female writers and the female voice. Still dealing with issues of race, class, and gender, women writers now constructed the literature in very multidimensional characters who were firmly based within Black communities. Political discourse remained an important aspect of the literature, but now it was portrayed from a multidimensional and community-based perspective. Thus, one of the major important threads of contemporary African American literature rests in the depiction of Black identity – showing complexities in an authentic manner and illustrating how the surrounding community reflects a similar form of nuance, which is not to be contained by prejudice or archetypal tropes degrading the Black man, woman, or child. The contemporary African American novel "continually renews itself" as it redefines and reuses conventional structures and presents the continuous importance of "telling a free story" (Graham, 2004, p. 12). This renewal reflects also in the young adult novels analyzed in this thesis. In line with the argument of how the significance of the novels' message are enforced in a historical context, the authors have arguably applied similar forms of reusing conventional structures to strengthen the meaning of their texts.

The development of the African American literary tradition has built on previously used literary elements, reusing traditional conventions in modernized texts. The notion of this relationship between past and present African American literature was made clear by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his groundbreaking study of African American literary criticism and theory, *The Signifying Monkey,* in 1988. In his work, Gates asserts how his theory of "Signifyin(g) […] is a metaphor for textual revision" (p. 88). Stating how the trope of Signifyin(g) is rooted in

African American literature, Gates elaborates on how it "manifests itself" through theme, rhetorical strategy, and literary history (p. 89). In similar terms, Mary Helen Washington describes how "writers speak to other writers" (1990, p. 7). As she further explains the results of signifying, she notes that writers "change, challenge, revise, and borrow from other writers," creating interweaving patterns throughout the literary tradition (p. 7). The act of Signifyin(g) creates an opportunity to read much of the African American literary tradition "as successive attempts to create a new narrative space for representing the recurring referent of Afro-American literature, the so-called Black Experience" (Gates, 1988, p. 111). In similar terms, by contextualizing the 'police-violence' novels with the larger tradition of African American literature, this thesis presents examples of Signifyin(g); however, the major difference presented in this thesis rests on the perspective of the analysis. By examining the young adult novels through a young adult framework, the importance of the contextualization increases with the limits of the young adult genre. Nevertheless, the analysis' lens also presents the importance of the young adult framework together with the African American genre, arguably introducing an idea of the narrative losing its significance with the exclusion of one of the genres.

Literary debate: conceptualizing the protest novel

Linking the contemporary young adult 'police-violence' novel to the larger tradition of African American literature requires a review of the debate on the protest novel. The contemporary young adult novels discussed in this thesis portray realistic settings clearly linked to social protest and political awakenings, which are not common portrayals within the young adult genre. Therefore, by highlighting concepts of protest in the young adult novels, they arguably relate more to the ideology and politics of the African American literature and the protest novel than the young adult genre. Important to the history of African American literature and tradition is the aspect of using literature as a device to critique social injustice by implementing political

and ideological aspects into the texts. However, the amount of ideology acceptable to portray within the literature has been highly debated, as discussed in the previous section. One of the implications of this debate rests on the construction of the protest novel, its intentions, criticism, and legacy.

Protesting the establishment, the status quo, and the injustice it brings has been humanity's tool for centuries in order to acquire the rights we are entitled to. However, the format of protest has often been illustrated in various ways, whether, for instance, through physical protests or protests through artistic expression. Among these are using the means of literature as an organ to critique societal injustices and, in some cases, provide suggestions about how we might obtain a solution to the presented issue. Through such political writing, the protest novel was constructed. In general terms, the overarching goal of the protest novel was to bring greater freedom to oppressed people (Trodd, 2006, p. xii). Within African American literature, what has historically been referred to as the 'traditional form' of the protest novel was the model exemplified by Richard Wright through, amongst others, his novel *Native Son* (1940). His work has also been described as "social realist" (Graham, 2004, p. 2) and "naturalistic" (Byerman, 2011, p. 86), indicating his use of literature as a tool to portray realistic, social issues without regards for shielding the reader from the acrimony of the narratives.

Contemplating Wright's overtly ideological protest model, the debate surrounding the model is similar to Du Bois' critique of Black art and literature, and his following criteria of how it should operate. Similar to Du Bois, Wright also favored propaganda over aesthetics, indicating the need for literature to portray the spectacles of the current social issues. For instance, in 1937, following Zora Neale Hurston's publication of her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Wright severely criticized her narrative stating that "the sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought." He critiqued her model of writing as being

intended to entertain a White audience based in a "tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro," – referring to the minstrel technique which made "the 'white folks' laugh" (Wright, 1937). However, not everyone agreed with Wright's employment of ideology and propaganda within literature and art. Similar to Langston Hughes' response to Du Bois in 1926, James Baldwin critiqued *Native Son* and its rhetoric in his essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" in 1949. Baldwin questioned the intentions of Wright's novel and critiqued its reluctance to move past "material [made] for a pamphlet" (Baldwin, 2017, p. 15). Restricted by the impulse to use the novel for propaganda, Baldwin states the writer is unable to discover the truth. Truth, as presented by Baldwin, indicated "devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment; freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be charted" (p. 15). Thus, Baldwin argues for the need for a distinction between the genres (Ward, 2004, p. 174). Defending his argument on the foundation of the restrictions of the protest novel, he argued that the protest novel neglected the nuance and complexities of the individual and her/his life. Stating how "[the] failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended," (Baldwin, 2017, p. 23) Baldwin critiques the genre for limiting the scope of literature. By presenting the characters in images of violence and oppression, their true and complex nature does not reveal itself. This potentially restricts them more as they are perceived without the ability or opportunity to transcend their oppressive environments.

Further fueling the debate, Ralph Ellison stated in 1957 that the novel "is a work of art and not a disguised piece of sociology" (Ellison, 1995, p. 273). Although Ellison represented similar "literary tastes of an age struggling with its moral, social, and political agendas," (Graham, 2004, p. 2) as Wright, his literature took a direction of "impressionism or 'high modernism'" (p. 2). For instance, comparing Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) to Wright's *Native Son*, the major contrast in their forms rest on Ellison privileging "textual concerns over

ideological ones" (p. 2). Recognizing Baldwin and Ellison's renouncement of Wright, literary and social critic Irving Howe supported Wright and his work in his essay "Black Boys and Native Sons" (1963). Howe presents Baldwin's critique of Wright as an "announcement of [Baldwin's] own intentions" (p. 353) and says that Baldwin shows, amongst other things, the aim of "transcending the sterile categories of 'Negro-ness,' whether those enforced by the white world or those defensively erected by the Negroes themselves" (p. 353). However, in a further examination of Baldwin's work, Howe illuminates the contradictions of Baldwin's opinions. Since Baldwin stated in "Everybody's Protest Novel," "literature and sociology are not one and the same" (Baldwin, 2017, p. 19), Howe questions Baldwin's assertion because in his work *Notes of a Native Son*, where the referenced essay appears, Baldwin also notes that "one writes out of one thing only – one's own experience" (p. 7). Howe's question, then, rests on what exactly encompasses the experience of a Black man in the U.S.; he indicates that "the 'sociology' of [the Black man's] existence formed a constant pressure on his literary work" (Howe, 1963, p. 354). Wanting to highlight the "rifts in logic" (p. 354), Howe's essay presents the growth of the Black writer and how the essence of their work may always contain aspects of the 'sociology of their existence.' Although Howe agrees with the importance of critiquing the overtly ideological aspects of *Native Son*, he also asserts how Baldwin's and Ellison's "move beyond Wright's harsh naturalism" further towards "more supple modes of fiction" would not have been possible without Wright: "Wright had been there first, courageous enough to release the full weight of his anger" (p. 355). Had Wright not transgressed the established models and ideals of the novel, there would not have been room for the succeeding writers to explore different modes of literature that was embellished in nuance and complexities beyond that of ideological ideals.

To summarize, the debate about the protest novel encompasses a discussion of the purpose of the novel and what it is to contain. Some point to the failures of the protest novel

based on its neglect of human life and the surrounding community. Others argue that the novel is supposed to contain focus on ideology and politics as forms of propaganda. Considering Wright's *Native Son* as a protest novel presents a clear definition of the political function of the novel. However, neglecting the possibility of political tone and function in more subtle novels containing more explicit imagery of humanity, such as Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* unfolds a new debate of *how* the ideology of the novels is supposed to be presented. Arguably, as all works of literature most likely contains aspects of the writers' socio-political ideals together with personal experience, no piece of literature can be entirely apolitical. Further, as noted by Howe, even overtly political narratives, such as *Native Son*, contains aspects of humanity as it indeed is based in personal experience. The debate thus relates more to how the writer can respectfully present a group in context with their struggles, without refusing the complexities of their lives and communities, and at the same time critique a dangerous and oppressive society. Arguably, with the notions of authentic narratives linked with imagery of social critique and protest strengthen the connection between the image of growth, progress, and political awareness presented in the 'police violence' novels.

Overview

Altogether, this thesis addresses identity and power in contemporary young adult 'police-violence' novels. Examining the developments of the protagonists' power and identity demonstrates some of the main characteristics of the young adult genre. However, by observing this development explicitly through racial profiling and police brutality, the young adult genre presents restrictions for the analysis of the young adults' growth. Therefore, I intend to contextualize the young adult novel with African American literary traditions in order to reveal the limits the young adult genre has for literature portraying issues linked to the experiences of Black people in the U.S. Unfortunately, due to the lack of scholarship on the novels, the

presented analyses will mostly be informed by theories on identity and power in relation to young adult literature, a historical framework of African American literature, and close readings of the chosen young adult novels.

Starting with a chapter on the young adult novel *The Hate U Give* (2017) by Angie Thomas, we see how the text presents the identity development of Starr in the aftermath of witnessing the death of her friend by the hands of a police officer. Analyzing how identity development occurs in the aftermath of a disruption in the protagonist's life, we witness how the character learns more about the power she holds as a witness. Nevertheless, through contextualizing the narrative, we see how the repression the protagonist had experienced before the incident originates from an old idea of oppression represented in racial tropes. The connection between the two genres creates a more explicit image of Starr's reluctance to accept the delegated position within the power structures.

Continuing in chapter 2, we meet high school student Justyce in *Dear Martin* (2017) by Nic Stone. Believing himself safe from racial profiling after securing himself in a White community, Justyce's view on the world becomes disrupted as he experiences an act of racial profiling. By writing letters addressed to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we see Justyce's struggle to accept his position of powerlessness. Using letters to understand the implications of the racism he experiences, Justyce's identity develops as he learns more about power structures. Nevertheless, the issues presented in the novel make no indication for being resolved before the child reaches adulthood, indicating how the narrative does not conform to the young adult genre. However, by emphasizing the significance of Dr. King, in the narrative, we witness how the civil rights fighter illustrates an important aspect of the young adult's development. Attempting to imitate Dr. King, Justyce's development reflects more of a reluctance to resist the power structures attempt to subdue him in adolescence, signaling an intention of protesting the structures in adulthood.

In the last chapter, we are introduced to the ghost-boy Jerome; a twelve-year old who was shot playing with a fake gun in the park. Alluding to the murder of Tamir Rice in 2014, Jewell Parker Rhodes use the ghost as a tool to question why Black children are being murdered in *Ghost Boys*. Accompanying Jerome in his afterlife, we see how the promise of the young adult genre falls short in the image of the dead child never reaching adulthood. Nevertheless, by enforcing the allusions to lynching literature, we witness how the ghostly figure of the Black boy presents a critique and protest of the system.

Lastly, I will summarize my findings on the young adult novels in order to create a clearly constructed answer to how the novels transcend the constrictions of the young adult genre. Emphasizing the importance of the young adult genre, I do not intend to critique the genre itself; however, I do want to highlight the importance of this literature and how in order to understand the context of the issues in them, it is necessary to not limit the novels exclusively to the young adult genre. Further, I hope this study will be a sufficient addition to the study of contemporary young adult literature and that it will contribute to further scholarship within young adult literature; or more specifically, young adult literature representing people of color.

Chapter 1 – *The Hate U Give*

> They hate because they fear, and they fear because they feel that the deepest feelings of their lives are being assaulted and outraged. And they do not know why; they are powerless pawns in a blind play of social forces.
>
> - Richard Wright, *Native Son* (302)

Introduction

As a reaction to the police shooting of Oscar Grant in 2009, Angie Thomas wrote a short story about police violence as an assignment in college. Later, she expanded the story into her 2017 debut novel, *The Hate U Give*, as similar incidents continued to present themselves. In interviews discussing the novel, Thomas has further elaborated on how the novel was influenced by her own personal experiences with growing up in 'the hood' but attending college in a predominantly White, upper-class area. Shifting between the two environments, she describes how she was constantly subjected to two different takes on the tragic events of Grant's death. Similar to what is presented in the novel, Thomas explains how at her college, Grant was seen as "a thug who deserved what he got," but in her own neighborhood he was seen as "one of [their] own" (Dar, 2017). Here Thomas introduces one of the main conflicting ideas in her novel – the identity confusion that may occur when situated between two divided communities.

Echoing Thomas' personal experiences, *The Hate U Give* presents a narrative following 16-year-old Starr Carter as she tries to balance her life between the poor, predominantly Black neighborhood where she lives, and the wealthy, predominantly White elite prep school she attends. The foundation on which she has built up her dual identity begins to crack when she witnesses the murder of her childhood best friend, Khalil, by a White police officer. In an

internalized battle over how to achieve justice for Khalil while simultaneously struggling with the fear of publicly presenting herself as the sole witness to the tragic event, we follow Starr on a journey between what is right, what is wrong, and what needs to be done to create change. Immersed in ideas of the "destructive impact of racism" (Dar, 2017), imagery of the Black Lives Matter protests, and how to negotiate a world constructed to work against a whole community of people, Thomas introduces a timely presentation of the social- and racial issues prevalent in U.S. society and how they affect the identity of a Black teenager.

Emphasizing the subject matter and its application in the young adult genre produces a narrative of identity and power development in relation to racial awareness. Through examining the author's portrayal of identity and growth, I will analyze to what extent these representations fit within the framework of identity and power analysis in the young adult genre. The intention of this analysis is to highlight how the young adult framework limits the potential understanding of the narrative. Arguably, the framework of identity, power, and growth presented by Trites is restrictive for a reading of the protagonist if we want to consider her or his involvement with social critique and the process of finding the power to speak out against injustice. Therefore, I assert that it is necessary to include the perspective of African American literary traditions in the analysis in order to comprehend the implications of the identity development and power growth the protagonist experiences.

More specifically, in this chapter I will analyze how the conflicting identities of Starr result in her silence after witnessing the death of her friend, Khalil. However, because of the media's negative description of Khalil, Starr progressively activates her power as the witness in order to amend the wrongful depiction of Khalil. On the way towards speaking out, Starr experiences an identity development equivalent to what one may find in the young adult framework. Nevertheless, the 'police-violence' novel arguably informs the protagonist with a tool for rebellion against authority figures which transcends the adolescence into adulthood arc

of many young adult novels. This contradicts the fundamental idea of the young adult genre where the young adult's issues are supposed to be resolved by the time the protagonist reaches adulthood. Furthermore, by structuring ideas of identity creation through Starr's need to resist racial tropes, I argue that Thomas' narrative shows how the issues Black young adults experience will likely remain in adulthood. Additionally, through the development of identity and understanding of personal power, the narrative also critiques old assumptions related to archetypal tropes. With this, the novel initially attempts to subvert the tropes' existence from the nation's collective memory. Building on racial tropes, in addition to addressing issues of race and injustice, creates more specifically a link to the protest novel within African American literature. Therefore, I will use a short comparison to *Native Son* to underline how the narrative of *The Hate U Give* becomes more significant when connecting the framework of identity and power from the young adult genre with the traditions of African American literature.

Understanding personal identity

In *Disturbing the Universe,* Trites asserts that the main purpose of the young adult novel is depicting personal growth in light of an issue the adolescent is presented with. However, she explains that this portrayal of growth in the young adult genre is equivalent to what the character has learned about power (2000, p. x). In Trites' examination of young adult literature, she conceptualizes that the fundamental engagement of power in the narrative is for the adolescent to "learn [how] to negotiate the many institutions that shape them: school, government, religion, identity politics, family, and so on" (p. x). Accordingly, the young adult must learn about the surrounding power structures and understand their own position within those structures before they can reach adulthood. By learning about power and their social position, the young adult will come to understand the power they hold and how to yield said power within the established structures. The growth portrayed in the young adult illustrates their increased knowledge of

power and its effect on individuals. Thus, being a fundamental part of young adult literature through the symbolism of the adolescent's growth, power also is a way for the adolescent to test the limits of their own power. By testing limits, the young adult is supposed to learn to understand and comprehend how society is structured and how to endure a society which, for some, might be unjust or actively work against them. In this sense, young adult literature actively engages with institutional powers and how to negotiate through life as an adolescent surrounded by these power structures. In some ways, this literature presents itself as a compass on how to adapt, behave, and endure certain situations one might find oneself in as an adolescent.

Engaging with similar instructional methods, *The Hate U Give* presents the mentality and struggles of a person of color growing up in the U.S. Illustrating typical aspects of embarrassing teenage experiences, Starr describes how she as a twelve-year-old girl had "the talk" with her parents about the birds and the bees. Considering how mortifying this experience may be for any young adult, the narrator adds a disturbing twist with the admission of her parents giving her two talks. The other was what to do and how to act if she were ever stopped by a police officer (Thomas, 2018, p. 24). This interaction introduces Starr's position in the power structures. Regarding governmental forces, Starr is presented as a powerless figure. This powerlessness leads to Starr's father feeling the need to establish techniques for Starr to help her in situations when she is interacting with governmental authorities. Asserting that Starr is not too young to be arrested or shot, Starr's father instructs how if she ever was to find herself in such a situation, she is to "keep [her] hands visible[, don't] make any sudden moves[, and only] speak when they speak to [her]" (p. 24). With this, Starr's powerlessness becomes visual in the meeting with an authority figure as she essentially is trained to imagine herself as a suspect of a criminal case in a similar situation. These descriptive directions also imply the

possible consequences which might be inflicted on her if she does not adhere to rules. This ultimately reenforces the image of Starr's powerlessness.

Consequently, Starr has from a young age been made explicitly aware of how she lives in a world where she constantly has to be smart and adapt to certain situations in order to keep herself safe. The idea of adapting to a situation further develops and presents itself in Starr's construction of her personal identity. Concerning the personal battle of who she is, how she is perceived, and how she does not want to be perceived, Starr consequently and continuously presents strategies that show how she adapts her personality based on the social situations she finds herself in. For instance, when attending school, Starr reflects that she "[flips] the switch in [her] brain so [she's] Williamson Starr" (Thomas, 2018, p. 73). The main difference, she points out, is that Williamson Starr "doesn't use slang […] even if her white friends do" (p. 73). In this explanation, Starr shows how she uses code-switching as a method for adapting herself in society. Code-switching is the ability to shift between two or more languages or dialects depending on the social context a person finds themselves in (Morrison, 2017). In using this method, Starr shows how a fundamental part of her has been constructed in order to comfortably move between different social environments without having to fear possible inconveniences. Her reasoning for using code-switching is situated in her assertion that when her White friends use slang, they are cool; however, when she uses slang it makes her "hood" (Thomas, 2018, p. 73). Starr initially has created a dual identity: one which she uses around her family and community and one which is activated when interacting with people outside her community. In line with her father's instructions, Starr's response and negotiation with the power structures limits her into a constructed identity created on the principle of not transgressing any social rules when interacting outside her community. Instead of testing any limits in her interaction with other power forces, she becomes submissive in an attempt to not create public, uncomfortable scenes.

Imagining Starr's constant adaption, Thomas presents a typical image of a young adult trying to negotiate the institutions surrounding her. However, interpreted from Starr's adjustments in society, we perceive how Starr views her own position within these structures. Starr expresses how she views her individual power to be inferior to the surrounding White individuals. Thus, the power Starr possesses is seemingly formed by racial oppression. Fearing being limited or alienated based on the color of her skin, she adapts to society in order to more comfortably maneuver herself through life. Not daring to test the limits of her power, she is initially repressed into a state of being where she does not entirely present her true identity. This becomes especially evident in Starr's relationship with her friend, Hailey. Presented as the leader of their friend group, Hailey is shown to always get her way. Even if Starr would prefer another outcome than that where Hailey got what she wanted, Starr never gave any indication of her disagreement. Making Starr's conformity more explicit, Starr is starting to become aware of her and Hailey's fading friendship. However, firm in her intentions of not making a scene, Starr supposes she might just "[be] sensitive," but if things have started to change, she'll "keep pretending everything is fine" for now (Thomas, 2018, p. 80).

Contextualizing the idea of race with Starr's use of code-switching, W. E. B. Du Bois' idea of double consciousness from 1903 emerges. Published in his autoethnographic work, *The Souls of Black Folk,* Du Bois presents and explains the African American experience of double consciousness. The concept entails how subordinated or colonized groups experience an internal conflict over identity as a result of living in an oppressive environment over time. The internal conflict consists of a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois, 2007, p. 3). Identifying the idea of double consciousness shows the effect of racism on the mind and behavior of the oppressed and how it shapes Black people to act and think in certain ways. Du Bois says the African American is "born with a veil" in which he is "gifted

with second-sight" where the individual is constantly aware of his "twoness" negotiating and struggling against each other (p. 3). This struggle presented by Du Bois echoes in Starr's strife between fitting in without disturbing the constructed perception of herself and activating a more authentic self who dares to speak out for Khalil. Arguably, the notion of Starr's awareness of how other people might perceive her through degrading tropes etched into the American consciousness present themselves as a fundamental aspect of Starr's identity. Her 'twoness' presents conflicting ideals of remaining safe in the White society with the dissatisfaction of not feeling able to enact a more authentic identity.

By interrupting Starr's constructed reality, Khalil's murder presents an obstruction which forces Starr to re-evaluate her social position. Starr's option between staying silent and speaking out against the injustice Khalil faced introduce new dilemmas for her perception of herself. By staying silent, Starr has the option to remain in her seemingly comfortable existence where potential confrontations are exchanged for submission to the power forces. However, by speaking out, Starr would have to negotiate these power forces anew; potentially subjecting herself to insecurity and possibly danger. Nevertheless, Starr comes to realize that her missing voice from the public narrative strengthens the power of the authorities. Without a contradicting force, the media are allowed unrestrained liberty to portray Khalil however they wish. Starr's position as the sole witness to the incident makes her a potential powerful voice amidst the clashing oppositions between justice and injustice. Realizing the potential of the power she holds, Starr seeks to discover to what extent this power can be used. Starr has to transgress her constructed reality in order to negotiate the power structures.

Starr's newly acquired power partly relates to Trites' notions of the power of the adolescent. As Maria Nikolajeva remarks on Trites' work, the teenage protagonist has, to all appearances, only "two choices when meeting with repression: to perish or to become repressive [herself]" (Nikolajeva, 2010, p. 7). Nikolajeva questions Trites' focus on the power

of the adolescent and how Trites' assertions show how containing power simply means that the protagonist has moved from repressed to repressive. As we see with Starr, she represents the power of the repressed obtained through an oppressive act. Meaning, the power she obtained as a witness came from a violent act which originated from oppressive attitudes. Starr's method for obtaining power indicates the restriction of the young adult framework. Starr obtains power through other means than becoming repressive; however, this does not automatically remove Starr from the position of the repressed. This power contains the possibility for Starr to elevate beyond her state of repression by giving her a voice. Nevertheless, the power which follows her voice as a witness only has the *possibility* to create a change for Starr. Obtaining more optimal power depends on the actions of the adolescent from this point on.

Re-constructing personal identity

In discussing "Nationhood, Struggle, and Identity" in young adult literature, Elia Michelle Lafuente points out that numerous young adult novels focus on personal growth; however, this growth is directly linked to an experience of disruption for the protagonist (Lafuente, 2012, p. 33). For Starr, this disruption is presented early in the narrative through the murder of Khalil. In the aftermath of the murder, Starr experiences internal conflicts connected to her constructed identity as she starts projecting feelings of confusion between enacting the identity used when perceived by her White classmates and transgressing her own identity regulations. This disruption indicates the beginning of Starr's personal growth and a journey where she has to contemplate her own position in society.

Driving home together from a party, Khalil and Starr are pulled over by a police officer on the charge of a broken taillight (Thomas, 2018, p. 26). Finding herself in this situation, Starr recalls her father's instructions of behavior when encountering a police officer. During this episode, Starr reflects on other attributes of the instructions her father presented: "*If you're with*

somebody, you better hope they don't have nothing on them, or both of y'all going down. […] *If you can remember his badge number, that's even better*" (p. 25; emphasis in original). With this in mind, Starr hopes that somebody had the talk with Khalil when he was young. However, Khalil does not seem controlled by the same instructions as Starr as she declares that "Khalil [broke] a rule – he [didn't] do what the cop [wanted]" (p. 25). By breaking the code of conduct, Khalil sparks a reaction by acting against what is required for him to stay safe. As the officer shoots and kills Khalil, Starr, as the only witness, is forced into a position of making a choice between keeping herself safe from the focus of media attention and voicing her perspective of the incident in order to get justice for Khalil. Through the narrative, Starr contemplates whether or not she should speak out against the injustice. Directly after the incident, Starr remains silent about what she witnessed. Nevertheless, witnessing the surrounding community's reaction to the murder, she becomes more aware of the social and political divide created in society. This awareness is reinforced as she compares Khalil's murder with similar events of violence towards Black people in the past, how Black people are treated in general, and how they are treated in connection to the rising protests. Furthermore, in connection to these observations, Starr reflects upon her own position; she realizes that her silence only contributes to accepting the continued oppression of Black people since the forces that hold the most power are not being properly challenged.

Although politics usually does not have an obvious and clear appearance in young adult literature, the text will always in some way be illuminated by the ideologies determined by the authors' socio-political beliefs. As stated by Roderick McGillis, literature for both children and young adults point to and teach the reader about "culture in a broad sense" in complex ways (2010, p. 347). However, an explicit focus on a political issue is not common as it usually becomes buried in the complexities of the narratives. Politics then, normally appears through demonstrations of how government policies influence adolescents or how they are socially

constructed by identity politics (Trites, 2000, p. 22-24). Politics of identity refers to the social construction of how we group people of similar social positions and backgrounds together. Fundamentally, the term emphasizes the idea that "identities are politically relevant" (Alcoff & Mohanty, 2006, p. 7). The significance of politics of identity in young adult literature mostly relates to the adolescent's definition of the self and their personal position in their own culture. This position ultimately constitutes the character's access to power in the positions they find themselves in (Trites, 2000, p. 47). By witnessing the shooting of Khalil and the aftermath, Starr is forced to re-evaluate her social position. Reflecting on the situation and contemplating her position as sole witness, Starr realizes her perception of her own identity is less powerful than she previously believed. Upon reflection, she states how she's "always said that if [she] saw [a Black person getting killed just for being Black], [she] would have the loudest voice, making sure the world knew what went down" (Thomas, 2018, p. 38). Starr had through social media and signing petitions created an impression of herself as willingly, actively, and bravely working against racial injustice. However, finding herself in the situation, she realizes that she is "too afraid to speak" (p. 38). Starr's constructed personality has ultimately repressed her ability to actively engage with a cause in which her voice plays an important role.

In fear of the possible repercussions of speaking out against the police officer, Starr decides to stay quiet in order to protect herself. Apart from being questioned by the police, the identity of the witness is being kept anonymous. However, due to Starr keeping silent, the portrayal of Khalil's identity is thus under attack. Because media and news sources are the main source of information on the case, the social construction of Khalil as a criminal instead of a victim is more easily implemented. Shortly after the shooting, a news report released the identity of the murder victim; however, the title connected to the news story was "Khalil Harris, a Suspected Drug Dealer" (Thomas, 2018, p. 106). Without further clarification of the events or statement of what transpired on the night of his murder, they only disclose "that an

'unidentified witness' had been questioned and that the police were still investigating" (p. 106). Without Starr's additional perspective on the event, the media's control of the perceived identity of Khalil results in a large number of people believing Khalil, in some way, deserved his fate.

The media's portrayal of Khalil is infused with ideas of the Black man as inherently violent and a criminal. When talking about politics of identity, these ideas are socially constructed; they are "defined by discourse, not biology" (Trites, 2000, p. 46). The social construction of racial difference effects the idea of the self and how the self is perceived politically. Embedded in discourse, racial difference originates from cultural heritage, as Ralph Ellison illustrate in *Shadow and Act* (1964):

> It is not skin color which makes a Negro American but cultural heritage as shaped by the American experience, the social and political predicament; a sharing of that "concord of sensibilities" which the group expresses through historical circumstance and through which it has come to constitute a subdivision of the larger American culture. (p. 131)

Thus, the media's construction of Khalil as a criminal and not a victim rests on a longer history of racism as an institution with socially constructed ideas of how a group of people presumably act.

The idea of the media's influence on a viewer's ideas and perceptions is firmly present in Starr's friend, Hailey. Experiencing the media as a reliable source of information, Hailey asserts in a discussion with Starr and their other friend, Maya, how Starr simply should "get over" Khalil getting murdered because he "was a drug dealer and a gangbanger," thus she concludes that "somebody was gonna kill him eventually" (Thomas, 2018, p. 337). Witnessing the effect of her silence, especially on someone close to her, Starr's previous determination to keep calm and remain in her constructed persona completely shatters. Starr reacts by physically

attacking Hailey and starting a fight. With this, Starr mentally states that she is "no longer Williamson Starr or even Garden Heights Starr. [She's] pissed" (p. 337). Allowing herself to publicly react to the misleading impression of Khalil portrayed by the media, Starr reaches a turning point in her own growth. By breaking the barrier of her constructed identity, Starr deconstructs her own ideas of how she should behave and creates an opportunity for herself to reconstruct who she is and acquire more power to speak out.

In the process of witnessing how both media and people around her react to the shooting of Khalil, Starr develops an identity that involves accessing her own social power. Seeing the need for a second opinion and another perspective of the event, Starr becomes more and more certain in her need to speak out; she is only missing enough bravery to do it. The narrative consequently reflects on the possibilities of using your voice as a means of accessing power. The media, being the sole source of information to the event, is continually critiqued and commented on to Starr by the people from her neighborhood. When figuring out that Starr is the witness, one of her friends ask her "why [she's] keeping quiet 'bout it?." She suggests Starr is hiding from something and notes how the media are "not even giving his side of the story" (pp. 194-195). Continuing the critique, Starr's friend asserts her opinion that she does not understand why Starr is keeping quiet, especially in light of "all the stuff they're saying 'bout him on the news, calling him a thug and stuff, and you know that ain't Khalil" (p. 195). Finishing of her talk with Starr, her friend presents the final blow by claiming how "the Khalil I know would've jumped on TV in a hot second and told everybody what happened that night if it meant defending you" (p. 196). Although Starr asserted during their conversation that she already talked to the police and nothing happened, Starr is continuously pushed by her friend towards the importance of speaking out for Khalil. Basing her point in community and friendship, Starr's friend uses the connection between Starr and Khalil as a means to push Starr into transgressing the established norms Starr has created for her identity.

Through reflecting on the events presented in the aftermath of the shooting, Starr realizes that she has to be the voice that argues against the degrading characterization of Khalil. Realizing the importance of her role in the situation, she contemplates "what's the point of having a voice if you're gonna be silent in those moments you shouldn't be?" (p. 248). After the shooting, there have been several protests all over the country. The protests formed on the grounds of the injustice of the case; however, they were further extended as the police officer was acquitted. The growth of Starr's identity reaches an all-time high as she finds herself attending one of the protests in Garden Heights. Transcending beyond the fear of speaking out, Starr actively engages with her power as the witness and realizes the potential her new power has. Thus, Starr shows how her identity has grown in the aftermath of the obstruction which disturbed her reality. Through a focus on the security provided by her community, Starr was able to activate her powers through identity formation in order to speak out against injustice. Overall, this illustrates how the power she has received came from oppression of people of color, but, as her voice now is activated, she may be able to transcend her state of oppression.

Although Starr publicly spoke out about her side of the incident, Khalil still did not get justice. Fueled by anger, Starr now uses her power and voice to rebel against the forces of power. Ultimately, by breaking the chain of her constructed identity, Starr activated a new, reformed identity which disregards to a higher extent social- and governmental codes of civil obedience. At the protest, Starr climbs a patrol car, grabs a bullhorn, and introduces herself as the witness. Using her voice as "[her] biggest weapon" (p. 405), Starr announces the injustice Khalil faced as he did nothing wrong and asserts how the protest is not about how Khalil died, but "about the fact that he lived [and that his] life mattered" (pp. 406-407). By illuminating the fact that Khalil's life mattered, regardless of whether he was a criminal or not, Starr uses her newly acquired voice and power to subvert ideas about how a life is worth less based on assumptions of character. Although Starr has not entirely transcended her state of repression,

her rebellion in collaboration with the community presents a symbolic possibility of how power of voice may create more change in the future. Furthermore, this transgression insinuates how the power of rebellion Starr has activated will stay with her into adulthood. Through indications of how issues of racism remain in adulthood, Starr's need to use her power to challenge the power forces remain. Ultimately, although Starr has portrayed the identity development expected in the young adult genre, and she has learnt about the power structures and her position within those power structures, the narrative still fails to conform to the framework of the young adult genre. The young adult is supposed to have learnt about the structures and her or his place within them before reaching adulthood; however, the young adult is also meant to *accept* their position within the power structures. Obviously, Starr is a character reluctant to conform to her position as a repressed person. Illuminating the injustice of the circumstances, one can imagine Starr continuing to protest as long as the issue exists. Thus, the framework of the young adult genre is restricting for the young adult 'police-violence' novel, which showcases the need for a more elaborate genre description.

Contextualizing with African American literary history

Regarding young adult literature, a focus often rests on the image of growth created in the young adult character, while underestimating the allegorical meaning hidden within the growth (Trites, 2007, p. 144). By contextualizing the narrative of the young adult novel with African American literary history, the historical implications of the novel become highlighted; this creates a more nuanced image of how the young adult novel portrays issues of the contemporary social situation. Mainly for this part, Starr's identity is constructed and restricted due to socially constructed ideas of African American women. Witnessing similar views leading to the oppression of Black men, the narrative creates a connection between the history of oppression of Black people and their current treatment. Nevertheless, unfolding Starr's personal growth,

the narrative subverts constructed ideas of racial prejudice by intertwining older conventions of tropes with complex depictions of characters.

In the preceding section, we witness how Starr is confined to an identity constructed through ideas of double consciousness and code-switching. The main reference to this is how she created her own identities in order to adapt to different social situations. By bestowing the character with such a philosophical reflection of how her identity is constructed and how she needs to act in order to be perceived outside repressive assumptions of character, Thomas brings forth ideas of old tropes which have continuously oppressed Black people for decades. By linking this imagery to a longer tradition and history within Black representation, Starr's interpretation of being perceived as 'hood' is connected to her fear of being viewed as the "angry black girl" (Thomas, 2018, p. 74) if she were to verbally react in a situation where she becomes mad or otherwise provoked. In her refusal to be confined to such a trope, Starr brings forth a long-standing issue of representation through racial tropes and archetypal characters which have repressed African American people, specifically women in this case, since the Antebellum period. The narrative invokes the racial trope, Sapphire, which is a trope "that characterizes [black women] as shrill, loud, argumentative, irrationally angry, and verbally abusive" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 87). The trope originated during the Antebellum period as a means to keep Black women submissive to their slave owners and was later replicated in popular culture, which contributed to normalizing the dehumanization of Black women. The characteristics of this trope can also be linked to that of the Jezebel or the Mammy; however, the Sapphire has not been studied to the same extent due to researchers believing, according to Harris-Perry, that there is a truth to the trope in relation to Black women (p. 89). Despite this, the Sapphire has still been presented in several different ways and representations through "the bad black woman, the black 'bitch,' and the emasculating matriarch" (p. 88). In all, the construction of such a trope presents itself in issues of repression in the form of individuals

refusing to properly express themselves or speak their minds because of fear of being reduced to a trope. This hinders an individual to break free from a repressing and racist society. By illuminating this historical context related to the identity construction of Starr, we see that her reluctance to break free from her constructed identity in her school persona is a result of a form of oppression dating back to slavery. Starr's positioning of herself in a racist society illuminate issues beyond the confinements of the young adult gerne; this indicates that the young adult genre's framework might not be able to comprehend and contain the mechanisms by which Starr has to construct her identity.

Presenting the inner monologue of Starr and how she adapts her identity depending on the situation she finds herself in is linked to her determination to not be confined to a racial trope. With this presentation, older debates of depictions of Black people as tropes in literature surface. The racial trope "is a social control mechanism that is employed to punish black women who violate the societal norms that encourage them to be passive, servile, non-threatening, and unseen" (Pilgrim, 2008). In an effort to present the harm of archetypal tropes and the author's attempts to subvert them, a link towards James Baldwin's "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949) is created. In this essay, Baldwin critiques writer Richard Wright's usage of archetypal characters due to the overt focus on an ideological cause within the text. The novel in question, *Native Son* (1940), introduced the character Bigger Thomas in the image of the 'Brute'. This racial trope "portrays black men as innately savage, animalistic, destructive, and criminal – deserving punishment, maybe death" (Pilgrim, 2000). In his critique, Baldwin argue that such representations do not fight against the oppression Black people experience; they only neglect the complexities and nuance of the people, which ultimately helps the oppression prevail. Baldwin further compares Bigger Thomas to Uncle Tom, the main character from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). The two characters are presented as archetypal opposites, but still Baldwin argues they "are locked together in a deadly, timeless

battle," where they constantly resist all aspects of the other's personality (Baldwin, 2017, p. 22). As Bigger Thomas is overtly violent, Uncle Tom is overtly pious and saint-like; however, none of the characters show any means of nuance or possible transcendence from their oppressive states. Baldwin argues that the opposition between the two ultimately makes Bigger into Uncle Tom's descendant, since they are both locked in a reality simply portraying life as a slow, agonizing process towards death (p. 22). The critique is based not only on the archetypal representation presented in Bigger Thomas but also the refusal to move past previous models of character building, which were used to argue a social issue in a modest, non-transgressive manner as Stowe did when writing her abolitionist text. Contrasting Wright and Stowe, Angie Thomas presents a character reluctant to be contained by similar tropes. Through the narrative, Starr actively engages with her constructed identity as a means to avoid a similar fate; however, her reluctance to be contained to a trope presents as a continued state of oppression. Additionally, her initial submission and refusal to speak out is implicated in the creation of Khalil into the image of the racial trope, a state which Starr actively tries to avoid.

By emphasizing the use of double consciousness and racial tropes, we can see that important similarities are presented in *Native Son* and *The Hate U Give*. Bigger Thomas is perceived by society as a dangerous criminal man; however, the reader is presented with a more philosophical aspect of his psyche where he reflects over his existence as a Black man. The reader sees how his actions are all linked to a fundamental fear, which ultimately makes him execute even more transgressive actions. Amongst others, Bigger reflects over how his actions are perceived as more transgressive than if he were a White man. With this realization, Bigger shows how in an attempt to hide the evidence of his mistake, he commits more heinous crimes. Similarly, Khalil is perceived as a criminal in the eyes of the media, even though he has not performed a criminal act. As the media describes Khalil, they reduce him to images of a "drug dealer" and a "thug" (Thomas, 2018, p. 55). His status as a victim is neglected, and his murder

is attempted to be justified based on these allegations. Initially, Khalil is blamed for his own murder as he is reduced to a 'Brute.' Although we are not introduced to Khalil's internal monologue, Starr shows a similar form of reflection as Bigger in the aftermath of Khalil's death. In addition to reflecting on her own existence and the racial issues created through oppression, Starr also maintains a focal point on Khalil's existence. Similar to Baldwin's comparison between Bigger Thomas and Uncle Tom, Khalil is the descendant of Bigger; the Black man still has not become able to transcend the racial trope and its diminishing attributes. However, echoing Baldwin's critique, Starr represents the voice speaking the truth of who Khalil really was; she confronts the established assumptions based on preconceived notions of Black men. The importance of Khalil's portrayal as the trope of the 'Brute' is the effect it has on the changing identity of Starr. Witnessing the world presenting Khalil through one single perspective, using allegations and assumptions as a source of information, he is created into a criminal. The media's selective choice of information encourages Starr to speak up about the injustice.

In an interview about her novel, Thomas admits a goal of not presenting her novel as an "issue book" (Dar, 2017). This illuminates similar ideas which Du Bois asserted within double consciousness. Through his observations, Du Bois asserted that Black people were more often studied and discussed as problems of the modern world rather than people experiencing the problems created by the modern society. Double consciousness is presented as the awareness of the oppression within the individual and the individuals' power to refuse this oppression. The term relates to *The Hate U Give* both through Starr's awareness of how she is different from her peers because of the color of her skin but also through her reflections of why Khalil is represented as a criminal through the news media. Starr reflects over a longer history of power struggles Black people have had to endure in order to gain human rights, and she realizes how silence remains a factor in why there are still racial issues today. This is further emphasized

through Starr's revelation that Khalil did not have much choice about deciding to sell drugs. In effort to pay off his mother's debt to a 'King Lord,' Khalil sold drugs to keep her alive. Essentially, the environment Khalil was born into diminished his opportunities to keep a larger distance from the criminal environment of the society he lived in. Contrasting Khalil and Bigger, the source of Bigger's existential reflections originate from hopelessness of living in a world which is so oppressive that he believes his destiny is not in his own hands. Khalil's initial position represented a similar hopelessness; however, through Starr's added perspective, Khalil's diminishment to a trope is deconstructed. Although Starr could not change the outcome of Khalil's fate, she could affect how he was perceived. Thus, Starr's growth indicates how these issues might change in the future.

Double consciousness and reflections on its effect on Starr's identity are presented as tools to discover the adolescent's own power as a means to fight against the oppression pushed upon them. In an effort to present a more comprehensive image of Khalil, Starr creates a Tumblr page, a social media website for sharing of pictures and short texts and calls it "*The Khalil I Know*" (Thomas, 2018, p. 202; emphasis in original). However, Starr realizes with time how her efforts are not sufficient enough. Through the experiences Starr observes together with her reflections about how the world views Black men, Starr realizes her need to take greater measures in the fight for Khalil. Understanding the media's control over the public narrative makes Starr attempt to describe a new perspective. However, as we saw previously, justice was still not achieved. It is the combination of these revelations and experiences which culminates to the point where Starr is standing on top of the police car shouting "Khalil lived" (p. 407). Publicly displaying this manner of civil disobedience, Starr has partly been affected by the imagery of racial tropes in the media, making her fight more explicitly for Khalil as she herself understands the issues related to being diminished to a trope. In other words, by recontextualizing Khalil's identity, Starr is allowed to reframe her own sense of self.

Thus, by linking together *Native Son* and *The Hate U Give*, we see the legacy of the archetypal tropes remaining; however, the means in which they are used and the message they deliver are different. Comparing Khalil to Bigger, we see how the young adult novel presents similar attributes as the protest novel did. Furthermore, the young adult novel's relation to the protest novel is further strengthened by its imagery of political awakening seen in Starr and her need to physically partake in the protests by the end of the narrative. Arguably, *The Hate U Give* re-imagines the protest novel from the historic filter of Baldwin's criticism. Through the additional perspective of the Black female protagonist, the archetypal tropes Baldwin claimed constituted the "failure of the protest novel," (Baldwin, 2017, p. 23) become subverted with Starr illustrating a more nuanced image of Khalil. As Starr gains some agency by the end of the novel, the differences between *Native Son* and *The Hate U Give* rests in Starr's attempt to transcend the categorization Bigger Thomas could not.

Chapter conclusion

This chapter sought to investigate how Starr's identity development and growth is illustrated in the narrative and how the implications of this progress might be limited by the young adult framework. As we have seen, Starr's reality is obstructed by a traumatic incident which creates a conventional interruption for the young adult to commence their growth. As a result of Starr's struggle between staying silent and speaking out, she develops a more complex understanding of her identity and the power structures surrounding her. To start with, the narrative follows the established framework of development and growth expected from a young adult novel; however, with the continued struggle Starr experiences, the narrative begins to transgress the boundaries of the young adult framework. As Starr starts obtaining access to her voice, we witness a growing awareness of the power in speech. Her earliest attempts to rebel against the power structures illustrate a building resilience in Starr. Presented in Nikolajeva's critique of

Trites' structure of power in young adult literature, Starr is still exemplified as a repressed character but now with the opportunity to obtain more power without becoming repressive. By the end of the narrative, Starr is shown to understand the power structures surrounding her, and she allows the knowledge to enact her into being. Thus, Starr continues to actively engage with the power structures, implying her intention to rebel as long as injustice persists. In short, by refusing to accept her position as a powerless figure within the power structures, Starr's identity development has created her into a character transcending the fundamental intentions of the young adult narrative.

This transgression of the young adult framework becomes more explicit with the contextualization of the narrative with African American literature. Seeing Starr's development explicitly from the perspective of identity and growth, we neglect the implications of a longer history of oppression shaping the identity of the marginalized group. Juxtaposing the similar critiques of the tropes in *Native Son* and *The Hate U Give* we are introduced to a longer history of how similar depictions have tried to critique social issues. Furthermore, by adding James Baldwin's critique of the use of racial tropes in the protest novel we understand *The Hate U Give* in a more complex depiction of how identity and power is created through understanding historical developments. Illuminating the similarities of Wright's protest novel and the imagery of protest in *The Hate U Give*, we see how the novel in itself transcends the young adult framework. One of the manners is the explicit imagery of protest, which rests on the argument of *The Hate U Give* developing from the protest novel through the historical filter of Baldwin's criticism. Nevertheless, the most explicit way the young adult novel transcends its intended framework is manifested in the implications that the issues of racial prejudice and injustice will not cease to exist as Starr advances into adulthood. With these implications of the issue remaining, we are also presented with an insinuation that Starr will continue to rebel and protest against the established power structures until justice is served to all victims of police and

vigilante brutality. Thus, Starr refuses to accept her position within the power structures, rejecting one of the fundamental intentions of the young adult narrative.

Chapter 2 – *Dear Martin*

> But race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming "the people" has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy.
>
> - Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (7)

Introduction

In November 2012, four teenage boys found themselves parked outside a gas station in Jacksonville, Florida. As one of the boys got out of the car to enter the establishment, he left the car running in order for the other boys to keep listening to their music. Shortly after, an older man and his girlfriend arrived, parking next to the boys' car. The older man, Michael Dunn, was annoyed by the boys' music as he believed it was too loud. He asked the boys to lower the volume. Tevin Thompson, who was sitting in the front passenger seat, complied but was shortly requested to turn the volume up again by the back seat passenger: Jordan Davis. As an argument commenced, Dunn took out a firearm and shot towards the car. Jordan Davis, a seventeen-year-old, died from the injuries (Maddox, 2014).

Fast forward to Ferguson, Missouri, 2014. An eighteen-year-old by the name of Michael Brown was shot by a police officer and died on the scene. This incident sparked a movement with Black Lives Matter at its core. The phrase, Black Lives Matter, was initially born as a hashtag after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who shot and killed the seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin in February 2012 (Onion et al., 2020). However, after the murder of Michael Brown, the movement rose in the midst of protests and marches all over the U.S. (Stephens, 2014). The movement's presence in the public sphere generated a larger discussion of the movement's impacts and repercussions. For instance, in the midst of these protests, public

figures, such as former governor Mike Huckabee, asserted how Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would not support the Black Lives Matter movement; he would, instead, be "appalled" by it as Huckabee believed it indicated "elevating some lives above others" (Bradner, 2015). Additionally, ahead of an anti-racism march in Atlanta, Mayor Kasim Reed supported the protests; however, he also requested "that they not take the freeways. Dr. King would never take a freeway" (Jarvie, 2016). The commentary on the movement's development from public figures illustrates some of the criticism against the movement; however, it also highlights misconceptions of the movement's intentions, which is to show the injustice inflicted on a community and not to raise that community above anyone else.

Responding to these incidents and proclamations, the novel *Dear Martin* (2017) was born as a combination of reactions and experiences related to the described incidents. Nic Stone, who had recently given birth to a son at the time of Jordan Davis' death, found herself asking how and why such incidents could occur. Reflecting on how her own son would one day fit the description of the victims, she became acutely aware that he also one day might experience racial profiling to the extent that he might be murdered. The notion was petrifying to her. By the time of Michael Brown's murder, Stone's fear intensified as the murderer was a police officer whose job, first and foremost, is to protect people. In an effort to put feelings into words, Stone connected the narratives and compiled the incidents together; this ultimately lead to her writing the story revolving around the life of Justyce McAllister.

Justyce is a seventeen-year-old African American boy from Atlanta. Justyce is a "high-school senior and full-scholarship student at Braselton Preparatory Academy" (Stone, 2018, p. 10). Attending a predominantly White school, he does realize how established racist ideas persist through some of his White classmates. Justyce states how he grew up in a "bad" area; however, as his academic achievements are highly impressive, he further expresses that he has "a future ahead of [him] that will likely include an Ivy League education, an eventual law

degree, and a career in public policy" (p. 10). With his achievement and predicted future, Justyce initially believes himself excluded from the racial profiling and violence Black men often experience. However, one night while trying to help his drunk ex-girlfriend, he experiences a traumatic incident of racial profiling by a police officer. Justyce is instantly arrested and not permitted to speak. At the police station, he is not set free, even after the arrival of his ex-girlfriend's parents who confirm he was trying to help and not harm the girl. The police do not let him go until after they have talked to a lawyer. In the aftermath of the incident, Justyce starts a personal experiment – one which consists of a journal of letters. The letters are all addressed to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; however, as Justyce is not able to send the letters to Dr. King, he collects them in order to evaluate how Dr. King's teachings hold up today. For Justyce, the intention of the project was to become more "like Martin" (Stone, 2018, p. 138). Through the narrative, the perspective continuously shifts between a third-person narrative and the first-person narrative presented in Justyce's letters. In the letters, Justyce tries to comprehend his own position as a Black man in society. Experiencing intensified feelings of alienation in his school environment, Justyce realizes how he is different from his academic peers through their inability to relate to the trauma and fear he has encountered.

Considering Justyce's disrupted illusion of safety, this chapter will look at how the protagonist uses his letters to Dr. King as a way to comprehend the power structures surrounding him. Enlightened by his powerlessness in the face of government authority, Justyce projects his ideas about lack of equality into his experiment. Nevertheless, the letters appear as a tool for Justyce. By writing down his experiences and thoughts, Justyce presents, by the end of the narrative, a personal development of understanding the power he holds in an oppressive society. Furthermore, by comparing the racial prejudice and injustice today with the period of the Civil Rights movement, Justyce examines how Dr. King's teachings might be relevant to the contemporary issues of racial profiling and police brutality. The letters present an account

of the adolescent's personal development in relation to racial struggles. Examining his own perception of his identity, Justyce's letters present a reflection of the development a young adult often experiences in young adult literature.

Nevertheless, as the notions of identity and power become highlighted in the narrative, we witness the narrative's fusion with African American history and traditions. First and foremost, this link presents itself through the introduction of Dr. King. Furthermore, the narrative also presents the importance of literacy in the struggle against oppression. Comparing the ideas about literacy and education in *Dear Martin* with the development of the slave narrative, we are presented with a longer history of how literacy and education has been used within the Black community as a tool to fight for freedom from oppression. Additionally, by including Dr. King as the recipient of the letters, we are presented with an allusion to the power of the letter represented by the Civil Rights champions of the 1960s. Overall, by contextualizing the young adult narrative with African American literature and history, we see the increased significance of the historical allusions made in *Dear Martin*. Through the addition of this perspective, the concepts of identity formation and power development exceed the confinements of the young adult genre; this shows us the importance of infusing the narrative with a cultural and historical understanding when analyzing it.

"Why can't we all get along like butterflies?" (Stone, 195)

As young men and women embark on the pursuits of adolescence in the process of reaching adulthood, many experiences that a sense of despair and doubt are familiar emotions they are forced to grasp. Additionally, these times of turmoil may also present reflections of hope as the adolescent develops an extensive understanding of her or his environment. Within young adult literature, the use of letters or epistolary conventions within the novel are commonly linked to the protagonist's need to reflect on an incident or situation they find themselves in (Wasserman,

2003, p. 48). Similarly, the epistolary conventions present an opportunity to comprehend and come to terms with the turmoil of adolescence as the protagonists examine the position they find themselves to be in. For example, up until the incident of racial profiling, Justyce believed himself to be safe from the injustices and violence Black people face. Due to his impressive academic achievements, Justyce was able to physically remove himself from the 'bad area' of his childhood neighborhood. Moving into a dorm at his school, Justyce is able to distance himself considerably from this area and its surrounding culture. This removal enforces the idea that he is safe from the prejudice people have towards Black people from such areas, and the consequences these prejudices might bring. In the aftermath of the incident of racial profiling, however, he realizes that the oppressive structures are still surrounding him, and they prevail beyond community lines. Recognizing his powerlessness, Justyce utilizes his ability to learn, understand, and reflect on social and historical issues in order to contemplate his position. Using the letters as a vital tool in this process, he examines his struggles, their origin, and his own identity.

In "Re-visions, Re-flections, Re-creations: Epistolarity in Novels by Contemporary Women," Elizabeth Campbell defines the epistolary novel as "a novel written in the form of letters, either an exchange of letters between two or more correspondents, or a single letter, or number of letters, from one correspondent to one or more recipients" (1995, p. 333). Additionally, she also relates the form as most frequently used by women, how the letters are contemporarily more "political in theme and more radical in form" (p. 332), and how they are often presented within post-colonial cultures "in which women have been doubly oppressed" (p. 332). In other words, "the epistolary style [is] generally the responses of those who have been oppressed and silenced" (p. 335). Furthermore, Ruth Perry supports this idea, claiming in her book *Women, Letters, and the Novel* how the epistolary "speaks to the deeper truth that people are locked in their own skins, in their own consciousnesses" (1980, p. 107). This is

demonstrated in *Dear Martin* as the narrative and letters make it explicit how Justyce experiences being trapped within his own skin and how this confinement may bring violent consequences. Therefore, Justyce's experiment symbolizes an effort in which he intends to understand the power structures surrounding him and how he can restructure his identity in order to push against these power structures. Adding Dr. King as the recipient of the letters, Justyce illustrate an attempt to comprehend his feelings in relation to racist experiences and in connection to a larger history of racism.

The epistolary conventions have infrequently been used in young adult literature (Wasserman, 2003, p. 48); however, there is no doubt it is a fitting form for the young adult genre as it presents the "interior monologue" of the young protagonist through the letters which can potentially lead to "increased understanding and transformation" (Wasserman, 2003, pp. 48-49) or "constructive change" (Stringer, 1997, p. 42). As we previously have seen through the work of Trites, the protagonist of the young adult novel "must learn about the social forces that have made them what they are," and it is through those experiences the adolescent learns how to negotiate the power structures in the social institutions surrounding them and in "which they must function" (Trites, 2000, p. 3). As Justyce embarks on his experiment, he immediately reflects in his first letter how the incident changed him in relation to his belief that as "an upstanding member of society, [he'd] be exempt from the stuff THOSE black guys deal with" (Stone, 2018, p. 12). In other words, Justyce appears to have experienced the physical effects of racism seemingly for the first time since his removal from his old neighborhood. With this, he realizes that attitude and personality do not play a significant role in terms of distinguishing him from an actual predator, which contradicts his previous beliefs. He recognizes that the color of his skin will always project him as a predator or criminal. Considering this new realization, Justyce experiences a personal change, and a "need to pay more attention" (p. 13) to similar incidents. Accordingly, the elements that caused Justyce's need to change his perception expose

his revelation of his powerlessness. Reflecting on "how different [things might] have gone had [he] not been a black guy," (p. 12) Justyce emphasize his understanding that his powerlessness is based in the color of his skin and how that is the premise of the authority's confinement of him. Considering the progress within equal rights since the time of segregation before the Civil Rights movement, Justyce questions the progress in relation to his own experiences. Realizing there still are serious issues relating to racism, Justyce concludes that "things aren't as *equal* as folks say they are" (p. 13; emphasis in original). Highlighting the role of the epistolary conventions in the demonstrated realizations show how Justyce applies the letters as a physical example of his thoughts. Without the letters, Justyce would arguably not have been able to recognize the implications of the racism he experienced to the same extent. All things considered, due to the employment of the letters, Justyce is able to acknowledge his previous failure to notice these issues, declaring his intention to "really [start] *seeing* stuff and [write] it down. Figure out what to do with it" (p. 13; emphasis in original). Thus, Justyce actively uses letter writing as a tool to examine the power structures surrounding him and where his position is within these structures, which essentially initiates his identity development.

By calling attention to the letters' significance in relation to Justyce's growth, we witness the importance of the narrative's move between the third-person narration of the general narrative, and the first-person narration presented in Justyce's letters. In the letters, we are given an explicit view of Justyce's internal monologue and his outlook on society in connection to the racism and prejudice he witnesses. The letters magnify his account as they are the only insight we receive of his personal reflection in the narrative. By witnessing the letters in his effort to 'be like Martin' – whose important inclusion will be more explicitly examined at a later point in the chapter – the reader is presented with Justyce's growing awareness of his powerlessness and the effect this has on his identity. The letters confide how everything "feels like a losing battle," (p. 35) how he "[feels] a little defeated," (p. 66) and his experiences are

"pretty discouraging" (p. 113), and they magnify the protagonist's understanding of his position within the power structures. The turbulence of the newly discovered reality causes Justyce to become more aware of the racial structures around him, which creates a combination of anger and hopelessness within him. These feelings are increased as he learns how his best friend's father's achievements were overlooked at work. It took him four years longer to achieve a good position compared to his White colleagues. Nevertheless, with all the authority he has in his current position, he is still disrespected; for example, he experiences people referring to him by racial slurs (pp. 111-113). Becoming aware of the degree of these issues, whether they are expressed through experiences of Black people, the attitudes from White people, or the media's portrayal of Black victims of police brutality, continues to discourage Justyce. In the letters, he continuously reflects over different episodes of racism, and contemplates his reactions to the events in opposition to how he *should have* reacted. Arguably, as Justyce's experiment with the letters shows his effort to become like Dr. King, Justyce reflects on his reactions and how he in the future might react in a more "dignified" way (p. 37). Ultimately, the letters are an act of hope for Justyce and something to re-create his identity on. The hope for further progress toward equal rights is linked to his experiment and his perception of Dr. King's achievements and it becomes an optimistic reassurance for Justyce when he is submerged by hopelessness. Nevertheless, Justyce's despair peaks as he and Manny, his best friend, are both shot by an off-duty police officer in the heat of an argument over loud music at a traffic light. Manny doesn't survive the incident, and Justyce feels completely powerless. Justyce does not understand how the world possibly can move away from such overt acts of racism and he gives up his experiment (pp. 120-124). By giving up his experiment, Justyce sinks into his powerlessness – evidently accepting an inability to create change through pushing against the established power structures in order to create progress within equal rights.

But "all *those* butterflies look exactly alike" (Stone, 196)

Sharon A. Stringer notes in her book about the psychology of young adult literature, *Conflict and Connection* (1997) that in young adult literature, characters may "feel as if some experience sets them apart from others. They may search for ways that they can become like everybody else and not feel so different" (p. 42). *Dear Martin* begins by presenting a scenario in which Justyce is detached from his illusion of fitting in. Upon realizing his alienation from his peers and the accompanying conflicting and worrisome emotions he experiences, the letters were supposed to be a tool of guidance. Here he would be able to reflect on his life, social position, and how he could come to terms with this new experience. However, in the wake of Manny's death, Justyce seem discouraged and at a loss of hope for the future. Dated on February 1, a short week after the shooting, Justyce declares in a letter, "He's gone. Never did anything to anyone, and now Manny's gone. I can't do this anymore" (Stone, 2018, p. 124). With this confession, Justyce makes clear how the use and intention of his experiment to 'be like Martin' failed when the unjust and violent actions done to him and Manny were not based on a criminal action they executed. Upon realizing that he will always be a potential victim to racism, Justyce seemingly admits defeat and feels he is powerless against the institutions surrounding him. Considering the framework of identity and power in the young adult genre, Justyce's realization transcend the young adult structure. The growth projected in the adolescent's understanding of power and power structures is introduced as a fundamental indicator of the young adult's rite of passage into adulthood. Contrary to that, Justyce states how the issues he faces will not cease to exist when he reaches adulthood but will instead follow him into adulthood. The implications of Justyce giving up on his experiment together with the knowledge of the issue's prevalence offer as an image of complete powerlessness within the power structures, both as a young adult and as a future adult.

Discarding his experiment, the letters written by Justyce are replaced by news reports through the rest of the narrative. This disruption in the narration creates a fragmented perspective of the narrative. The reader loses Justyce's personal voice, and the victims of fatal shootings are now presented explicitly as 'thugs' and criminals. The loss of Justyce's endurance against the power forces indicates a narrower perspective for the onlooker to contemplate the situation in relation to the incidents. Even though both Manny and Justyce never performed an illegal act and achieved high marks at a preparatory school, they were still scrutinized and questioned through the news media in relation to exactly what *they* did to make the officer pull the trigger. Additionally, as previously mentioned, Stringer states how the interior monologue may lead to constructive change (1997, p. 42). This identifies how Justyce's possibility for constructive change becomes eradicated as his interior monologue seemingly is completely silenced. However, Stringer has also acknowledged how "the conflicts in our heads prevent us from reaching our full potential," which in turn creates an underestimation of "the power of our interior monologues" (p. 41). Thus, by excluding the act of letter writing, Justyce becomes a character whose conflicting thoughts actually prevent him from achieving his true potential. In other words, with the oppression from the power structures forcing Justyce to silence his own internal monologue, his powerlessness becomes a marker of a pessimistic outlook on the future of equal rights. Consumed by hopelessness, Justyce gives in to his powerlessness as he does not realize the potential power resting in his interior monologue. By continuously questioning the established prejudice and racial profiling, Justyce implicitly constructed his identity around notions of how to fight against inequality. The potential of this identity construction is presented in the desire to 'become like Martin,' – meaning Justyce wanted to achieve similar accomplishments as Dr. King. However, before Justyce is able to understand the power of the development he experiences through the interior monologue represented in the letter, he gives

in to the power surrounding him, seemingly accepting how the world will never progress from this point.

Contrasted with Starr in the previous chapter, Justyce appears to be defeated by the injustice and prejudice he witnesses. Giving up his own voice and reflection in the midst of the violence and death, he seems to have entirely quit his experiment and all relation to it by the end of the narrative. By the end of the novel, Justyce has evidently ended his experiment and stopped writing his letters to Dr. King. Despite this, the second to last section of the novel presents us with a new, final letter, offering a resolution to the realizations Justyce has made since Manny was killed. Contemplating an assertion made by one of his teachers when he told them that he quit his experiment, Justyce seems to have come to terms with the trials of life and is ready to challenge these trials in the future. Justyce dwells on the intentions of his experiment and concludes that he "can't figure out what [he] was trying to accomplish" (Stone, 2018, p. 199). At this point, he has come to the conclusion that no matter what he does, he will always experience racism or racial profiling to some degree. In contrast to this, he also contemplates how he would most likely never have been accepted as a student at Yale University if it weren't for Dr. King's achievements and how he "[challenged] the status quo" (p. 200). In all, he registers that he might have approached his experiment the wrong way. Up until this point, as he was facing racist situations, he had asked himself: "*What would Martin do?*" (p. 202; emphasis in original), however, he realizes he should rather ask: "*Who would Martin BE?*" (p. 202; emphasis in original). Upon this realization, he comes to terms with the facts that, first of all, Dr. King would be himself, "THE eminent MLK: nonviolent, not easily discouraged, and firm in [his] beliefs" (p. 202; emphasis in original). Thus, Justyce's experiment might have failed as he still has not had time to figure out who he is or what he believes. On that note, the second fact he accepts is that he is still young and still has time to figure things out. Contrasting this realization to the hopelessness presented in every letter up until this point, Justyce now

presents a notion of hope for the future – the possibility for personal development which will not necessarily create major change, but which will help him understand more clearly who he is and what his role is in this world. With his turn of perspective, Justyce regains some hope for the future, which also indicates a return of personal power. Acknowledging how he still remains weak contrasted with the governmental authority figures; he understands how his identity development over time will gain him a stronger sense of power. Essentially, Justyce realizes how his previous perspective relates to how he attempted to construct his identity based on the older, more experienced Dr. King – failing to recall the fact that Dr. King was not born great. Understanding how change demands a great deal of determination and patience, Justyce comes to accept how he, in his adolescent state, does not contain enough power yet. However, with perseverance, his adult self might contain enough power to properly rebel against the power structures.

Regarding the growth of Justyce's identity, the concluding letter shows how he endures and continues the struggle against extraordinary circumstances. Acknowledging the importance of his interior monologue, we witness how the letters initially helped Justyce grow into a reflection of life where he is aware of its struggles but also understands the importance of resilience. Through this activity, Justyce activated his cognitive skills with focus on a specific subject. This measure "plays major part in [the] identity development and self-understanding" of the adolescent (Stringer, 1997, p. 45), as shown in Justyce's newfound understanding for his position as a young adult within the power structures. By changing the way in which he viewed his experiment, Justyce realizes how he has asked the wrong question. Thus, the possibility for a more equal future persists; he simply reflected on the issue from a wrong perspective. Justyce shows a deeper understanding of how his cognitive ability works as he presents a situation where he thinks about his own thinking. As we see in the final letter, Justyce thinks about how he approached his experiment. This act illustrates his understanding that how he thought about

the issues and his attempt to resolve them were not the ideal method. Stringer points out how the ability of thinking about your own thinking "can lead to intense self-scrutiny and self-consciousness" (1997, p. 45). Demonstrated in the appointment of a new perspective in the last letter, Justyce goes through similar developments as suggested by Stringer. Accepting his young age, Justyce understands how his present awareness is more than enough for now. Further, his increased hope shows the potential for further growth of this knowledge. With this image, Justyce conceptualizes himself as a future participant within the continued movement for equality. Again, this proposes the likelihood of Justyce's issues remaining in adulthood. Understanding the significance of the potentially life-long issue, Justyce shows a reluctance to accept his position within the power structures as permanent. Accepting his powerless position as a temporary situation, Justyce presents intentions of rebelling against the power structures continuously along with his increased knowledge of equality and methods of protest. By these means, Justyce's development and growth does not entirely comply with the young adult framework. Reluctant to accept his powerless position, Justyce has intentions of continuing his development into adulthood, contradicting the intentions of the young adult framework as the issue should be resolved by the time the adolescent reach adulthood. Arguably, Justyce understands how he cannot 'become like Martin' over a short period of time, but it has to be a life-long commitment to a cause and for a people.

Contextualizing with African American literary history

Disruption in the life of the adolescent is one of the main indicators of young adult literature, as this disruption represents the prospect of growth which the adolescent must experience. Related to Trites and Lafuente's assertions on the value of this disruption, Marc Aronson offers a similar response as he insists that young adult literature replicates the real-world teenage experience. In this statement, he refers to how the young adults are motivated to "test

themselves against society, each other, and themselves in some mix that includes sex, thought, conformity, and rebellion" (2001, p 33). Aronson indicates that young adults must actively 'test themselves' in order to develop and claim an identity. As seen, Justyce questions the established power forces surrounding him. By introducing historical facts on the progresses and shortcomings in the struggle for equal rights, Justyce makes connections to contemporary racial issues in order to understand their prevalence. Through his letters he is able to comprehend and develop his understanding of his personal position within these forces. Thus, he progressively becomes aware of the personal power he holds in association with the progress of the future. Having said that, focusing solely on the cognitive abilities of Justyce in relation to 'thinking about his own thinking' and identity formation, there are major elements of the narrative being diminished. By including larger aspects of Justyce's surroundings, reading more into the comments and opinions presented, we witness the narrative being more influenced by a literary and historical connection to African American traditions.

Literacy, education, and slave narratives

Within African American history, the importance of education and literacy has been presented as vital tools in the struggle for freedom. Most distinguishably was this illustrated through slave narratives. While education is presented as an important tool related to becoming enlightened on a topic, literacy is foundational to being able to independently develop your knowledge. Connected to these means of enlightenment, the slave narrative presented the opportunity of the freed slave to illuminate others about the horrors of slavery. These narratives were essentially used to present how education and literacy had significant implications in the struggle against the oppression of the antebellum America. Thus, education and literacy combined with the slave narrative, presented a textual attempt to fight against slavery. *Dear Martin*, in addition to examining historical and personal aspects of racism in the U.S., also

illustrates the importance of education and literacy in order to comprehend and criticize racial prejudice and injustice. The narrative draws attention to these techniques as tools when Justyce questions established ideas of racism and oppression. Furthermore, the narrative also implicitly indicates how refusing individuals an education is an act of oppression. Therefore, in order to understand the significant implications of the subject of education and literacy within African American tradition, we need to understand its history connected to oppression.

African American literature arguably had its first emergence through the slave narratives of the second half of the 18th century. Although they focused on racial experience, these narratives also contained an emphasis on the religious experience of Black people and slaves (Gould, 2007, p. 12). By the 1830s and 1840s, however, the focus of the slave narrative shifted as a result of "the organization of more radical antislavery societies in America," which ultimately sought and called for "the immediate emancipation of slaves" (p. 12). Hence, the slave narrative shifted its attention to southern plantation slavery, which created what may be referred to as "the antebellum slave narrative" (p. 12). In these slave narratives, the focus was sharpened to make them "popular and effective political means of fighting slavery" (p. 12). Despite the increased focus on antislavery efforts, the remaining political division around abolition showcased the need for the continued distribution of slave narratives.

As the slave narrative can be referred to as "the dominant form [of African American literature] prior to the American Civil War" (Reid-Pharr, 2007, p. 146), it is important to also bear in mind "the extreme efforts made on the part of the enslaved persons to become literate" (p. 146). In his pioneering study, *From Behind the Veil* (1979), Robert B. Stepto states that the "primary pre-generic myth for Afro-America is the quest for freedom and literacy" (p. ix). Considering the history of slavery in context with literacy, the rebellion of Nat Turner in 1831 – also known as, the Southampton Insurrection – demonstrated major implications for the future of literacy among slaves. Shortly summarized, the revolt was led by the enslaved Virginian,

Nat Turner. One of the essential motivations for the rebellion was the oppressive system of slavery; however, Turner has also asserted religious terms resting behind his motivation (Breen, 2021; Coleman, 2020). The rebellion barely lasted 24 hours; however, "it prompted a renewed wave of oppressive legislation prohibiting enslaved people's movement, assembly – and education" (Coleman, 2020). In the south, the rights of slaves were even more restricted in an effort to maintain power and the institution of slavery. The newly produced legislation put into place more specific anti-literacy laws, which were influenced by the realization of the danger a literate slave posed. By removing the option of education, southern lawmakers believed the slave's power would be diminished; nevertheless, the legislation also functioned as a resistance towards the increasing support of abolitionism in the north. As stated by Clarence Lusane, a professor of political science at Howard University, slavery was justified based on the assumption that Black people were inherently unintelligent and illiterate sub-humans. The educated slave disproved this belief, which undermined the fundamental justification of slavery (qtd. in Coleman, 2020).

Implementing these notions within *Dear Martin*, there is a significance in Justyce's letters beyond that of trying to make sense of his identity as a young Black man. The letters, contextualized with the history of education, literacy and protest against oppression for Black people, are a tool for Justyce to criticize modern oppression. Although the situation is entirely different from the one in which slave narratives were written, Justyce use his letters with similar intentions as the slave narratives. In this sense, Justyce also use his letters in order to describe and critique an oppressive society. Early in the narrative, Justyce discloses in one of his letters a desire to escape the predominantly White environment of his high school and permanently return home to his mother and a community that understands the struggles he is facing (Stone, 2018, p. 36). Regardless of his desire, upon returning home Justyce finds his mother on the couch with her nose buried in a book. Witnessing this scene ignites childhood memories in

Justice of how hard his mother had worked to teach him to read, which makes him realize he'd "be on the bus back to school before the evening was over" (p. 34). In these portrayals, Justyce demonstrates the significance literacy has for his family and how his mother's focus on his education presents Justyce with an opportunity for a better life in the future. While conversing with his mother this evening, he explains his feeling of alienation in his school environment, and she tells him that running away is not a solution to his problem. Rather he has to "*make* a place for [himself] in this world" (p. 36; emphasis in original). Later in the narrative, she further elaborates upon how she "sent [him] to that school so [he'd] have a chance at the best education" (p. 182). The implications of these statements combined with the previous comments about his childhood neighborhood being a "rough area" (p. 12), show the idea of education and literacy as important tools in regard to creating a better future outside of his community. However, they also show that these are not tools which are necessarily easily obtained by Black people – particularly those living in poverty.

Acknowledging the history of laws prohibiting enslaved people, and thus, by affiliation, Black people, access to an education, we observe the major implication education and literacy have for the Black community and its traditions. With the continued publications of slave narratives, arguments against slavery and oppressive laws were continuously introduced to the public. For instance, one of the more celebrated slave narratives of the 19th century, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845), rendered the value of literacy in context with achieving freedom. Although Douglass partly cursed his ability to read based on its illuminating power about his bondage and lack of freedom, he also urges the education of enslaved people as a means to achieve freedom. As Lindon Barrett asserts in his article "African-American Slave Narratives: Literacy, the Body, Authority," the importance of literacy rests on how it is "conceived in terms of empowerment and the transformation of identity it grants those long excluded from it in a society in which letters were indispensable" (p. 418). In

other words, literacy has the ability to grant power to the oppressed. This power presents itself both as a literal tool to critique social inequality and as a means to develop their image of identity in an enslaved world; this contradicts the idea that Black people were worth less due to their 'lack of intelligence' compared with the White man.

The idea of reduced access to proper education for Black people, and people living in lower income neighborhoods, is further explored in the novel through Justyce's Societal Evolution class. In attempt to present a scenario of open discussion with societal subject matters, one of the students opens the lecture wanting "to discuss how affirmative action discriminates against members of the majority" (Stone, 2018, p. 59). Jared, a White, rich boy attending the same classes as Justyce is offended that he was not admitted to Yale early action, while Justyce was. As a basis of his assertion, he states how he's "ranked number two in [their] class, [he's] captain of the baseball team, [he does] community service on weekends, and [he] got higher test scores than Justyce… yet [Justyce] got into Yale early action, and [he] didn't." He closes his statement with how he knows "for a fact it's because [he's] white and [Justyce's] black" (p. 59). Throughout the discussion it is made clear that Jared did not have higher test scores than Justyce, and it is implied that he simply assumed his results were better. Sarah Jane, another student in the class, joins in on the debate and calls Jared out on his assumptions. She states that their origin derives from Jared's assumption that Justice has lower scores due to him being Black. Jared's assumptions create a historical connection to established ideas about Black people dating back to slavery. Tackling the issues surrounding these assumptions further highlights a relevant and unfortunate reality Black people face and shows how affirmative action is one of the means necessary for people with less access to educational tools to become admitted to university. Sarah Jane presents the exceptional opportunities they have had due to the ability to attend the school they go to; she states how they have the availability of tools, information, and teachers, all with a very high education, so they specifically are prepared to

apply to a good university. Further she compares their reality with that of "a black guy […] whose single parent's income falls beneath the poverty line" (pp. 62-63) with minimal access to updated information and textbooks, no available computer to use, with teachers fresh out of college, and so on – "basically, the guy knows people expect him to underperform" (p. 63). In light of the information Sarah Jane has, she compares the two fictional students' test scores and asks whether it would be fair to base entrance to college on test scores when one student had much more access to additional aids to help them perform better.

The focus on education in the novel and the access to *proper* education is seemingly presented with two intentions. The first is the ability to use your education and ability to develop yourself and your knowledge as a means to challenge the status quo. By writing his letters, Justyce reflects over his identity and sense of self and how he can further mature into a person who can challenge established notions linked to racism. On the other hand, the novel also presents and acknowledges Justyce's privileged position with the educational spot he has been able to achieve. By presenting Sarah Jane's arguments supporting affirmative action, the novel shows the reality of many Black children and how their opportunities to create and develop themselves are reduced due to lack of additional and proper tools to guide them. By linking these ideas to African American history and literary tradition, the shortages of promises made to Black people are made clear, and the importance of proper education is enforced. More specifically, highlighting the aim of the slave narrative to show the importance of education and literacy in light of oppression, we witness how these ideas remain in modern times. Justyce use his letters, writing about the racism he experiences, in order to both understand the issue and to develop himself into a character able to protest them in a more eloquent manner. Although Justyce never explicitly show his letters to anyone, they perform a similar account of how literacy and education develop an individual into a more active participant in the struggle against oppression.

Letters and the Civil Rights movement

Another feature worth considering when contextualizing *Dear Martin* with African American history and literary tradition is the significance of the *addressee* in Justyce's letters. Campbell identifies the value of the epistolary when she writes that "women send themselves in letters, feel the presence of the addressee in letters they both write and receive, and, in contemporary novels especially, see the letter as a mirror in which they examine themselves" (1995, p. 336). By introducing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as the addressee, issues of racism and the progress of civil rights are intensified. Furthermore, Campbell explains how even if the letters are never sent and never received by the addressee, "the addressee is still present in them. Thus the novels cannot be properly interpreted unless the addressee is kept in mind" (p. 338). The play on epistolary conventions in the novel are, therefore, linked to the Civil Rights Movement and the advocacy work Dr. King performed during this period.

When discussing contemporary epistolary novels, Campbell states how they are historically linked to a form of writing used by women as a means to implement their own voice within literature. The epistolary genre also had a significant role within a political environment, indicating the contemporary epistolary novel becoming more overtly political and radical in form than its predecessor (p. 332). Recognizing these facts of the epistolary, Campbell insists it should be linked to the voice of the oppressed, as a reflection of "their experience as the 'other' in a culture in which they have been traditionally voiceless and thus powerless" (p. 333). Further, the "angry revolutionary voices" now surfacing can be linked to the "[consciousness] of new freedoms available to them and [their anger] about past and present repression" (p. 334). The letter, then, becomes a 'mirror' image where the oppressed may create their own voice without disruption. In an imagined world with limited oppression, the writer is free to create themselves.

It is no strange occurrence, then, that we find such conventions implemented in a young adult novel portraying the complexities of adolescence under extraordinary circumstances. Since Justyce includes Dr. King in his letters as an experiment intended to make Justyce become 'like Martin' through a study of Dr. King's work (Stone, 2018, p. 101), Justyce presents the image in which he wants to be viewed. Moreover, by using a person of such great renown, Justyce offers an idea of what he initially signifies as the type of person most likely to achieve progress with the contemporary issues Justyce faces. The mirroring happening between the two characters creates a link through time and connects the contemporary issue of a young man experiencing racial profiling and the past Black Civil Rights activist, preaching for justice. The effort made by Justyce through his experiment illustrates an attempt to create a distinguished voice, limited of oppression, which eventually will help him figure out how to deal with his issues. In other words, Justyce uses the letters to examine power structures and understand his own position in a historical perspective. The revelations Justyce makes through his experiment creates an identity development in Justyce which makes him more resilient to withstand the injustice and racism by the end of the narrative.

Connected to the appearance of Dr. King in the letters and the *act* of writing letters, we see the potential of change a letter can produce through Dr. King's own work. His *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (1963) shows how a written text, or letter specifically, may have a major impact upon social or political issues. The significance of the *Letter* in itself is major in the context of the Civil Rights Movement. As it "captured the essence of the struggle for racial equality and provided a blistering critique of the gradualist approach to racial justice" (Bass, 2001, p. 1), the letter has become one of the most important documents from this time period. Thus, considering the idea of how the writer 'mirrors' himself in the addressee, Justyce's identity development initiates a reflection of future-Justyce potentially obtaining a similar role as Dr. King. We witness how Justyce experiences and understands power structures through

the letters and how he acknowledges his powerlessness as a young adult. However, witnessing the impact a letter can have, either in the context of an open letter critiquing a social issue or a personal letter reflecting on private issues, the significance of Justyce's experiment shows the potential for reflection to create change. The act of writing, in the case of Justyce, is powerful as he actively seeks understanding of an issue that he is not able to comprehend. Through the knowledge he obtains, his power grows as his understanding of the implications of the issue develops. Furthermore, the power of the act becomes strengthened as Justyce imagines himself becoming like Dr. King in the future, which implies that he has the potential to achieve similar progress within civil rights in adulthood.

When linking *Dear Martin* with the achievements of Dr. King, the contextualization highlights a connection with the aims of Civil Rights literature. In many ways, the idea of critique and protest infused in this period's literature corresponds to the implications of the contemporary young adult narrative. In analyzing Civil Rights literature, Julie Buckner Armstrong presents the literature through the words of Audre Lorde, a Black poet, essayist, and autobiographer who used her work to write about lesbian feminism and racial issues. Lorde's work demonstrates how literature can "[transform silence] into language and action" (Armstrong, 2015, p. 13). Further, Armstrong links Richard Wright and his idea of the power of literature with the quote: "Could words be weapons?" (taken from his 1945 memoir *Black Boy*). In short, the literature of the Civil Rights identify language as one of the most powerful weapons of all when challenging established ideas and issues.

One of the issues brough forth during the Civil Rights Movement, linked to the lack of rights for Black people, were the failures of the Reconstruction era. Through adapting tropes from literary abolitionism, the Civil Rights movement writers used these tropes in their own protests to link the "literary heritage of dissent […] to argue that America had not fulfilled the promises of Emancipation" (Trodd, 2015, p. 18). Hinted at in the previous section, part of the

legacy of this failure is the fact that a considerable part of Black communities living in poverty and lacking access to proper education. As mentioned earlier, Justyce reflects on how society has not necessarily progressed as much as believed and how "things aren't as *equal* as folks say they are" (Stone, 2018, p. 13; emphasis in original). Connected with Dr. King and the literature of the Civil Rights period, the narrative arguably has similar ideas of protest embedded in the words and actions of the novel. Most explicitly is this presented in how education and the letters have an impact on Justyce's development that helps him create an image of himself as a future protester – an image in which he visualizes himself protesting the status quo and inequality as a grown man.

In reference to *Letter from Birmingham Jail,* we witness a clear indication of the power of the letter and how 'words *can* be weapons.' The letter was a response to the public appeal opposing the demonstrations in Birmingham in 1963 (Berry, 2005, p. 109). The response was very much connected to Dr. King's frustrations over people dismissing issues of racial injustice and how many seemed to accept without questioning the segregated society of the period. King's frustrations rests in the statement, made by the White clergymen, that they should wait with protesting as they believed it was not an appropriate time for protest. The *Letter* has come to be "recognized as the most important single document of the civil rights era" (qtd. in Berry, 2005, p. 109) and was a political statement with intentions of increasing the Civil Rights movement's support. As the *Letter* gained international attention, it succeeded in its aim as attention was focused on Birmingham and the movement (Colaiaco, 1984, p. 2). History gives us an example of how a letter may change the course of history and how there is power in the written word. Implementing these notions into a reading of *Dear Martin,* there is a similar pattern. Although not showing a major change on a national or international basis, Justyce's letters portray the optimism for change similar to Dr. King and his work. In the last letter written by Justyce, we see how he understands his growth and his potential for growth in the future.

Referencing a letter written by Dr. King at seventeen-years-old, Justyce states the letter "gives [him] hope that maybe [he's] got some time to figure things out" (Stone, 2018, p. 202).

Justyce is utilizing Dr. King's methods for social change. The act of writing letters, studying the history of civil rights through Dr. King and rereading the letters he has written Justyce experiences an effect similar to the reaction towards Dr. King's *Letter*. Justyce's attention is now focused on a specific cause, which leads him to reflect on the cause in light of a more complex historical and personal perspective. Initially, Justyce appeared to be demotivated as he believed his experiment failed. In retrospect, he seems to have expected similar achievements to those of Dr. King only to become discouraged when he failed. Nevertheless, the aforementioned last letter of the narrative presents prospects of hope for Justyce. In this final letter, where he elaborated on his experiment's failures, he understands how his current change of perspective might be an indicator for some remaining hope for the future. The major significance of this last part is the presentation of hope, which has been mostly lacking in the narrative up until this point. The hope is created as a reaction to the discovery of the letter written by Dr. King as a seventeen-year-old boy. The letter was addressed to the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* where he wrote, "*We* (as in Black people) *want and are entitled to the basic rights and opportunities of American citizens*" (Stone, 2018, p. 202; emphasis in original). Upon realizing Dr. King was the same age as Justyce was at this point when he "had that *exact* though for the first time" (p. 202; emphasis in original), Justyce begins to find hope in his position. He realizes he still has time to learn, fail, and develop his own idea of self. Justyce confirms this realization by stating how "knowing [Dr. King was his] age gives [him] hope that maybe [he's] got some time to figure things out" (p. 202). Justyce's revelation at this final point restores the mirror image between himself and Dr. King that he initially wished to perceive. Wanting to 'be like Martin' with the indication of making a difference for the racial issues implemented within the social structures surrounding him, he previously

thought this was unachievable. By realizing he compared his young, inexperienced self with the grown man who had worked for justice for a long time, he understands that the development he has experienced in the past year is simply the start of a longer process. Thus, by 'mirroring' himself in the image of Dr. King, Justyce is presented as a character who refuses to accept his social position as a powerless person. Understanding how experience and knowledge plays a significant role in social change, Justyce temporarily accepts a position as relatively powerless. Thus, the narrative highlights the importance of resilience against the racial issues Justyce experiences. Collectively, these examples enforce the constrictions of the young adult genre since, if solely confined to the genre, Justyce would never achieve reaching adulthood because he does not accept his position in the power structures. Implying the continued resistance to prejudice and racism in adulthood, Stone presents a narrative which transcends the young adult genre, and, therefore, needs a larger context to signify the importance of the narrative.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter examined how Justyce employs epistolary conventions in an effort to comprehend the racial prejudice he experiences and how these conventions contribute to identity development and growth. Through the narrative we witness how Justyce's belief that he is safe fractures and how his conflicting thoughts on the lack of potential for progress towards equal rights discourage him to the point of hopelessness. This identity development introduced in the stagnation of Justyce's imagined power is conducted by his letter writing. In one way, the narrative seemingly fits the structure of the young adult framework as Justyce ends his experiment in an understanding he will remain powerless against the power structures. However, by the end of the narrative, Justyce understands how his perspective on the issue led him on the wrong path as he tried to find a solution to his issues. Presented in the interior monologue shown through the letters, Justyce starts to comprehend to what extent his

reflections are a tool for the growth of his power and how this growth will one day hold the potential to protest against the power structures. With this new perspective, the narrative implies that Justyce will continue to educate himself on topics of racism and equal right until he is able to properly fight against the structures. This shift illustrates the protagonist's reluctance to accept his position as a powerless force within the social structures. In light of this, the novel transgresses the ideals of the young adult framework.

Both the analysis focusing on the young adult framework and the one adding the contextualization of African American literature illustrate the importance of understanding history and education. Prior to the contextualization, Justyce's growth symbolized more how reflections impact understanding and reasoning. However, with the contextualization of how education and literacy has played an important part of protest and the struggle against oppression for Black people, Justyce's developed understanding of identity and power is increased. Although Dr. King plays a significant role in both analyses, his influence and accomplishments become magnified with the historical contextualization as we understand more clearly how letters and knowledge lead to progress. Adding a context referencing the slave narrative, literacy, and education, Justyce's manner of confronting his issues becomes embedded with a longer history of protest. Ultimately, Justyce activates tools in line with Black people's critique of inequality and challenge towards the establishment. Additionally, by alluding to the development and accomplishments Dr. King performed in his life, these tools are further emphasized as the narrative implicitly gives a specific example of how progress may be achieved through education and literacy. With these allusions, the young adult narrative more explicitly transgresses its intended framework as we are presented with the prevalence of the issues. Meaning, the young adult novel implicitly reuses features making the political aspects of the narrative more overt. Adding the characteristics of Dr. King, the narrative implicitly signals protest; both in how Dr. King encouraged forms of protest and in Justyce's

reflections on how to create a change. Justyce may not rebel against the power structures while still in adolescence; however, he will most likely strive to become a figure fighting for equal rights in the future.

Chapter 3 – *Ghost Boys*

> Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: … How does it feel to be a problem?
>
> - W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (2)

Introduction

Not one to shy away from emotionally challenging subjects, Jewell Parker Rhodes is an author who employs realistic narratives of national tragedies and racial issues in her novels. Initially, Rhodes did not have a desire to create narratives about assaults of Black people. Nevertheless, she decided she would be able to create such a story if she added ghosts. Elaborating on her decision, she stated how the figure of the ghost brought together Emmett Till and the contemporary murders of young Black men. Stating how she had been a child herself when Emmett Till was murdered, Rhodes expresses how the grown-ups at that time talked to children about the murder in ways which might not been done today (Rhodes, 2019). Her novel *Ghost Boys,* which "was partly inspired by the death of 12-year-old Tamir Rice" (Alter, 2017), tackles issues of racial profiling and police shootings while simultaneously examining a longer history of racial violence in the U.S. Following the death of 12-year-old Jerome, the narrative presents a philosophical and pedagogical tale of how a child can be shot and killed for playing with a toy gun outside. The story is told from the perspective of Jerome's ghost. He witnesses the aftermath of his death, his family's grief, the following court trial, and the community's reaction to the acquittal of the White police officer who shot him. As a ghost, Jerome also encounters other ghosts, including that of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy who was lynched in Mississippi

in 1955. Commencing a relationship of guidance, Emmett helps Jerome understand the implications of his remaining presence in the real-world.

In this chapter, I will examine how power and powerlessness collide in the image of the ghost boy. As Jerome is killed in an early stage of adolescence, the foundation on which the young adult genre is built on – the rite of passage into adulthood – becomes obstructed. Nevertheless, the narrative arguably maintains the portrayal of identity development and growth. In light of this growth, I argue that the narrative still transcends the confinements of the young adult genre as the adolescent characters refuse to accept the position of powerlessness they are assigned. In light of this, the chapter highlights the similarities between the young adult novels and the lynching poetry of the Harlem Renaissance. By implementing notions of the history of police- and vigilante brutality, the narrative presents an elongation of the literary critique of racial violence.

Identity and ghosts

As previously mentioned, young adult literature illustrates the transition into adulthood. Furthermore, it explores the construction of identity, which is the "most formidable task of entering and negotiating adulthood" (Konstam, 2015, p. 17). Identity development and growth in young adult literature, as previously mentioned, is a rite of passage symbolized in the characters' growth and what they have learned about power. In *Ghost Boys*, however, this rite of passage is disrupted by the protagonist's premature death, which prevents him from growing into adulthood. Whether the novel portrays the adolescent's growth through the aspect of the Bildungsroman or the Entwicklungsroman, both initiate some sort of development. Nevertheless, both models fail when the protagonist's life is cut short. The adolescent's death presents the powerlessness of the Black child and the power of the authority figure. As a result of the overt power of the authority figure, the adolescent's opportunity to "test the degree of

power they hold" (Trites, 2000, p. 1) is removed. As the adolescent is now unable to negotiate the surrounding power structures, his potential to "[rebel] against authority figures to escape oppression" (p. xi) is eliminated. On a related note, Nikolajeva questioned Trites' assertions of the power of the young adult as she presents the two options of being repressed or become repressive. With this, Nikolajeva does recognize how some rebellious characters are removed from the narrative through violent deaths or suicide as authors seemingly do not know what to do with them (Nikolajeva, 2010, p. 7). While Nikolajeva's point helps us see a reason why some young adult characters are murdered, it does not work for Jerome because he was never introduced as a rebellious character. Implying how the dead protagonist does not conform to the framework of young adult literature, the examination of his growth becomes more a representation of the growth the ghost-child experiences through knowledge and intellectual development related to the reason why he was murdered.

Compared to the previous novels, examining power and identity in relation to protesting injustice in *Ghost Boys* is more of a challenge. As Jerome is not able to *physically* speak out against the racial profiling, his voice is diminished compared to the voices of Starr and Justyce. Nevertheless, as Jerome remains in the world of the living as a ghost, his potential to create change persists. The image of the ghost represents thus a dual power of death – power through death as shown through the act of taking a life, which enforces a position of power in the social hierarchy, but also, in this instance, power through death as presented in the act of haunting. As the protagonist accesses power through haunting, his remaining presence exhibits as a memory of his death, which forces the haunted living to remember the circumstances in which he died. With the constant reminder of deadly injustice symbolized in the ghost, the potential for justice remains.

The ghost is a link to the past – a reminder of past events and the history linked to a person or a group of people. Kathleen Brogan states that, traditionally, "ghosts function as plot

device – providing crucial information, setting in motion the machinery of revenge or atonement" (Brogan, 1995, p. 149). However, in African American literature, the usage of the ghost also "reflects the crises of a larger social group" (p. 150). Further, in her book *Cultural Haunting* (1998), Brogan notes how "in contemporary haunted literature, ghost stories are offered as an alternative – or challenge – to 'official,' dominant history" (p. 17). The dead, consequently, always return for a reason, and, as Joanne Chassot asserts in her book *Ghosts of the African Diaspora* (2018), "the ghost always responds to specific historical and cultural conditions and anxieties" (p. 3). The ghost story, in other words, has become a narrative strategy "expressing political stances of certain ethnic groups" (Tian and Li, 2018, p. 272). Since Jerome's rite into adulthood was disturbed, he returns as a ghost, which symbolizes the injustice of a marginalized group that has experienced oppression for centuries. Furthermore, Slavoj Žižek claims that ghosts return as "collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt" (Žižek, 1991, p. 23). In Jerome's case, his inability to transcend the world of the living seems to be a result of the injustice surrounding his death and a need for comprehending the reason why he died. In relation to Trites' assertions on the close link between growth and power in young adult literature, Jerome's return as a ghost symbolizes an effort to regain a sense of power through understanding the circumstances of his death and impacting the people surrounding him in the afterlife.

Shifting between the time before and after his death, *Ghost Boys* presents Jerome before his death with a predetermined destiny connected to uncertainty and potential violence. His school is shown as an institution filled with students from poor neighborhoods and containing violent bullies, which creates a need for alliances between friends to keep safe. At home, the uncertainty is enforced by his family's fear; they constantly order Jerome and his sister to stay safe and to "come straight home" (Rhodes, 2018, p. 11), and they assert how "in this neighborhood, getting a child to adulthood is perilous" (p. 13). Forming an alliance with the

new student, Carlos, Jerome, together with Carlos, navigates through school between classes highly focused on keeping out of trouble. However, tired of being bullied, Carlos brings a toy gun to school in order to scare the bullies away. The plan initially works, and Carlos gives the toy gun to Jerome. However, the tool meant for protection becomes the reason why Jerome is shot and killed because he plays with it in a park after school and becomes a victim of racial profiling by a police officer. The narrative presents Jerome in a seemingly infinite loop of powerlessness, whether it be in school or on the street.

Paradoxically, Jerome's death – the peak of powerlessness – is contrasted with his return as a ghost, which arguably offers him an opportunity to regain some of the lost power. Ghost-Jerome is invisible to the living and not capable of communicating with anyone apart from a White, twelve-year-old girl named Sarah. Nevertheless, his ability to be seen and heard by Sarah is not accidental as Sarah is the daughter of the police officer who shot Jerome. Sarah, who is the same age and height as Jerome, is used to juxtapose the officer's defense of why he felt it was necessary to shoot Jerome. During the preliminary hearing, the police officer states how he was threatened by the boy because he believed him to be "at least twenty-five [years old]" and a "dangerous man," further describing him as "big," "hulking," and "scary" (Rhodes, 2018, pp. 50-51). The implication of the officer's racial profiling infused with historical assumptions about Black people is tested as Sarah confronts her father after the preliminary hearing. Arguing that Jerome was Sarah's height, Sarah demands to know why her father would describe Jerome as 'dangerous' and 'big.' After the confrontation, Sarah divulges to Jerome her fear that she herself might be shot, as Jerome was, based on her notion of their physical similarities. However, Jerome affirms how that would not happen as she is "a girl," but also because she is "white" (p. 69). This interaction indicates the importance of Sarah and Jerome's emerging companionship. Although the relationship between the White girl and the dead, Black boy exhibit a multitude of significances, one of the most important aspects of their relationship

rests, arguably, on Jerome's effect on Sarah's personal growth. The indication of Jerome's revelation to Sarah that she will not be shot due to her gender and race is a starting point for Sarah's personal growth. Through interacting with Jerome, Sarah is introduced to a whole new spectrum of realities, which illuminates historical events previously unknown to her.

Through the narrative, Jerome's presence in Sarah's life raises her awareness of prejudice, racism and injustice; this makes her into an agent Jerome's voice may operate through in order to tell his story. Brogan writes that "as an absence made present, the ghost can give expression to the ways in which women [read: oppressed people] are rendered invisible in the public sphere" (1998, p. 25). Ghost-Jerome, invisible to everyone except Sarah, symbolizes the unheard voice of the victims of fatal police brutality. By means of this, the ghost symbolizes people who have historically been oppressed and silenced due to gender, race, or other factors, which magnifies the idea of the ghost as an image of memory. Memory, in this sense, indicates a past event remembered by a cognitive collective as shown through historical collections of information. The ghost-victim who returns is a reminder to those who can see him. This activates a historical, collective memory through communication with the dead and the living's attempt to seek answers in relation to this new, violent information. For Sarah, this connection becomes increasingly important as Jerome not only is a catalyst for her identity growth but also an indicator of her future potential for protest. Witnessing the consequence of Jerome's trauma, Sarah figuratively adopts parts of the trauma, which guides her onto a path in the search for information and justice. With this, Sarah arguably takes on some of the role Jerome might have experienced had he not been murdered.

Not understanding why he has returned to the world as a ghost, the frustration of invisibility continues to antagonize Jerome. Questioning his continued existence, Jerome ponders how he was still here, "yet not here" (Rhodes, 2018, p. 119). Walking through crowded areas, ghost-Jerome further explains how he "[walks] among people, invisible, and people still

make space for [him]" (p. 119). As if feeling ghost-Jerome's presence, the living, unconsciously, move out of his way as to not collide with him. This imagery indicates the reality of Jerome's haunting. Arguably, Jerome is rendered powerless by his invisibility; nevertheless, the narrative illustrates how he is still able to impact the people around him. Jerome, by these means, is not entirely powerless; however, his power is reduced compared to the potential power he had as a living person. Nevertheless, Jerome makes use of the little power which remains in an effort to achieve justice. Symbolically, Jerome's felt presence portrayed in the passing people who avoid colliding with him represents his continued existence through cultural and collective memory. This indicates that, as long as the community remembers him and the injustice he faced, the hope for retribution remains. These observations strengthen the significance of the relationship between Jerome and Sarah. In relation to the effect of being haunted has on the living, Chassot writes that the "connection and the continuity with the past that the ghosts enable," is the main factor which helps the living "understand, deal with, or work through their present situations" (2018, p. 9). Not only seeing Jerome, but also seeing the "hundreds, thousands of ghost boys" (Rhodes, 2018, p. 95), Sarah is introduced to and educated about the violent history of her nation. Looking out at the sea of ghosts, "standing, ever still, looking up through the window" (p. 95), Sarah realizes how they all were "killed like Jerome" and "killed like [Emmett Till]" (p. 96). Arguably, the information revealed to Sarah through the ghosts creates a form of "identity confusion" (Stringer, 1997, p. 4). Her association with the ghosts illuminates a part of history she was previously shielded from; this makes her question what she knows, her relationship with her father, and her trust in authority figures. However, she attempts to resolve her confusion by focusing on educating herself about the history of violence towards Black people and what she can do to enlighten others about the issue.

Sarah realizes the major issues of racial prejudice and profiling as the preliminary hearing continues. Watching a video capturing Jerome's death, she notes how her father "didn't

really *see* [Jerome]" (Rhodes, 2018, p. 109; emphasis in original). In order to obtain a better understanding of the history of the ghosts, Sarah turns to the school library to look up, amongst others, Emmett Till. At first, the librarian seems reluctant to give Sarah the information about Emmett Till; the librarian implies that she might be too young to know details about such "an upsetting case" (p. 115). The librarian's reluctance shows the ideal wish to shield children from the gruesome truths of life, which is similar to how Sarah had been kept ignorant of social and racial issues until she met Jerome. Nevertheless, the librarian eventually gives Sarah the information when she reflects on how she herself was Sarah's age when she learned about Emmett Till and saw the pictures of his lynched body (p. 117). Jerome's power as a ghost is presented in this intellectual development Sarah experiences. By interacting with Jerome, Sarah is introduced to a history and social situations she was previously not familiar with. The increased knowledge of the situation urges her to speak out against the prejudice and injustice she has witnessed through the ghosts. Nevertheless, Sarah clearly becomes troubled by the new information and images she discovers. However, Jerome expresses that it is "okay that Sarah's […] troubled; she should be." (p. 184). Commenting on the urgency of the situation and how Black people are in danger due to "fear [and] stereotypes about black boys" (p. 184), Jerome comes to understand the reason why he cannot transcend beyond his ghostly figure. His mission, as with all the ghost boys, is to linger as a reminder to the living of the circumstances of their deaths. The reminder's purpose is to force the living to actively engage with the issue in hope for change and justice because "only the living can make change" (p. 191). Thus, Sarah's troubles are encouraged as that is "how [she] helps herself and the world" (p. 184) – by informing people, young and old, of the reality of the circumstances. Sarah's development highlights the power of Jerome, as she, by the end of the narrative, has experienced a political awakening in which Jerome inspires her to challenge the established prejudice. As long as Sarah

keeps critiquing the incidents where young, Black people are murdered, Jerome maintains his own possibility to rebel against the power structures which surround him.

Considering the narrative as a whole, Jerome is an image of complete powerlessness when he is murdered by a White police officer. This act confirms the officer's power position within the hierarchy, both in relation to him being a figure of authority, but also in relation to race. As a ghost, Jerome still has to negotiate these power structures with the realization that the only person who can see him is a *White* girl. Jerome finds a need to tell his story in order to critique the social and racial issues established in the society; however, he must also accept how, to obtain the power to speak, he must relinquish his voice to a person who already has more cultural and social power than he does. The implication of this relationship enforces the continued racial divide in reference to personal power, as Jerome, even in death, must negotiate the power structures of the living and speak through a White girl. Nevertheless, the collaboration between the Black boy and the White girl is a force of power as Jerome 'troubles' Sarah with his knowledge, disturbing *her* reality, which ultimately shows how he still has some power. Parallel to Sarah's personal development and identity change in relation to her evolving knowledge of contemporary social issues, Jerome also experiences an understanding of the position he has as a ghost. His identity is formed by the notion of him being a ghost but even more so by the relationship with Sarah and the implications of her growth. Sarah's growth, in many ways, indicates a growth Jerome could have experienced had he not been killed. As his identity is 'erased,' he implements part of himself, through information and knowledge, into Sarah. With this symbolistic merger of the two characters, the vision of Sarah's future becomes imbedded with implications for rebellion and protest. Already implied in her confronting her father, Sarah's revelations on racism and prejudice become a means for her identity development. This development, arguably, paves the way for Sarah to potentially become a future political activist – fighting for justice in cases of police brutality. Highlighting the

potential Sarah's future holds, the power of ghost-Jerome becomes more explicit as we see to what extent his presence can create change.

From lynching to police violence

Contemplating the image of the ghost in the young adult novel, we witness the murdered Black child return as a memory of a past trauma. As a ghost, Jerome is presented as a victim of a heinous crime. Furthermore, Jerome is also compared to Emmett Till. This comparison presents itself most clearly as Sarah notices the resemblances in the deaths of Jerome and Emmet and comments on how they were killed in similar manners (Rhodes, 2018, p. 96). Emmett Till was a 14-year-old African American boy who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 after allegedly offending a White woman. After this, Emmett Till became "one of the central figures on the stage of American racial trauma" (Kolin, 2008, p. 6). His brutal death and the image of his lynched body has "symbolized the horror of racism in America" (p. 6), and the following acquittal of his murderers has been marked "the Shame of the Nation" (Bass, 2008, p. 74). In *Ghost Boys*, Jerome is introduced to the ghost of Emmett Till, who is the leader of the ghost boys (Rhodes, 2018, p. 147). Emmet Till appears as a guide for Jerome and Sarah. As Jerome does not comprehend the reason why he is dead and why he is not able to move on, Emmett helps Jerome understand the importance of his relationship with Sarah and how Jerome's continued existence "isn't all about [Jerome]" (p. 147). Through Emmett's guidance, Jerome realizes how "thousands of ghost boys, are trying to change the world. That's why [they] haven't said goodbye" (p. 190). Jerome and Emmett's positions and responsibilities as ghosts are thus similar. Furthermore, the connection between the two boys is reinforced through Jerome's family's continued response to Jerome's death with a comparison to the death of Emmett. As Jerome's grandmother considers Jerome's fate to be "just like Emmett Till" (p. 24), his mother declares that she wishes for her son to have an open casket as she "[wants] the

whole world to see what they did to [her] boy," – she continues by asking: "Isn't that what Mrs. Till said?" (pp. 28-29). The comparison between the two boys, then, creates a link between the violence of the past with the violence of the present – marking a link between lynching rituals and the contemporary police and vigilante brutality. Building on the history of violence against Black children, the narrative consequently illuminates a longer history of portraying and critiquing violence based on racial oppression.

Lynching is an act of extrajudicial killing; this means that it is a murder which is not carried out by the police or a corresponding governmental authority figure; nonetheless, it is still sanctioned and overlooked by the state. During the Harlem Renaissance, generally referred to as the period between approximately 1918 and 1937 (Hutchinson, 2007, p. 7), lynching texts became common within African American literature. First and foremost, the Harlem Renaissance signified a blossoming within African American arts. This period was never entirely cohesive; however, all art was "loosely bound together by a desire for racial self-assertion and self-definition in the face of white supremacy" (p. 1). Therefore, the complexities of race, history of racism, and its future was fundamental to the Harlem Renaissance. Further, it was "connected to the emergence of the struggle for civil rights and the anticolonial movements" (Wintz & Finkelman, 2004, p. x). Relating to this, many African American intellectuals urged writers to implement social and political ideas within their texts as a means to acquire social equality (Davis, 2008, p. 478). Within theatre, the theme of lynching became very prominent. Nonetheless, it also made its appearance in other forms of literary texts, among them, poetry. For instance, early in the Harlem Renaissance, Claude McKay published his poem "The Lynching" (1922). Here McKay presents the lynching ritual as an event which "[bonds] the white community and to assert its power" (Harding, 2017, p. 2). The focus in his poem, as asserted by Maggie E. Morris Davis, rests on "the lynchers and their dangerous progeny" (2018, p. 51). The lynched body is displayed as a voiceless and spiritless entity, and

the emphasis in the poem rests on the audience of the ritual, who are shown through descriptions such as the "women thronged to look" and "little lads, lynchers that were to be, / Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee" (McKay, 1922). Davis further asserts how the poem "largely abandons the black body of the lynched for an extended critique of the white lynch mob" (2018, p. 51). This was a relatively common theme in the early lynching texts as the bodies of the lynched were "objectified to represent the result of the violence of white racism" (p. 51).

As the 1920s progressed, the occurrences of lynchings decreased. Nevertheless, the implications of racism fundamental to the lynching spectacles did not disappear. As the amount of lynching decreased, the number of legal executions of African Americans increased. As shown in James W. Clarke's work on the subject, lynching was essentially replaced by a more acceptable form of violence, revealed in "swift and superficial trials," referred to as "legal lynchings" (1998, p. 285). Thus, lynchings were camouflaged by the judicial system, which made the fundamental racism of the lynching rituals invisible. With this diversion, the lynching poetry began to change. As Maggie E. Morris Davis elaborates on in her article "Sound and Silence: The Politics of Reading Early Twentieth-Century Lynching Poetry," this change was most emphasized by "the centrality of the black body to the lynching spectacle" (2018, p. 52). With the refusal to neglect the Black body by keeping the focus on the White mob, the poetry now gave voice or life to the victim in order to restore her or his humanity (pp. 52, 57). Davis writes that "as lynching decreased, the tension between sound and silence intensified," as reflected in the 'legal lynchings,' ultimately stating how "there is more at stake as racism becomes invisible, silently and arrogantly parading as justice" (p. 57). Taking into consideration this development of the lynching texts, *Ghost Boys* illustrates many similar methods. Presenting the murder of an innocent child by a police officer, we witness an imitation of the lynching ritual together with the idea of the 'swift and superficial trials.' Further, the dead body *and* the ghost symbolize the silence; both in terms of 'silent racism' and physically being silenced by

authority. Nevertheless, the text in itself, together with the communication between Jerome and Sarah, represents the 'sound' in the critique of the injustice and the cry for change.

As illustrated in the novel's presentation of the preliminary hearing, the police officer reacted on an assumption that the toy was real, and the Black, innocent boy was actually a Black, dangerous man. The preliminary hearings come to a close on the opinion that "there is not enough evidence to charge" the police officer "with excessive force, manslaughter, or murder" (Rhodes, 2018, p. 138). The contemporary portrayal of the 'swift and superficial trials' has arguably turned into a collective of incidents marked 'do first, ask forgiveness later.' Even though the implications of this development may be perceived as a lack of progress, Jerome realize how attitudes in fact have changed. Contemplating how Emmett's murderers "never believed they did wrong" and the "all-white jury found them innocent," Jerome realizes how there might be progress in the fact that the officer who shot him was tried even though he was acquitted due to lack of evidence (p. 183). Furthermore, the officer is not celebrating, which implies his knowledge of the fatal misjudgment he has made. The officer is presented as knowing the guilt of his actions. This progress suggests that the fundamentals behind the lynching narrative present itself as vital tools for understanding the 'police-violence' novel, both to give voice to a vital social issue and also to show how attitudes in fact have changed and have the potential to change even more.

Richard Wright wrote a substantial example of lynching literature that bestowed dignity onto the lynched body. In his poem "Between the World and Me" (1935), the narrator stumbles upon a skeleton of someone who has been lynched in the woods. Wright gives the body life as he describes how "the dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves into / my bones. / The gray ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into my / flesh." (1948, p. 786). The speaker himself experiences the resurrection of the lynched; the speaker becomes the victim, feeling how they "stripped" him, and "[battered his] teeth into / [his] throat till [he] swallowed

[his] own blood." (p. 786). The reenactment of the lynching plays out "like a ghost returning with a message for the living" (Harding, 2017, p. 9). This assertion of Harding echoes Žižek's previously mentioned claim of the ghost as a "[collector] of some unpaid symbolic debt" (1991, p. 23). Similar to the lynching narrative which holds the focus on the victim, the 'police-violence' novel portrays comparable significance on the topic of giving voice to the victim of police and vigilante brutality. Wright's explicit imagery of the process of lynching shifts the focus from the White mob to the Black body, which incorporates both a critique of the White violence and gives an imagined voice to the victim.

Wright's poem to all appearances made its impact as its title echoed into the 21st century. In 2015, Ta-Nehisi Coates published his epistolary memoir *Between the World and Me,* indicating a link to Wright's poem through the reuse of his title. The memoir, initially directed towards Coates' then 15-year-old son, Samori, presents a warning about the dangers of having a Black body. Compared to the explicit acts of racism portrayed in the poem, Coates refers to racism as a "visceral experience," which "dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, crack bones, breaks teeth" (2015, p. 10). With this, *Between the World and Me* uses the racial violence which structures everyday life in America, rendering it absolutely, physically real through his phrasing. Coates attempts to portray the pillaged body as something more than a body you see in a forest clearing or a body in the public media; he emphasizes how the violence towards the Black body is more than a string of isolated incidents. Coates echoes Wright in his memoir; however, Coates is talking about, amongst other things, the contemporary issue of police violence. Arguably, by structuring a link between Coates' book and Wright's poem, we are presented with an image of the legacy of lynching intertwined with contemporary police violence. There is a larger general history which can be extrapolated from the text, as the narrator of Wright's poem stumbles upon the lynched man, Coates' son stumbles upon the reality that the murder of Michael Brown will go unpunished. Correspondingly, *Ghost*

Boys presents the realization of the importance of remembering these previous victims. Sarah, portrayed as the White, ignorant girl stumbling upon the struggles of Black boys. Ghost-Jerome presents as an extension of the victim which previously might have been given life, but not necessarily an audible voice.

Acknowledging the similarities between the lynching texts and the 'police-violence' novels, we see the intention of Coates' memoir to present itself as a cautionary tale for his son who 'stumbles' upon the racial realities. Through Coates' use of the young adult as the intended reader of his memoir, he introduces both the fear of the violence and history which the prejudice is built upon. In many ways, the memoir's narrative illustrates characteristics similar to *Ghost Boys*. Both texts focus on the physical depictions of racism; Coates does this through explicit phrasings and Rhodes through the child ghost. Using the adolescent as the receiver of the revelations of racism, both authors seem to take advantage of the innocent child and how their realities are disrupted with fear and violence. By making the young adult aware of racial issues, the disruption they experience relates to the element of growth in the young adult genre. The growth of the young adult, as presented in an Entwicklungsroman, relates not to the physical growth of the young adult, but rather to increased knowledge. In both cases these revelations link to identity formation in the hope that the "stressful experiences may […] stimulate identity" (Stringer, 1997, p. 3), making them more resilient. Although Jerome is dead, he still portrays a resilient attitude as he continues to challenge the power forces through haunting. However, this possible resilience might come to contradict the foundations of the intentions of the young adult genre. As Trites asserts how the literature intends to teach the young adult about the power structures and how these structures shape the young adult (2000, p. x), we see how the young adult is intended to conform to the surrounding power structures and accept the notion that they will always remain less powerful than a government authority. This idea is further reinforced as Nikolajeva claims Trites only suggests two options for the young adult: be repressed or

become repressive (2010, p. 7). However, by making a young adult more resilient, the possible identity formation they take on might contain more ideas of rebellion than conformism. The legacy of the presented literature shows how the issues young adult Black boys face are not accidental and they are most likely to exist all through their lives. Jerome is killed as a child; he never experiences what issues adulthood may present him with. However, linking the young adult literature together with the lynching narratives, where we are shown imagery of grown men being killed, the idea of racism faced in childhood and young adulthood still existing in adulthood becomes enforced. Analyzing how authors of these young adult narratives suggest that these issues will remain with the young adult into adulthood, the implications are that the resilience of the young adult also becomes something which is brought into adulthood.

The ability to communicate with the dead has been shown to not only provide a cultural and social function but also a political one (Chassot, 2018, p. 10). Linking together the themes of the Harlem Renaissance with the work of Coates, the presentation of victims of vigilantes and police brutality as ghosts creates a connection between the past and the injustice which prevails in contemporary society. In this sense, by presenting the victim as a ghost, Rhodes arguably informs the reader of a longer history of violence going back to a time where murdering for entertainment was a reality and shows how the prejudice related to those incidents remains in some ways today. The reason for Jerome's continued existence as a ghost, despite his wish to move on, is a need for him to understand the violent history of his people. Moreover, the form of the ghost also reminds and informs Sarah of the same history. Sarah, as Jerome's only link to the living, is a catalyst – an agent to speak through in order to, hopefully, make a difference. As Sarah is informed of the circumstances of Jerome's death, together with the history of murders of Black children, she becomes an activist for justice and rights for Black people. This influence on Sarah, then, is not only based in her personal relationship with the

contemporary ghosts, but also with the ghosts of past victims and the indications of how long prejudice has remained a lethal issue.

Connecting these literary contributions to the contemporary young adult novel, we witness a collective trauma memory represented in the ghost figure. Patricia San José Rico states in her book *Creating Memory and Cultural Identity in African American Trauma Fiction* that there is an interconnection between historical traumatic events inflicted on African Americans dating back to "the original trauma of the estrangement from the motherland," moving through slavery into "repression and segregation imposed by the Jim Crow laws," leading further into the racism we witness in contemporary America (2019, p. 26). She argues that all these traumatic experiences are interrelated because they originate from the same source. Rico, thus, asserts that the contemporary violence performed against Black Americans in the U.S. today is "indicative of the continuation of the line of succession" illustrated above (p. 26). Moreover, the intention of all the literature presented in this chapter is to give voice to the voiceless, whether it be a victim of the present or the past. The ghostly figure represents a collective trauma, dating back centuries, bearing witness to a neglected or silenced history.

Because the ghostly witness shows the origin of the issue and bears witness to the history of trauma, the young adult narrative of *Ghost Boys* presents a clear political intention. Similar to the lynching literature, the narrative presents its socio-political intentions by giving voice to the victim of racial violence. In many ways, such literature is an ideal way to voice an injustice or trauma – working towards "the halting of future repetitions of violence" (Rico, 2019, p. 37). The comparison of Emmett Till with Jerome in *Ghost Boys* presents an illustration of the interconnection between lynching and police- and vigilante brutality. Thus, by affiliation, there is also an interconnection between the oppression of the early 20th century and the 21st century. In many ways, by highlighting the correspondence between the different literary forms and violence depictions, the ghost in the contemporary young adult literature "[serves] to illuminate

the more shadowy or repressed aspects of characters" (Brogan, 1995, p. 150). The focus the ghost brings to the narrative is presented in the history of similar fates. As shown through all the ghost boys in the narrative, Jerome is far from the first child whose life was brutally taken, and he will he likely not be the last. Thus, the ghost presents another important aspect within the African American literature: it "[signals] an attempt to recover and make social use of a poorly documented, partially erased cultural history" (p. 150).

Chapter conclusion

The main argument for this chapter is that the young adults refuse to accept their powerless positions. Illustrated in the image of the dead, Black boy, Jerome represents complete powerlessness as he is killed for playing with a toy gun and is thus permanently silenced by the authority. Primarily, as Jerome is murdered, the narrative automatically transcends the young adult framework as the adolescent does not get the chance to experience a growth towards adulthood. With Jerome being forever locked in the image of a boy, the fundamental idea of the young adult narrative is disrupted. Nevertheless, even in death Jerome experiences a form of growth, especially when we look at growth as knowledge about power. As Jerome refuses to let the power structures go unchallenged in light of the injustice of his case, Jerome activates the only source of communication to the living world he has. Understanding the power his ghostly form has over Sarah, Jerome deconstructs her perspective of the world in order to continue challenging the power structures from beyond the grave. Although Jerome continues to challenge the structures, disrupting the ideas of the young adult framework, the growth and development he experiences as a ghost resembles what is expected from a young adult novel. He learns about the power structures, and with this knowledge he understands the historical implications of his murder. This knowledge creates an identity development. Jerome shifts from the wish to transcend his ghostly life and not wanting to witness the aftermath of his murder

anymore to a resilient state of mind in which he understands how his current position is meant to remind the living of the ghost boys' fates. However, with his growth, Jerome starts to understand his new position and goal as a ghost, and why it is important for him to remain. Ultimately, seeing the influence the haunting has on the identity development of Sarah, Jerome understands the power of his ghostly form.

The narrative's transcendence from the young adult framework becomes explicit through the ghostly figures in the novel. As we juxtapose the young adult novel with lynching literature, the implications of Ghost-Jerome can be drawn into a symbol signifying all the boys who have been murdered based on racial prejudice and racial profiling. This makes the social critique of the novel more explicit, which connects it more with protest literature than only young adult novels. Ghost-Jerome's haunting of Sarah symbolizes the haunting of all child victims in the collective consciousness. Similarly is society haunted by the victims through their appearances in visual imagery on social media or in news rapports. However, aspects of didactic influence and growth make the narrative continuously remain within the genre of young adult literature. Because the growth found in the young adult is now moved from Jerome to Sarah, the previously silenced 'lynched' victim obtains a voice to critique the continued existence of violence towards Black people.

Conclusion – The limits of genre

> To accept one's past – one's history – is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought.
>
> - James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (333)

My goal with this thesis was to explore the themes of identity and power within the young adult novel, specifically African American young adult literature, in order to identify to what extent this framework limits the intentions of the narrative. I argued that the young adult genre was limiting for the young adult 'police-violence' narrative as the framework cannot sufficiently comprehend the growth the protagonists experience. Instead, the analysis exemplified that a combination of the young adult framework contextualized with African American literature and history allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the narratives. In order to support my statement, I analyzed the narratives strictly within the structures of identity and power as it is defined within the young adult genre to make more explicit exactly how the narratives are limited by the young adult genre. The framework was mostly based on Trites' statements on the topic as she asserted how "power is a force that operates within the subject and upon the subject in adolescent literature" (2000, p. 7). Similarly, I used the term 'power' with regards to how the adolescent has the opportunity to access a form of personal power which will assist them in fighting against the surrounding power structures.

The findings of the analysis of the three primary texts show that there are limits to the young adult framework, first and foremost with regards to power or growth. As we have seen through Trites' definitions and Nikolajeva's critique, Starr, the protagonist of *The Hate U Give*

obtains power *through* oppression and not by becoming repressive. Furthermore, her reluctance to accept her oppressed position, Starr illustrates an intention of protesting issues of racism and injustice into adulthood. Similarly, in *Dear Martin* Justyce also refuse to accept his position after negotiating the power structures. Understanding how the issue will still prevail as he reaches adulthood, Justyce intends to continue to develop his knowledge and understanding of the issue until he is able to make a real change. On the other hand, *Ghost Boys* presents more how the criteria of the young adult framework become obscured. As he is murdered at the start of the narrative, the novel transcends the framework immediately as Jerome is refused his rite of passage into adulthood. However, through his return as a ghost, he still experiences a form of personal development and growth as he understands the larger history behind his murder. Nevertheless, as Jerome uses his haunting ability to make Sarah protest against the injustice he faced, Jerome can be viewed similarly as Starr and Justyce; with the intention of protesting the power structures into the time frame which would initially have been his adulthood.

As these findings illustrate how the young adult framework introduces constrictions for the 'police-violence' novels, I contextualized the young adult novels with African American literature and history. The point of this contextualization was to highlight the significances found from the identity and power analysis, as well as illustrate how the African American framework helps emphasize the significance seen in the growth of the young adult protagonists. In *The Hate U Give* this was most explicitly represented through the illustrations of how racial tropes have been used to oppress people of color. Examining the use of racial tropes within African American literature, *The Hate U Give* express similarities with the Richard Wright's protest novel *Native Son*. This comparison creates a better understanding between the growth Starr experiences, how she views her own identity, and how identity and power are linked to a political aspect. Further, in *Dear Martin*, the contextualization expresses how his experiment presents more implications than simply a cognitive development in light of understanding an

issue. The act of writing letters become highlighted within the African American context as an act preceding public protest. Focusing on education, literacy, and letter writing, the contextualization enforces the importance these tools have in the history of the struggle against oppression for people of color. Linking him with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the context more clearly imagines Justyce becoming a civil rights activist similar to Dr. King. Lastly, *Ghost Boys*' context imagines the history of violence inflicted upon Black children for decades. By linking the young adult narrative together with lynching literature, we are introduced to a longer discussion of how Black writers have used their work to give voice to the silenced and keep the memory of the victims alive. Understanding the history connecting Emmet Till's murder to his own, the protagonist Jerome accepts his role as a ghost in order to remind people of the continued injustice and violence people of color face.

As we have seen, all three young adult novels transcend the young adult framework. What is significant about this is how they all seemingly do it in a similar way. Although Starr, Justyce, and Jerome all have very different circumstances, their main form of transcending beyond the young adult framework is based in the reluctance to accept their position in the power structures. In other words, all three adolescents' struggles originate from issues of racism and racial prejudice. As all three protagonists develop an understanding of the issues of racism and its history, they refuse to accept these established notions, making them determined to continue to challenge the power structures until there is a significant progress within justice and equal rights. The analysis made clear that the novels critique how children are being accused of being criminals based on old racial tropes created to oppress Black men into subservience. Furthermore, the novels critique how the innocence of the murdered children is overlooked in an effort to justify why the officers felt the need to pull the trigger. All these images of jarring brutality against children introduce the insanity of the situation. However, the young adult characters play the most significant roles with their image of growth. Not only do all the

protagonists learn about the power structures, but they also experience some form of educational development linked to how they perceive the issue of racism and how to make a difference. The young adult's growth, in this manner, is fundamental to this form of critique as the novels not only presents an issue, but also suggests a solution. This echoes the intentions of the protest novel. In the foreword to *American Protest Literature*, John Stauffer states that "protest literature functions as a catalyst, guide, or mirror of social change. It not only critiques some aspects of society, but also suggests, either implicitly or explicitly, a solution to society's ills" (Trodd, 2006, p. xii). The actions and developments of the young adult protagonists are introduced as examples for how people can contribute to change. With understanding and knowledge of the issue of racism, the young adults come to understand how their impact on progress can be achieved. This image is also strengthened with the connection all the narratives have with the Black Lives Matter movement and how their protests created an image of hope for progress.

Thus, the explicit portrayals of racism and the struggle against it presented in the young adult novels create a pattern of transcendence. Furthermore, when contextualizing the young adult novels within a historical framework of African American literary traditions, the aspects of protest and transcendence become more overt. The identity development and growth the protagonists experience do indeed become more extensive and significant when contextualized in a historical framework. Racism, the central focal point in all three young adult novels of this thesis, transcends adolescence; nevertheless, the main significance of the narrative is still represented in the adolescent's growth and its connection to social critique. This indicates that without the young adult framework it would not be possible to explain the significance of the adolescent's growth. Yet, it is important to additionally include an African American perspective to understand the nuance in the narratives.

Again, the explicit imagery of protest contributes to the idea of the 'police-novel' transgressing the young adult framework. As we have seen, Starr physically protests against injustice, Justyce implies an intention of protest in adulthood, and Jerome activates his power to fight against oppression from his grave. The young adult novel does not conventionally introduce direct concepts of political issues; however, they may imply it through a complex and nuanced structure of the narrative. Thus, the image of protest or social critique may be presented in a young adult novel implicitly. Nevertheless, by constricting these young adult novels strictly to the young adult framework, the implications of the protest and rebellion presented in the young adults may be reduced. However, as shown in my thesis, the contextualization of the narrative within a historical framework contributes to highlighting the subject which the young adult narrative may not be able to fully comprehend. The young adult genre ordinarily depicts issues common to the young adult but also issues that are supposed to be resolved by the time the young adult reach adulthood. Whether this be issues of, for example, gender confusion, bullying, divorce, or death, the young adult is supposed to come to an understanding or acceptance for the implications of these issues in their lives. This is similar to the concept of understanding and negotiating the power structures. However, the analyzed young adult novels all contain issues of racism, and racism is not only a young adult issue. It is an issue many young adults have to deal with, but it is not exclusive to the young adult. By contextualizing the narratives with African American literature and history, the analysis may thus imply a separation from the young adult framework. However, removing the narrative from the young adult framework would make the imagined potential for progress impossible as it is the growth of the adolescent which makes this specific imagery.

Although the historical framework creates a more explicit focus on protest and social critique, making the novels' transgression from the young adult framework more obvious, the significance of the critique presented in the novels would not be possible completely *outside*

the young adult framework. As stated with my intentions for this thesis, I never considered critiquing the young adult genre itself. Simply referring to the limits the genre presents, I want to highlight how connections between genres creates a more in-depth construction of the narrative. Acknowledging the registered limits of the young adult genre, I want to emphasize how the implications and significances of the narratives would not be possible without the young adult framework. As I have shown, some of the more fundamental aspects of the young adult genre rests in the adolescents developing understanding of the power structures and how to negotiate these structures. Focusing solely on this aspect, the young adult literature is supposed to present the growth of an adolescent implying developed knowledge or understanding on a situation or subject. Highlighting this idea of growth, the social criticism of the young adult narratives and the significance of their portrayals becomes a symbol for the potential growth of society. As stated by Carl Jung, "One of the essential features of the child motif is its futurity. The child is potential future" (Jung & Adler, 1981, p. 125). Jung's claim implies how the young adult signifies the potential for progress and growth in society itself. The young adult framework provides the potential for a change that is necessary for societal improvement. The image of growth and development shown in the young adult characters essentially illustrates hope for the future and the potential for progress.

Another aspect important to consider on the topic of the social criticism the novels perform is presented in the didactic structures of the novels. By implementing points meant to educate the reader, the novels maintain a significant aspect of the young adult gerne. Looking at how Starr teaches the reader to speak out against injustice, Justyce indicates how knowledge is power, and Jerome calls out for the reader to "bear witness" (Rhodes, 2018, p. 203), we only scratch the surface of how the authors attempt to apply didactive features to the narratives. Again, these attributes maintain a close relationship to the young adult genre, emphasizing further the significance the young adult framework presents for the specific critique the authors

present in their novels. By the end of a young adult narrative, many novels "contain a direct message about what the narrator has learned" (Trites, 2000, p. ix). Similarly, all the protagonists of the primary works of this thesis have learned that the progress for equal rights and justice is not instantaneous, but it is a necessity that they speak out and use their knowledge and experience to critique the prevailing issues. With these didactic implications, the young adult novels may influence a transformation within the reader, creating similar developments in them as the protagonists themselves experienced. With this, I conclude my thesis on an emphasis of the importance the young adult novel has on the imagery of growth and hope for progress in an oppressive and unjust society.

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