

Empathy and Dis/Empowerment:
Writing Diversity in Young Adult Fiction

by

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Class of 2018

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in Sociology

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have come together without the help of my advisor, Jonathan Cutler. I have stayed unexpectedly calm throughout this whole process, and I think that is largely because he took on the stress for me. I know that my methodology felt unorthodox and scary, and so I am grateful for his trust in my work. Thank you for learning way more about young adult fiction than you probably ever wanted to.

Thank you to all the people who collectively spent hours listening to me talk about YA fiction: My parents, the real heroes, who have fed my YA addiction with Barnes & Noble gift cards, completed YA photography projects, and read my favorite YA books so they could discuss them with me; Becky, who has always unabashedly shared an enjoyment of YA with me; my QAC family, who let me interrupt their work during shifts to tell them about the book I was reading; Sara, who has been my closest and dearest thesis buddy; and Natalie, who did full-day thesis benders with me whenever needed. Also, a big thank you to Candace, Sonya, Molly, Nicole, and all the other friends at Wesleyan who have given me support – I am so lucky.

I will dearly miss Thesis Squad 2018! Our group texts and pizza nights at Krust provided me with comradery, laughter, and support throughout this long process.

Lastly, I'd like to thank John Green for the years of practice analysis that his books have provided me with. My interest in and perhaps obsession with YA fiction reached new levels when I read *An Abundance of Katherines* my freshman year of high school. Thanks, John, for being my favorite white male author. No, really.

ABSTRACT

Young adult fiction, while a genre known for its nebulous definition and controversial portrayals of complex adolescent life, is mostly white and straight. This homogenous identity makeup extends from the representations in the texts to the authors writing the novels. Marginalized members of the YA community have long been asking for equal representation, and in 2014 these demands grew into a full-blown movement that was embraced by the industry and the established YA authors. But what does writing diversity in YA fiction mean? This thesis explores this question by conducting in-depth analyses of “diverse” YA fiction novels. Chapter one questions the problematic and centrist nature of the language of diversity. Chapter two takes note of which “diversity” novels are being criticized and which are being celebrated. Chapter three asks which authors are receiving support in the writing of diversity and which are being pushed to the side. Ultimately, this thesis follows the intricate and ever-developing events of YA fiction’s diversity movement to ask whether the resulting YA genre will be something new or something recognizable.

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INTRODUCTION

YA Fiction, You Mean Super Special White Girl and her Mysterious Brooding Boyfriend?¹

Young adult fiction has become a media phenomenon in the last ten years. Much of the fascination with and discussion surrounding YA fiction hinges on the genre's nebulous definition. While the history and evolution of YA fiction has no standardized narrative, recent attempts have been made to pin down one definition. This definition has largely contributed to the current reputation of YA fiction and its role in society-wide debates surrounding representation and diversity.

For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to establish some history and define the term "YA fiction." The most straight-forward definition is fiction published for young adults. This is often extended to say that YA books contain protagonists between 12-18 years of age, and are written and published with 12-18 year-olds in mind. However, this can quickly get nonspecific, as there are books with 12 year-old protagonists that would be published as children's fiction, juvenile fiction, or young adult fiction. So this definition, while literal, is not representative of YA as the culturally distinctive literary phenomenon that it is today.

The term "young adult fiction" was first coined in 1967 by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA).² YALSA was unsure how to categorize S.E.

¹ citizen-zero. "YA literature? You mean books about Super Special White Girl and Her Mysterious Brooding Boyfriend?", <http://citizen-zero.tumblr.com/post/121469505108>.

² Strickland, Ashley. "A Brief History of Young Adult Literature." *CNN*, 15 Apr. 2015, www.cnn.com/2013/10/15/living/young-adult-fiction-evolution/index.html.

Hinton's novel *The Outsiders* within the library system, and so they created the category of young adult fiction. For this reason, many consider *The Outsiders* to be the first YA novel, and say that it kicked off "the first golden age of YA lit."³ The books published during this golden age were defined as "mature contemporary realism directed at adolescents."⁴ They also almost always included some element of the "coming-of-age" story. But these requirements were loose, and the term existed mostly as a library and marketing category.

YA Fiction gained more cultural ground in 1998 with the release of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in the United States. The book created an active market for science fiction/fantasy novels that depicted teens dealing with dark and difficult situations, marking the beginning of "the second golden age of YA."⁵ This led to ground-breaking realistic fiction YA novels being released as well, such as *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, which follows a 14 year-old-girl who was raped the summer before her freshman year of high school and now must deal with the aftermath. These YA books were "fully-fleshed, fully-realized stories about the trauma teens face every day."⁶ However, their storylines were controversial, and they spurred on adults' fears that the darker subject matter could attempt to subvert society or "irrevocably damage fragile minds."⁷ This development caused many YA books

³ Chisholm, N. Jamiyla. "The Surprising, Short History of Young Adult Fiction." *Real Simple*, www.realsimple.com/work-life/entertainment/history-of-young-adult-fiction/.

⁴ Strickland.

⁵ Chisholm.

⁶ Jensen, Kelly. "Beyond the Bestsellers: So You've Read SPEAK by Laurie Halse Anderson." *Book Riot*, 14 Apr. 2016, bookriot.com/2014/04/01/beyond-bestsellers-youve-read-speak-laurie-halse-anderson/.

⁷ Foreman, Gayle. "Teens Crave Young Adult Books on Really Dark Topics (and That's OK)." *Time*, 6 Feb. 2015, time.com/3697845/if-i-stay-gayle-forman-young-adult-i-was-here/.

released post-*Harry Potter* to be banned in schools: The *Harry Potter* Series was banned for witchcraft and overly dark subject matter; *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie for obscene language and sexual subject matter; *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky for discussions of rape, sex, and homosexuality; etc.⁸ At the same time, these qualities became important hallmarks of the YA genre as a space that represented teen life as complex and pushed the boundaries of social norms with discussions of sexuality, trauma, mental health, identity, etc.

In 2009, the total sales for YA fiction exceeded \$3 billion, and the number of YA books being published increased dramatically.⁹ At this time, mass media platforms began to notice that YA fiction was a huge profit opportunity, and many YA books became popular outside the boundaries of the genre. It is unclear whether the mass media embraced YA to squash its revolutionary qualities, but this was a definite side effect. Mass media coverage of YA fiction caused fantasy novels like *Twilight* by Stephanie Meyer, *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, and *Divergent* by Veronica Roth to rise to the top of public consciousness, and any quietly banned novels were forgotten. This is not to say that these novels didn't have important subject matter. The media's embracement of *The Hunger Games* is ironic considering that its tale of a post-apocalyptic American nation under totalitarian control in which children are forced to fight each other to the death is meant to criticize the

⁸ Fitzpatrick, Shaun Bryon. "13 Banned YA Novels We Love." *Barnes & Noble*, 23 Sept. 2014, www.barnesandnoble.com/blog/13-banned-ya-novels-we-love/.

⁹ Brown, David W. "How Young Adult Fiction Came of Age." *The Atlantic*, 1 Aug. 2011, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/08/how-young-adult-fiction-came-of-age/242671/.

overwhelming power of the media. But it was also an incredibly smart choice, because the mainstream trivialization of *The Hunger Games* erased the racial and political narratives that ran so deeply in the book and turned it into another novel that fell into YA's dystopian novel trope. In fact, mass media's focus on YA fiction made incredibly clear the formulas and tropes on which it relied, the most common of which was a super special white girl who fell in love with her mysterious brooding boyfriend.¹⁰ And while these tropes *are* incredibly prevalent, the potential for YA fiction to change and push boundaries was forgotten.

This change in the large-scale perception of YA fiction was also intimately connected to the fact that it is a genre built up and maintained by women. Only once YA fiction became a profitable market did more men begin writing YA, yet they tended to be given more praise than their female counterparts for writing the same kinds of books. The previously extremely popular books written by female authors, such as the dystopian trilogies mentioned above, quickly switched from being celebrated to criticized for being fluffy and low quality. The timing of this change is not a coincidence, as when a medium is embraced by the mainstream it is often feminized and connected to female mediocrity. This shift culminated in YA being labeled as "pointless, probably female-authored, escapist tripe."¹¹

During this media-frenzy, YALSA published an official whitepaper to assert the value of young adult fiction as not just a library and marketing category, but a *literary* category. They defined YA fiction with a 5-point definition:

¹⁰ citizen-zero.

¹¹ Williams, Imogen Russell. "What Are YA Books? And Who Is Reading Them?" *The Guardian*, 31 July 2014, www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/jul/31/ya-books-reads-young-adult-teen-new-adult-books.

1. YA fiction addresses the needs of young adults and recognizes that they are “in evolution, in search of self and identity.”¹²

2. YA fiction allows young adults to see themselves on the page:

To see oneself in the pages of a young adult book is to receive the reassurance that one is not alone after all, not other, not alien but, instead, a viable part of a larger community of beings who share a common humanity.¹³

3. YA fiction can create understanding, compassion, and empathy in its readers. It does this by:

...offering vividly realized portraits of the lives – exterior and interior – of individuals who are *unlike* the reader. In this way young adult literature invites its readership to embrace the humanity it shares with those who – if not for the encounter in reading – might forever remain strangers or – worse — irredeemably ‘other.’¹⁴

4. YA fiction tells young adults the truth about the world, “however disagreeable that may sometimes be.”¹⁵

5. YA fiction is a framework to help young adults make sense of the world.

By doing all of the above, YA allows young adults to develop an identity, understand others, and distinguish between right and wrong – “to, in other words, become civilized.”¹⁶

¹² “The Value of Young Adult Literature”, American Library Association, May 8, 2008. <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/guidelines/whitepapers/yalit>. Document ID: 3c448370-600c-11f4-b18d-fe6025e206f0

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

This whitepaper contains the first occurrence of several factors that have now become widely accepted as part of the definition of YA fiction. First, that all readers should be able to see themselves reflected in the pages of a YA fiction novel. This is a desire for YA fiction to serve as a tool of self-empowerment, where readers can see representations of themselves that resonate with them in a meaningful way. Second, that this representation should reassure the reader they are valid in who they are because they are not alone. This shifts the source of a reader's empowerment from the self to knowing that they are part of a community of others who also believe in them or share some of their qualities. Third, that YA fiction should establish empathy in its readers for those characters who are not direct reflections of them, thus creating further understanding of others. This introduces a value separate from empowerment, where readers must be exposed to representations of difference in order to learn empathy. And fourth, that YA fiction will help young adults to "become civilized," assumedly meaning become citizens that will help improve society. This is a statement that the "revolutionary" qualities of YA stem from an investment in encouraging and maintaining community-focused behaviors.

Within this definition, the value of YA fiction begins at empowerment, then moves to empathy, and ends in the process of civilization and belief in community outcomes. While YALSA's whitepaper places these three very close together in a way that makes them seem compatible, these are three very different concepts that require conflicting investments. These conflicts start to reveal themselves in the fact that YA fiction, while maybe said to be a genre that allowed all young adults to see themselves on the page, hasn't been doing that very well. While YALSA's definition

was powerful in reclaiming some of YA fiction's legitimacy as a literary genre, it also further revealed the fact that YA fiction books were, up to this point, largely homogenous in characters and plot. The ways in which YA fiction was groundbreaking from the 1960s through the early 2000s focused on the lives of white straight (etc.) people, meaning those with non-marginalized identities. In 2012 only 22% of YA fiction bestsellers focused on marginalized identities.¹⁷ Most of these books still had a white straight protagonist, and the "diverse" character was a side-plot, or the representation of marginalized characters relied on negative stereotypes. This disparity has been identified as a lack of "diversity" – which is a term that I will expand on later – and has now become the main problem and point of discussion in the YA fiction community.

It is important to note that these statistics on the lack of diversity mostly refer to realistic fiction YA novels. While science fiction and fantasy are a *huge* part of YA fiction, especially considering their role in the growth of the genre, discussions of diversity in fantasy become a much more complicated conversation about the coding of race, sexuality, and gender. For the sake of this exploration, I will be focusing on the diversity of representation only in realistic fiction novels, as the complexities of fantasy coding warrant a thesis of their own.

While discussions regarding lack of diversity have been happening across all forms of media, this issue feels especially important in YA fiction considering the qualities that YALSA's definition boasts. And YA fiction's prior existence as a genre

¹⁷ Lo, Malinda. "Diversity in 2012 Young Adult Bestsellers, Part 1: Overview – UPDATED." *Diversity in YA*, 18 Dec. 2013, www.diversityiny.com/2013/04/diversity-in-2012-young-adult-bestsellers-part-1-overview/.

that pushes social boundaries makes it seem like the perfect place to begin having representation for marginalized people. However, the transition of YA into a diversity-focused genre has been a minefield of controversies and fights. While the main focus of most discussions has been how the writing of diversity in YA fiction can be improved, many questions have been raised surrounding *who* should write diversity, *how* to write diversity, and *what* diversity even is. Over the past few years, the discussions have expanded from within the industry to the mass media, almost mimicking the embracement of YA that took place around 2008.

In this thesis, I am interested in exploring why writing diversity in YA fiction has caused so much controversy both within the genre and in larger mass media led conversations. I am fascinated with what “writing diversity in YA fiction” means – not necessarily what people in the YA fiction community say it means, but how it is manifested in actual YA fiction books. I wonder how the definition of this phrase relates to which books are currently being criticized and which are being celebrated, as well as which authors are receiving support. Ultimately, the diversity movement has been discussed as a new radical movement within YA fiction, but I wonder if the result of this shift will be something new or something recognizable.

CHAPTER ONE

The Language of Diversity

I. WE NEED DIVERSE BOOKS

In the early 2000s, discussions regarding YA fiction's lack of diversity primarily existed on Twitter and other social media sites. The main participators were women of color in the YA community, who were very vocal about their frustrations regarding the domination of white authors and characters. By the "YA community" I mean YA authors, reviewers, and readers who turn to social media and review sites such as Amazon and Goodreads to discuss their thoughts about the books. I am not including industry officials, such as publishers, editors, and agents, as their interests must be more focused on sales and publicity than representational content.

These efforts at enacting change first began to be organized in 2014, when YA author Ellen Oh founded the YA-fiction focused non-profit We Need Diverse Books (WNDB). WNDB describes themselves as a "grassroots organization of children's book lovers that advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people."¹⁸ The organization stemmed from a hashtag, #WeNeedDiverseBooks, that began trending on Twitter on April 29th, 2014.¹⁹ This beginning helped the campaign to quickly get lots of notice and become a household name in the movement for diversity in YA

¹⁸ "About WNDB." *We Need Diverse Books*, diversebooks.org/about-wndb/.

¹⁹ "FAQ." *We Need Diverse Books*, diversebooks.org/faq/.

fiction. While several diversity organizations have popped up since 2014, WNDB has remained the most well-known and discussed.

It is valuable to note that in choosing their name – We Need *Diverse* Books – the organization has aligned itself with the language of “diversity” despite the many problems that may come along with it. Diversity, outside the context of any mission for a greater amount of representation in media, is a term that means a variety of something. But diversity has come to be commonly used to refer to all marginalized identities. Using the word in a way that makes sense grammatically, YA fiction can have *diversity* of representation, but a character or author cannot be *diverse*. However, the term is now often used in this way, as an adjective that can describe a person or thing, meaning that there is some essential quality of being “diverse.” This is where the usage of the word can become especially troubling.

On their website, WNDB gives their definition of diversity and the diverse:

We recognize all diverse experiences, including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities.²⁰

The danger of “diversity” and “the diverse” being so normalized is that it places the non-“diverse” – meaning the non-marginalized identity groups of being white, straight, etc. – in the center of a circle, and then ostracizes everything else as something on the margins. It is a term that was created and used *by* someone in that dominant position, and so for it to become a part of YA fiction’s mission for a wider variety of representation does nothing to displace the people who already have power in the genre. WNDB was created by a woman of color and meant to center her

²⁰ “About WNDB.”

struggles as well as the struggles of those signified as “diverse,” but aligning itself with the language of diversity creates a weak spot in which their goals could easily be co-opted by the originators of the term.

In this thesis, I will use the terms “marginalized” and “non-marginalized” to refer to the identity status of authors and characters instead of engaging with the adjectival use of “diverse.” I will still use “diverse” and “non-diverse” when quoting or referring to the positions of pro-diversity groups or people who are using this language themselves, as I think it is valuable to look at who is using this language and when it is being deployed. Throughout the thesis I will always use the term “diversity” to describe the current movement, as that is the convention in the YA fiction community.

On their website, WNDB has also loosely defined what writing diversity in YA fiction means to them through their mission and vision statements:

OUR MISSION STATEMENT:

Putting more books featuring diverse characters into the hands of all children.

OUR VISION:

A world in which all children can see themselves in the pages of a book.²¹

Interestingly, there are many parallels between WNDB’s mission/vision and YALSA’s definition of YA fiction. Both state the value of all children learning about people different from themselves and all readers seeing themselves reflected in the pages of a book. These similarities could be considered a sign that WNDB’s mission shouldn’t be too difficult to complete, since YA fiction has always supposedly been about reflecting the experiences of all readers. However, there is a difference between saying that readers should be able to learn about the experiences of people unlike

²¹ Ibid.

them and how this is done on the page. The actual representation of diversity can vary largely based on who these books are being written for and who they are being written by.

Many proponents of writing diversity in YA fiction have tried to separate the representation of marginalized characters from who is writing them. WNDB briefly discusses how these two are inextricably linked in their FAQ, where they describe their origins:

In a Twitter exchange on April 17th, 2014, Ellen Oh and Malinda Lo [another YA author] expressed their frustration with the lack of diversity in kidlit. This wasn't a new conversation for Ellen or Malinda, just the latest, this time in response to the all-white, all-male panel of children's authors assembled for BookCon's May 31st reader event. In a series of tweets, Ellen started talking about taking action. Several other authors, bloggers, and industry folks piped up saying they would like to be involved as well.²²

This origin story voices frustrations related to the focus on white men in the writing and production of YA fiction novels, which is frustrating both in its replication of larger power structures and in its evasion of the role of women in YA. The story also suggests that the goal of WNDB, and perhaps the diversity movement in general, should be to establish a greater diversity in the identities of the authors who are writing YA. However, the resulting mission statement, or at least the part of the mission that was embraced by non-marginalized YA authors and the mass media, focused on the lack of diversity *in* the YA novels.

As *We Need Diverse Books* and other proponents of writing diversity in YA fiction communicated their grievances, the conversation quickly extended from social media to a noticeable change in how YA books were being written and marketed.

²² "FAQ." *We Need Diverse Books*, diversebooks.org/faq/.

According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), in 2014 the number of YA fiction novels with African-American characters nearly doubled from 2013 to 2014. However, these books mostly just extended all the previous problems regarding how marginalized characters were represented. For example, most of the books included in the CCBC's statistics didn't have an African-American *protagonist*:

We count a book as "about" if the main character/subject is a person of color, or if we are able to determine based on examining a book that a person of color features significantly in the narrative. So a novel in which the main character is white will be included if we are able to determine a secondary character of color is important in the story. We do not count a book if the principle character is white and there are a range of secondary characters, including characters of color, but none of the characters of color seem to play a significant role. This is, of course, somewhat subjective; we talk about the books that we can't easily discern. We do not want to misrepresent a book as having multicultural content; likewise, we make every effort not to miss those that do.²³

Also, many of the marginalized characters in these books were written in a way that relied on negative stereotypes and microaggressions. While there was an increase in the number of "diverse" YA novels, they were still almost all written by non-marginalized authors. When WNDB and other marginalized authors pointed out that this was not the change they were searching for, these non-marginalized authors responded to say the complaints were over-dramatic and that the novels weren't that harmful. This dismissal is an example of one of the many ways the diversity movement has continued to be centered on, or has been co-opted by, these non-marginalized authors.

²³ "Publishing Statistics on Children's Books about People of Color and First/Native Nations and by People of Color and First/Native Nations Authors and Illustrators." *Cooperative Children's Book Center*, ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp.

It is then important to note that WNDB has ended up in a very different place than where it began. While their original call to action acknowledged not just the whiteness of YA fiction books but the whiteness of those who write them, WNDB has become more broadly focused on the issue of getting a wider variety of representation in general, no matter who is writing it. The stance that WNDB might have originally intended to take on has instead been embraced by the other most well-known YA diversity campaign, called #ownvoices. #Ownvoices focuses on YA novels written by marginalized voices, and specifically novels where marginalized characters are written by an author who shares their identity.²⁴ I will elaborate on the positions of #ownvoices later in this thesis. However, it is valuable to note now that they do not engage with the language of diversity, instead using the terms of “marginalized” and “non-marginalized,” and I have chosen to be consistent with their language in my own analysis.

Meanwhile, WNDB’s name is used in many conversations about how non-marginalized authors can contribute to the diversity movement. On her Tumblr, Ellen Oh has answered many questions from people who say they are a white (or straight, or male, etc.) writer who wants to better learn how to write diversity. For example, in 2015 an author sent her this message:

Hi. I'm a straight cisgender white female writer [and] teacher. I want to be better aware of my privilege so I can write diverse characters and, more importantly, empower my marginalized students to write.

Ellen Oh responded:

I really appreciate your asking this question and talking about your awareness of the privilege you have. What a big and positive step you’ve taken just by doing that! It is, in some ways, one of the hardest things for people to do. I

²⁴ Duyvis, Corinne. “#Ownvoices.” *Corinne Duyvis*, www.corinneduyvis.net/ownvoices/.

went to the WNDB team to ask them for help answering your question because I want to give you as many resources as possible.²⁵

Here, Oh is responding kindly and graciously to the author's request for help. She is thanking them for trying, and then directing them to resources on how to write diversity. And while WNDB focusing on helping non-marginalized authors write diversity does not implicitly minimize their focus on increasing the number of authors with a marginalized identity, this has been the result. As the movement has continued to shift focus towards how non-marginalized authors can help, the complaints about the all-white all-male panel of authors has disappeared from view.

II. THE JOHN GREEN EFFECT

Many established YA fiction authors who came to the genre in its formative years are now trying to hold onto their power by embracing the diversity movement. These non-marginalized authors are vocal about the importance of diversity in YA fiction and state intentions similar to those of the female author who asked Ellen Oh for help. They weave themselves into the narrative of the diversity movement as allies while also insisting that their intentions should matter more than the content of their books. And as the mass media has caught on to the changes taking place in YA fiction, the focus has shifted not just to the white author, but the white male author.

A prime example of this kind of allied author is John Green, who published his first YA novel *Looking for Alaska* in 2006 and was awarded that year's Michael

²⁵ elloellenoh. "Anonymous asked: Hi. I'm a straight cisgender white female writer..." *Oscr*, 22 Feb 2015, <http://elloellenoh.tumblr.com/post/111779637409/hi-im-a-straight-cisgender-white-female-writer>

L. Printz award for the “best book written for teens, based entirely on its literary merit.”²⁶ He quickly became considered one of the foundational authors of YA fiction. This frustrated many female readers and authors, who felt he came into a primarily female written genre and then received the credit of “saving” it.²⁷ But Green has also experienced periods of intense criticism regarding his representation of issues and identities. In 2017, after a long break from writing, he published *Turtles all the Way Down*. This new book consisted of many calculated decisions made by Green to avoid the stylistic elements that have been attributed to him – romanticization of mental illness/cancer, manic pixie dream girls, and a lack of any non-straight non-white characters – while also closely aligning himself with We Need Diverse Books.

Turtles all the Way Down is told from the point of view of 16-year-old Aza Holmes, who is greatly struggling with her OCD. She has a cut on her hand that she continuously obsesses over possibly being infected, causing her to get stuck in a loop of re-breaking the wound, washing it out, and re-bandaging it. She also obsessively ruminates over the fact that an ecosystem of bacteria lives inside her body. Specifically, she is obsessed with the potential of contracting the bacterial infection *clostridium difficile*. Aza tries to distract herself by hanging out with her best friend, Daisy Ramirez, who is funny, loud, and semi-famous online for her Star Wars fanfiction. She also tries to not become too annoyed by her mother, who constantly worries and hovers over her. But those distractions aren’t too helpful, and Aza spends

²⁶ “The Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature.” *Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA)*, 28 Mar. 2014, www.ala.org/yalsa/printz.

²⁷ Phirephoenix. “On John Green, genre revolutionaries and sexism in lit...” *Fight Fire with Phire*, phirephoenix.tumblr.com/post/60379888908/on-john-green-genre-revolutionaries-and-sexism-in

most of her narrative caught in a spiraling existential crisis about what it means for her to be living inside a body that is full of bacteria.

The book's plot is kicked off by Daisy and Aza learning that a controversial billionaire CEO has fled his home, and a 100k reward is being offered for any information about his location. Daisy and Aza are both rather poor, and so Daisy insists that they need to track down some information and get the reward. Luckily, Aza knows the billionaire's son, Davis, from they went to "sad camp" together, which is a camp for children who have lost a parent. Aza and Daisy track down Davis to get to know him again and hopefully gain some information that could get them the reward.

There is no clear non-white non-straight representation in this book, assumedly because John Green wanted to avoid the potential criticism of him trying to write a non-white non-straight character and doing it badly. He did use fewer generic white names - the best friend was Daisy *Ramirez*, Aza's therapist's name was Dr. *Singh* – but ultimately race was not made a noticeable factor. Instead, he stuck to what he knew by making the identity issue of the novel OCD and clearly stating that this was based off of his *own* experiences with his *own* OCD. This is a smart choice, and likely what some #ownvoices authors would prefer Green do, as he is not preventing another marginalized voice from writing a story about their own experience.

But Green balanced this minimum-effort character representation with a very strong message about privilege, identity, and empathy. When Aza re-meets Davis, an immediate issue in their relationship is his wealth, and Davis's paranoia that he will

never be able to be anything but his money. Out of fear that Aza just wants to know him again in order to get information about his father and get the reward, he actually *gives* Aza and Daisy the 100k reward for them to *stop* looking for clues about his father. Here the ways in which wealth is an immense burden to Davis must be made clear in order to highlight the ways that Aza struggles with being poor. It is only by creating a mirroring between the two that Aza's lack of wealth acquires meaning, therefore not pushing Davis and his wealth out of the spotlight in the process.

The first half of *Turtles all the Way Down* is consumed by a romance between Aza and Davis. However, the romance is written rather dryly, and there is little character development that leads to them expressing romantic interest in each other. Rather than a realistic romance, it feels like Green fulfilling an equation of boy in a room plus girl in the same room equals instant romance! It could be that Green wrote the romance in this way in order to avoid a common criticism of his books, which is that all of his female characters become "manic pixie dream girls." The manic pixie dream girl is a female stereotype that was coined in a 2007 review of the movie

Elizabethtown:

The manic pixie dream girl exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures.²⁸

The term was very quickly applied to Green's debut *Looking for Alaska* as well as his third book *Paper Towns*. The accusations of *Paper Towns* once again relying on the manic pixie dream girl gained more attention than any of the previous criticisms

²⁸ Rabin, Nathan. "The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: Elizabethtown." *The AV Club*, 25 Jan. 2007, film.avclub.com/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-elizabet-1798210595.

lobbed against Green, and he responded to them in a rather irritated manner in a since-deleted post on his Tumblr:

Have the people who constantly accuse me of this stuff read my books? *Paper Towns* is devoted *in its entirety* to destroying the lie of the manic pixie dream girl; the novel ends with a young woman essentially saying ‘Do you really still live in this fantasy land where boys can save girls by being romantically interested in them?’ I do not know how I could have been less ambiguous about this without calling the novel *The Patriarchal Lie of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl Must Be Stabbed in the Heart and Killed*.²⁹

Green’s failure to subvert an issue by writing out said issue is a failure that many non-marginalized authors deal with when trying to write diversity. If a person is not intimately familiar with why a concept is bad from their own experience, they can then struggle to understand why subverting the concept by literally writing it out isn’t productive. This is not to say that it isn’t possible to tear down negative stereotypes through ‘twists’, but *Paper Towns* still spent far too long sitting with the image of a boy using a girl to save himself before it ever acknowledged that this boy was in the wrong. While Green has never sat well with this criticism, at least publicly, he has put a lot of thought into how to un-do the manic pixie dream girl trope. Most recently, he discussed his use of it in *Looking for Alaska* in a video published to one of his YouTube channels in 2013.³⁰ Then, in his next novel – 2012’s *The Fault in Our Stars* – Green switched to writing from the point-of-view of a teenage girl. This is a switch that took place with little comment from readers, and Green mentioned it only to say that it was a new challenge for him. But there is potential that Green made this switch

²⁹ Fishingboatproceeds. ““Anonymous asked: Hey John, I was just wondering what your explanation was...” *John Green’s Tumblr*, fishingboatproceeds.tumblr.com/post/57820644828/hey-john-i-was-just-wondering-what-your/.

³⁰ Green, John. "Is Alaska a Manic Pixie Dream Girl?: Swoodilypoopers Strike Back #20" *YouTube*, 15 May 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4r4S9iTje0s>.

in part to avoid the manic pixie dream girl – even though the plot of *The Fault in our Stars* still partially relies on a romance – by having female thoughts control the book's narrative.

It is meaningful that *Turtles all the Way Down* is the second book in which Green has written from the point of view of a girl, especially when he has branded this book as mirroring *his own experience*. The lack of comments regarding his original switch, and the fact that Green feels comfortable saying this, points to the ways in which writing across a gender line has never been made an issue of accurate representation in YA fiction. The majority of protagonists in YA fiction novels have always been female due to YA's origins as a genre with solely female authors and readers. However, at the same time that YA fiction was femininized and trivialized by the mass media in 2008, more male authors began to write YA fiction novels. While some of these authors wrote male protagonists, like John Green from 2005-2008, many of them wrote female protagonists in order to reel in the female readership.

Parallels could easily be drawn between the issues discussed by WNDB when looking for positive representation and the stereotypes used by male authors writing from the point of view of female characters. When reading *Turtles all the Way Down*, how does one know that Aza is a girl? It could be that the romance between her and Davis – which was rather dry and drops away from the plot halfway through the book – took place at the beginning of the story solely to establish Aza's female-ness. And while Green perhaps tried to escape the manic pixie dream girl trope by stepping away from the male point of view, it is still prevalent in his stories. Davis idolizes Aza as a girl who actually loves him for *him* instead of just for his money. But Davis

struggles to do the same for Aza, as he cannot understand why she struggles to kiss him and is confused by her obsession with bacteria. Unable to see Aza as more than her OCD, Davis is not exactly dumped by Aza, but floats out of her narrative as Green re-orientes the plot to an empathy story between Aza and Daisy.

John Green cannot completely escape the manic pixie dream girl because it is how *the male mind imagines the female experience*. He inadvertently stereotypes his female characters because there is a part of the female experience he will never be able to replicate simply because he is not female. When asked in an interview about writing from the point of view of a girl for the second time, Green commented again on how it is always a challenge:

Any character is a sort of jump in empathy. Any time you're writing from the perspective of a fictional character, you're imagining what it's like to be not you. And that's one of the things I love about writing fiction is that it feels like an escape from my brain which can sometimes feel like not that fun of a place to hang out. I hope [Aza] seems real to people.³¹

In this response, Green first brings up *empathy*, that emotional skill which, according to YALSA and WNDB, is essential to YA fiction and the writing of diversity. Green himself is using the empathy he's gathered from other representations of women or encounters he's had with women in his life to write Aza. But he is also not acknowledging the fact that he has come to empathize with women through certain stereotypes that are integral to his position as a male.

This is not to say that a male author should never write a female character. But Green struggles to escape the manic pixie dream girl even more so because, at the end

³¹ McCluskey, Megan. "John Green on Mental Illness and Writing a Book That Mirrors His Own Life." *Time*, 12 Oct. 2017, time.com/4976944/john-green-turtles-all-the-way-down-mental-illness/.

of the day, he cannot let the heterosexual romance go. Despite Green saying that he “wanted to write about all the different kinds of love that can sustain and support you,”³² and despite the presence of Aza and Daisy’s friendship, Davis returns to the story in the eleventh hour. He comes over to Aza’s house to tell her that the police found his dad’s dead body, which means both his parents are now truly gone. They lie on the grass and look up at the stars, like they often did when they were romancing each other. And Aza’s narrative then attributes a majority of her development to the fact that she *loved Davis*:

I thought, lying there, that I might love him for the rest of my life. We did love each other – maybe we never said it, and maybe love was never something we were in, but it was something I felt. I loved him, I thought, maybe I will never see him again, and I’ll be stuck missing him, and isn’t that so terrible. [...] You remember your first love because they show you, prove to you, that you can love and be loved, that nothing in this world is deserved except for love, that love is both how you become a person, and why.³³

This ending is irritating because Aza’s empowerment is portrayed as relying on a key contribution of Davis seeing and understanding her, when the “love” Davis showed her never included empowering Aza for her OCD, but questioning why she couldn’t act like a “normal person.” Saying that love is why you become a person seems self-sacrificial in this context, as Aza sacrifices her agency over herself and her growth to Davis’s love and her love of him.

Green makes a second attempt at empathy in the second half of the book, when the plot shifts from the romance to a conflict between Aza and Daisy. Aza, for the first time, reads some of Daisy’s Star Wars fanfiction, and discovers that Daisy has been writing a character with OCD who is essentially Aza. Daisy’s fanfiction

³² Ibid.

³³ Green, John. *Turtles all the Way Down*. Penguin, 2017, 284-285.

version of Aza is portrayed as self-centered, selfish, and unable to care about anyone but herself. Aza confronts Daisy about her stories and Daisy responds that Aza *is* like that, as her OCD causes her to be consumed by her own problems. Daisy points out that she is much poorer than Aza, but Aza has never once considered how this affects Daisy's life. Daisy and Aza are then stuck in an impasse due to their inability to understand each other's circumstances.

This theme of whether Davis is his wealth, Daisy her lack of wealth, and Aza her OCD expands into Aza questioning whether or not a person is just their circumstances. Eventually, Aza decides that this is *not* the case, that we are *not* just our circumstances, but all just people. This is reinforced by Aza and Daisy resolving their issues through learning about each other's circumstances and coming to understand them. This plot line of literal negative representation in writing by Daisy and the eventual growth of empathy between Aza and Daisy is so overtly described that at points it felt like Green was shouting "We Need Diverse Books!" from the rooftops.

Turtles all the Way Down was John Green's way of being involved in the diversity movement without writing diversity. It was a smart decision, as he likely would have written diversity in a way that mimicked his encounters with the manic pixie dream girl trope. Now, whenever readers critique his representation of OCD, he has a ready-to-go response that Aza's experience with OCD is simply a reflection of his own. But *Turtles all the Way Down* has been embraced by many reviewers as an #ownvoices story and used as a specific example for the hashtag. While it is true that Green is writing from his own experience, and this allows him to write in a way that

prevents him from having to tackle writing diversity, this is very different from declaring a book to be part of the #ownvoices mission. While John Green has certainly come under fire for his mis-steps in the past, he is still John Green, a God of YA Fiction, and he does not need the support of #ownvoices to succeed. His book being used as an example of an #ownvoices story pushes books representing more marginalized experiences out of that spotlight. But Green will continue to receive more credit for his actions than many authors of color, because his support of the We Need Diverse Books movement allows for white authors to remain essential parts of the movement.

This is the John Green Effect: he has become a white face of writing diversity in YA fiction, and led the way for other white authors to remain relevant in this way. In January 2017, WNDB re-vamped their website, and under their mission/vision statements now feature three campaign videos. Two are interviews with children about why they desire to be reflected in the books they read. The third, eponymously titled “We Need Diverse Books,” features John Green as he describes why it is that we need diverse books. He begins:

I think we need diverse books because we need to reflect the reality of our communities and that reality is a very diverse one. But also, while it's important to see yourself in stories--and I think lots of people don't see themselves in enough stories--it's also really important to see the other, like one of the magical things about reading to me is that it helps me to imagine the life outside of myself, right, like it helps me to imagine other people complexly. And when you don't see the lives of others in stories it's difficult to imagine them complexly and I think that contributes to the essentializing of the Other. So, I really think it's vital that we have diversity in our literature.³⁴

³⁴ We Need Diverse Books. "John Green: Why We Need Diverse Books." *YouTube*, 27 Oct 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBMYa-dJWm8>.

The choice of John Green as the face of this video is interesting in terms of who the supposed audience is, or who WNDB wants to avoid making feel threatened. Many white authors and readers are surely comforted by the face of Green – a familiar voice who speaks with speedy eloquence. He recites a version of WNDB’s mission/vision statements, beginning with the importance of empowerment and the need for more people to see themselves reflected in YA fiction novels. He then speaks about how diversity in books helps him learn empathy, which in this case is the process of imagining “other people complexly” and avoiding the “essentializing of the Other.” And yet his summary fails to address how imagining people complexly can avoid the essentializing of the other – meaning the reduction of a person to just one quality – when the “diversity” movement relies on a term that lumps all marginalized identities into a group that is simply *other*, and he himself has not actually written diversity in YA fiction but simply avoided the use of negative stereotypes by not writing diversity at all.

This John Green effect continues to lift non-marginalized authors up while pushing down marginalized authors for discussing how they feel about stories that represent their own experiences. The heroes of the diversity movement are non-marginalized authors who relied on the expertise and guidance of marginalized authors to maintain their status. And now, a reader’s first introduction to the diversity movement in YA fiction might be John Green.

III. WRITING DIVERSITY IN YA FICTION

The John Green effect has not only worked in favor of authors who avoid writing diversity, as those who want to learn how to do it have many resources available to them. Most of these resources are shared through We Need Diverse Books or social media posts by authors affiliated with the organization. In a Tumblr post sharing some of these resources, WNDB founder Ellen Oh wrote:

I am the type of person that thinks you should write what you want BUT write it well, write it respectfully, and do a lot of good research. If your intent is to shortcut this process, then yes, I would prefer you don't write about marginalized cultures. The key here is to do it right.³⁵

In this post Oh has named the most meaningful and yet ill-defined rules for writing diversity in YA fiction – meaning the writing of diversity *by non-marginalized authors*. First, they must “do a lot of good research.” It is easy to understand what “research” means in theory – a systematic investigation to establish facts – and difficult to know what it means in actuality. In this case, what is research? The answer is never clearly established by Oh or anyone else. Theoretically, a non-marginalized author should be able to correctly write a representation of a marginalized character after studying what their life is like. Already one could be concerned that advocating for research is loaded with the belief in an authentic truth of an identity. For non-marginalized authors, this means they can believe that through researching what it is like to live with a certain identity they can discern some essential quality of that experience that allows them to write the representation *correctly*.

³⁵ elloellenoh. “lizbrignac asked: Re: Dear White Writers – I agree that white people...” *Ello's World*, <http://elloellenoh.tumblr.com/post/158050896054/re-dear-white-writers-i-agree-that-white/>.

And again, one could ask what it means to write diversity “correctly,” as the second rule (“the key here is to do it right”) is equally vague. Assumedly this means that, beyond whatever is discovered through research, there are several qualities that a good representation of a marginalized character should have. Luckily, WNDB shares links to many guides for non-marginalized authors on how to write diversity correctly that elaborate on what these qualities are. While there are many to choose from on their website, I read through every section of the most comprehensive guide I could find in October 2017, which was a guide on how to write characters of color.³⁶ This guide is not one cohesive article, but rather a curation of articles that have been written for a blog called “Writing with Color.” The articles have been organized into categories, such as “The Generals,” “Character Creation,” and “Racism and Microaggressions.” This guide is also not YA-specific, and focuses specifically on white authors writing other races/ethnicities, but specifies that these rules extend to all marginalized communities. For this reason, when summarizing the guide’s rules I will stick to its terminology of “white authors” and “diverse characters” while also displaying how the guide expands on the logic of Oh’s main point – “the key here is to do it right.”

The “Writing with Color” guide first restates Oh’s assessment that white authors should only write diversity if they plan to do the proper research. This is the first and ultimate pathway to success. The alternative would be a white author writing a diverse character “naturally”, meaning based on the knowledge they already have

³⁶ writingwithcolor. “A collection of WWC posts that deal with more general writing advice...” *Writing With Color*, writingwithcolor.tumblr.com/post/157661768101/writing-with-color-general-topics-a-collection/.

about a person with that identity.³⁷ This could result in the character's diversity only being signified through some one-off mention of skin color or sexuality. For example, it could be said that John Green naturally wrote from the point of view of a girl, and he ended up signifying Aza's femaleness through her attraction to Davis. The guide refers to this as normalizing diverse characters.³⁸ Normalization is a process through which diverse characters are integrated into the white experience. This could result in two things: Either the character is a carbon copy of the negative stereotype for how a white person sees someone with that identity, or the character's diversity does not affect their experience at all and is easily forgettable.

The solution to this is for white authors to do their research in order to learn about how a diverse character would experience life. However, even if a white author does their research, there is still a chance that they could end up writing one of the examples of bad representation listed above. In attempting to discern the essential quality that signifies a character as "diverse," a white author might choose the factor that's easiest for them to understand – the diverse character's suffering. And if an author writes about the character's diversity only in relation to their oppression, this again limits the character to being nothing more than a manifestation of how the white author understands them from their white perspective.

However, the process of *separating* a diverse character from their oppression could also cause a white author to normalize them. This happens because, once

³⁷ writingwithcolor. "Anonymous asked: I don't overthink when I'm writing a poc in my story..." *Writing With Color*, writingwithcolor.tumblr.com/post/102545220574/i-dont-overthink-when-im-writing-a-poc-in-my/.

³⁸ writingwithcolor. "peachy-keen-glam-queen asked: I'm currently writing a novel..." *Writing With Color*, writingwithcolor.tumblr.com/post/95575207666/im-currently-writing-a-novel-in-which-the-main/.

separated from their oppression, all that remains in the white author's mind is a list of qualities that they must check off to mark the character as diverse. In doing this, the white author does not give the character as rich a background as they would to a white character, which again ends up rendering the diverse character as a flat plot object. The key here is that diverse characters are just people, with as complex and interesting of lives as any white character, *but* if a diverse character is completely separated from their identity they can become a white character and the diversity is lost. The guide is acknowledging how thin of a line separates the ability to uncover an essential quality through research from essentialization. In this case, which side the white author lands on depends on whether they properly complete the research process.

This approach of stressing *research* as a tool that can allow the white author to understand and tell the story of the other is similar to the use of ethnography in sociology. Ethnography is a method of researching a group's cultures and practices by the researcher immersing themselves in said culture and becoming "one of the group." By taking up their point of view, the researcher will be able to paint a more complete and *true* picture of what the studied group is like. Ethnography's belief in the possibility of coming to know the experiences of the other has been heavily critiqued, and through its many similarities the role of research in YA fiction has opened itself up to similar critiques.

The push and pull of ethnography can be demonstrated by sociologist Loic Wacquant, who did an in-depth ethnography about the lives of boxers. Wacquant, who is a white man, spent three years training at an all-black gym in the south side of

Chicago. He had never boxed before joining the gym and hadn't expected to be so drawn in by the pugilistic world. Regarding the challenge of coming in as an outsider, Wacquant wrote that he wanted to try to "renounce the facile recourse to the prefabricated exoticism of the public and publicized side of the institution [of boxing]"³⁹ meaning he wanted to avoid the essentializing and exoticizing that tends to take place when studying a group of people. However, Wacquant believes that he was able to avoid inhabiting the "'gaze from afar' of an outside observer standing at a distance from or above the specific universe,"⁴⁰ by putting in the proper work to surrender himself completely to the environment. This sounds very similar to the concept of a non-marginalized author doing the proper research before writing diversity. Wacquant is acknowledging the problematic of ethnography as a study of a culture or group that is objectified as "other" by the eyes of the ethnographer. However, like many invested in diversity in YA fiction, he still believes that he can escape this power dynamic if he puts in enough work and forms close enough relationships with the people he is studying.

Wacquant cites the concept of total "surrender" in ethnography as "total involvement [in which] a person's received notions are suspended, everything is pertinent, [which implies] identification [and] the risk of being hurt."⁴¹ For Wacquant, this is the way in which he can escape his positionality as white man researching black boxers. This is again an amusing move in which he has solved the problem of the "gaze from afar" by suggesting that if the ethnographer gets close enough they

³⁹ "Prologue." *Body and Soul*, by Loic Wacquant, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 3–11, 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

will cease to be different. However, this ignores the fact that a difference has been created by the designation of the term “ethnographer” compared to those being studied. This is the same issue caused by the language of diversity in YA fiction, as labeling the “diverse” as a group of people that can be studied and known already complicates the process of representing them. The term “diversity” places the “diverse” in the subject position of an object that can be studied, and this holds up a power dynamic of the researcher, or ethnographer, seeing the object of their study through their own privilege and making interpretations in reference to a world in which their experience is centered. And while the goal of ethnography is to shed this bias, it is rather impossible to do so.

But Wacquant also believes that he wouldn't have been able to gain the trust of the boxers if he “had joined the gym with the explicit and avowed aim of studying it, for that very intention would have irrevocably modified [his] status and role within the social and symbolic system under consideration.”⁴² To Wacquant, his original intention – which involved no ethnographic goals – allowed him to shed his bias. He writes that the goals of his work are to “erase the traces of the work of sociological construction [...] while preserving the insights and results of that work,” as well as to “enable the reader to better grasp pugilistic things ‘in concrete, as they are.’”⁴³ This not only suggests that he can transcend the issues of his positionality but reveals an investment in Wacquant uncovering an essential truth about the authentic boxer's experience. This investment is troubling because it suggests that an entire experience

⁴² Ibid., 9.

⁴³ Ibid., 8.

can be boiled down to a single factor that then, in the case of YA fiction, can be harnessed in the researcher's writing.

This is not only essentializing but requires the other's experience to be understood in relation to the experiences of the researcher, or those in power. And those in power desire to define the existence of the other mostly to bolster their understanding of themselves – it is a reflexive process. Even if a researcher tries their hardest to shed their point of view, the process of ethnography serves to bolster those with non-marginalized identities. Wacquant's attempts to defend his own ethnographic process despite his criticisms of ethnography displays just how alluring the approach is to those in power. A similar defense has taken hold of YA fiction: John Green warns against the essentializing of the other, and yet research is the answer to the diversity deficit. And no one is addressing the fact that wanting marginalized people to see reflections of themselves in YA fiction and wanting non-marginalized people to be able to construct these images are two very different desires.

Ultimately, the best way to understand what is meant by research in YA fiction is to look at the result and study which books have been praised as successful examples of the research method. One such book is *Symptoms of Being Human* by Jeff Garvin, which was published in 2016. The book follows Riley, who is genderfluid, as they transfer to a new high school. Riley used to attend a Catholic school, where they experienced intense gender dysphoria in the mandated uniform. Riley also felt a lot of pressure to fit in due to their father being a republican congressman. While dressing up for a press conference Riley had a panic attack, after

which their parents checked them into the hospital for a month and then allowed them to transfer schools.

At Park Hills High School, Riley has decided to now always dress in a gender-neutral manner in order to fit in and go easy on their gender dysphoria. On their first day, Riley is taunted and teased by several students. Their home life is also tense, and so they take their therapist's advice of starting a blog where they can anonymously talk about their feelings and frustrations. After Riley's first couple posts their blog goes viral. Soon they start receiving lots of messages from readers, including ones from someone who knows that the blog belongs to Riley and threatens to reveal their gender fluid identity to the entire school.

At the end of the book is a long author's note from Garvin in which he explains his motivations for writing *Symptoms of Being Human*, as well as the research process that went into it. Garvin was inspired by a news story he read about a transgender girl who was suing her high school for the right to use the girl's bathroom. When he told his friends about the story, they mocked the girl and said she was "probably just a pervy boy trying to see some boobs."⁴⁴ He was horrified by this reaction and enchanted with the girl's bravery, and kept wondering what he would do if he was in her situation. He ultimately did not try to write this exact girl's story, and instead started writing the book without knowing the gender of his protagonist:

But then something unexpected happened. I got to know Riley not as a 'boy' character or a 'girl' character or a 'transgender' character, but as a human being – and I knew that this was the experience I wanted my readers to have, too. [...] I had serious doubts, though [...] about my ability to authentically write a character who was struggling with gender identity. Still, the compulsion to write this story was overwhelming.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Garvin, Jeff. *Symptoms of Being Human*. Balzer & Bray, 2016, 333.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 334.

This quote reveals a lot about Garvin's use of the research process. He spent over a year researching the lives of gender fluid teens, talking to them about how they are treated at home and at school. While doing this research he discovered that 12% of transgender and nonbinary people in the US experience sexual violence before they graduate high school.⁴⁶ All this to say that, by committing himself to this research and to the prospect of finding the authentic experience of the gender fluid identity, Garvin did the research process "correctly." But there is something haunting about Garvin's inspiration coming from his friend's cruel teasing of a trans girl. He does not reveal what his response to his friend was. Perhaps he was also unsure whether the girl's identity was valid, and this was his way of learning, in which case he already came into the research process with certain biases. If he wasn't unsure, he didn't address how he responded to his friend's comment, perhaps implying that this book is his way of proving his friend wrong. But while Garvin's desire to see Riley not as their gender identity but as a "human being" could seem like a radical approach to writing diversity, it wrecks suspicion of wanting to stress a *universal human experience* in the face of Riley's difference. In other words, Garvin pushes aside the specificities and hardships of Riley's identity to return to the largest and potentially most homogenous identity category of them all: "human."

This can first be seen by Garvin's use of the plotline of a character's anonymous blog being revealed as theirs to the whole school. This is an incredibly common plot structure used in many YA novels about a form of diversity that is not outwardly visible. This structure is perhaps so popular because its me-against-the-

⁴⁶ Ibid., 335.

world dynamic forces the entire student body to reckon with the protagonist's otherness and, ultimately, come to accept them. However, this set up also relies on ripping all control away from the marginalized protagonist and subjecting them to a large amount of bad treatment until someone steps forward and saves them. Therefore, the plot structure is less about the protagonist coming to accept themselves than the rest of the world coming to accept them at the cost of their privacy and control over their identity.

The plot of *Symptoms of Being Human* follows this structure exactly. Jeff Garvin sets up the final resolution of differences by drawing many parallels between Riley and other characters along the way. First, he shows Riley struggling with the very thing they find so frustrating in others: the boy-girl categorization. After Riley almost asks someone else whether they are a boy or a girl and realizes their hypocrisy, they write on their blog, "I can't blame you for trying to categorize me. It's a human instinct."⁴⁷ This creates a way in which Riley empathizes with the very people who disempower them, better allowing for their reconciliation at the end.

Second, Garvin creates a parallel between Riley and a character named Solo. Riley meets Solo on their first day and likes that he doesn't ask them whether they are a boy or a girl. They joke around together during first period, but at lunch Riley realizes that Solo is a football player and is friends with the boys who had taunted them earlier that day. When Riley confronts Solo about him being friends with these football players, he tells Riley that, as a fat black boy, he had to fight to get the football players to accept him. He says that Riley walks around the school like they're

⁴⁷ Ibid., 58.

“better than everyone else. [Like they’re] surrounded by a bunch of shallow, bigoted assholes.”⁴⁸ Riley shoots back that they *are* surrounded by a bunch of shallow, bigoted assholes, and Solo maintains that by assuming everyone is going to be bigoted, Riley makes it true. “You maybe invited it,” Solo says.⁴⁹ “I’m not going to let them stop me from doing what I want. And neither should you.”⁵⁰ Riley spends most of the book thrown off by Solo’s statements and pondering whether they’re being too self-centered in their belief that there are forces of bigotry they cannot overcome.

Third, Garvin creates a mirroring between Riley’s experience and the experiences of all people. This can best be seen through the title: *Symptoms of Being Human*. This phrase comes from a discussion that Riley has with their therapist, Doctor Ann. Riley asks her how they can possibly deal with all of the feelings, distress, and anxiety that come from their gender dysphoria. Doctor Ann reassures Riley that “wondering if it’s okay to be who you are – that’s not a symptom of mental illness. That’s a symptom of being a person.”⁵¹ This moment is a bit alarming because Doctor Ann goes from discussing gender fluidity to mental illness in one sentence, and whether she’s attributing Riley’s gender dysphoria to mental illness instead of gender fluidity is unclear. But that aside, by being told that their issues are simply “symptoms of being human,” Riley decides they shouldn’t feel too concerned about their struggles because all humans struggle with whether it’s okay for them to be who they are. Like Solo’s comment, this downplays Riley’s experience as an over-

⁴⁸ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 91.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 95.

⁵¹ Ibid., 110.

dramatization of what every white straight kid in their high school is also going through. To lessen Riley's "over-dramatization," Doctor Ann suggests they stop thinking about themselves so much and start thinking about other people. This portrays Riley's distress over how they are treated at school as a self-centered line of thought. By going back out into the world and empathizing with others, perhaps even those who bullied them, Riley can help them to empathize with Riley in return.

Despite their attempts to keep their anonymity online, Riley is outed during one of their father's press conferences. Right after this, they are sexually assaulted by two boys. The assault takes place less than 50 pages before the book's end, leaving Riley to then deal not just with their family's anger at their identity, but with their new-found identity of being a victim. This is the point at which *Symptoms of Being Human* started to feel like it was failing to deal with the issues that it had begun with – Riley's confidence in their identity – and instead was throwing more and more pain onto Riley. It is Solo who saves Riley from the assault, and at the hospital he says:

I'm sorry for what I said. [When] I told you that – that you *invited* it. [...] That you were asking for a fight, inviting people to.... I want you to know...that's bullshit. And it was not okay to say that.⁵²

This moment between Riley and Solo is written sweetly, but the way that Riley immediately forgives Solo is unsettling. It also remains unclear why Solo changed his mind, other than perhaps understanding through Riley's assault that Riley's gender fluidity was as big a deal as his weight and race. The lack of discussion between Riley and Solo as to why he initially said that Riley was inviting bad treatment turns

⁵² Ibid., 273.

Riley into a teaching moment for Solo and other readers while simultaneously silencing Riley's thoughts about the situation.

While Garvin may have wanted to champion the bravery of people like Riley in *Symptoms of Being Human*, he did little to empower them within his text. The most resounding message from the book is Garvin's statement that he wanted the readers to get to know Riley "as a human being." While it is true that Riley is human, this phrase can be used as a way to lessen the legitimacy of Riley's struggles and collapse the difference between them and everyone else. It ultimately champions the importance of a universal human experience over the power dynamics that have caused people like Riley to be marginalized.

Symptoms of Being Human has been praised for being "a moving portrayal of what it means to be different, yet the same, all at once."⁵³ Similar to the book's labeling of Riley's experiences as human experiences, this quote embodies a problem with liberal empathetic politics in which difference is not understood as different but transformed into a sameness that serves only those who already hold power. Meanwhile, this book and many others like it fly under the radar as examples of positive representation for diversity because they contain lots of researched facts and an empathetic message.

This is a problem that the "Writing with Color" guide runs into once they have espoused the value of research/ethnography. The guide then tries to backtrack from the virtues of research by saying that, "this method is a bit coddling, though, for folks *should* be able to see People of Color as people enough as opposed to just their race,

⁵³ Ibid, back cover.

and write them without sweating buckets.”⁵⁴ The guide wants to eschew research as a magical learning tool and establish that there is some aspect of diversity that white authors should be able to write naturally – even though writing diversity naturally is bad – because *diversity is reality*. The result of wanting to encourage research but discourage disempowering texts is to say that there is both an overarching reality that is the same for everyone and a reality belonging to diverse characters that white authors’ privilege can prevent them from fully understanding.

However, instead of pointing out this contradiction, the guide states that a white author’s failure to integrate these two realities is because of an empathy gap.⁵⁵ This empathy gap is, ultimately, the root cause of the lack of diversity in writing. The *purpose* of white authors writing diversity should be empathy, a desire to close the gap between realities with the hope that white readers will walk away from these books with a complete understanding of these diverse characters’ experiences. And fundamental to this purpose is the belief that while diverse characters experience a different reality than white authors, it *is* possible for a white author to come to truly understand that reality. This is in line with Wacquant’s opinion that, while ethnography can be essentializing, it is possible for the researcher to circumvent this problematic if they just get *close enough*. Thus, the diversity movement in YA fiction has aligned itself with the same issues that plague ethnography and the systematic study of otherness.

⁵⁴ writingwithcolor. “ya-lady-tauriel asked: I was wondering if this is a good way to write a POC...” *Writing With Color*, writingwithcolor.tumblr.com/post/152567985564/i-was-wondering-if-this-is-a-good-way-to-write-a

⁵⁵ writingwithcolor. “On White Fear & Creating Diverse Transformative Works...” *Writing With Color*, writingwithcolor.tumblr.com/post/155221286373/saathi1013-on-white-fear-creating-diverse/.

The flawed nature of teaching white authors to write diversity correctly shines through most heavily in YA fiction's obsession with the "problem novel." The problem novel, defined more generally outside of YA fiction as a social novel, is a "work of fiction in which a prevailing social problem, such as gender, race, or class prejudice, is dramatized through its effect on the characters of a novel."⁵⁶ The problem novel is very popular in YA fiction because it is an ideal way to teach a lesson about how to treat others, namely, *the* other. Problem novels are almost never written by authors who share the identity of the protagonist, because these novels are less about the experience of the identity in question and more about normalizing it for readers who do not share that identity.

The "Writing with Color" guide addresses this fixation: "It's worth noting here that writing about characters of color doesn't need to involve - and in fact, some advice recommends *avoiding* - telling Special Stories About Racism."⁵⁷ This is the problem novel in the context of race, where "characters of color are almost always just object lessons for racist people, which is dehumanizing and unnecessary."⁵⁸ The problem novel also inadvertently becomes a perfect example of how to close the empathy gap, as the exposition of the suffering caused by a diverse identity leads to other characters in the novel, or the reader, empathizing with them. However, in the process of absolving the differences between the white and diverse characters, empathy also *dehumanizes* the diverse character by making them rely on the white character's understanding to be seen as a real person. If empathy causes harm to the

⁵⁶ "Social Problem Novel." *Britannica.com*. Encyclopedia Britannica.

⁵⁷ writingwithcolor. "On White Fear & Creating Diverse Transformative Works..."

⁵⁸ *Ibid*.

diverse character, then it must be that *empowerment* would be the opposite of this: a diverse character learning their value without needing the understanding and acceptance of a white character. And if this is the case, then empowerment stories are inherently contradictory to empathy stories.

The two goals for writing diversity in YA fiction are then working against each other. This contradiction is partially revealed through WNDB's focus on not just empowering diverse teens but "putting more books featuring diverse characters into the hands of *all* children." This insinuates that there is a mutually beneficial value in non-diverse teens reading books with representations of diversity. And while this could be the case, it is unlikely if the books are written by non-marginalized authors who intend to focus on teaching empathy instead of empowerment. The contradiction is more clearly undone in YALSA's whitepaper:

Another value of young adult literature is its capacity for fostering understanding, empathy, and compassion by offering vividly realized portraits of the lives – exterior and interior – of individuals who are *unlike* the reader. In this way young adult literature invites its readership to embrace the humanity it shares with those who – if not for the encounter in reading – might forever remain strangers or – worse — irredeemably 'other.'⁵⁹

This excerpt explains that YA fiction helps integrate the "other" by empowering them to feel a part of the same community as the majority. However, the majority must also be taught to understand the other as something different. The "other" both doesn't exist and must be acknowledged.

This tension between empathy and empowerment is once again acknowledged, albeit indirectly, at the end of the "Writing with Color" guide:

Technically, you can write whatever you want. But the fact you're reading this tells me you give a damn about the people you're writing about. Empathy; I

⁵⁹ "The Value of Young Adult Literature."

like that. With how limited representation is in the first place, marginalized people need non-stereotyped, positive representation first and foremost, but a variety of representation ultimately.⁶⁰

This request for positive representation first and a variety of representation ultimately should not be impossible. But the wide support given to non-marginalized authors writing diversity in favor marginalized authors suggests that the industry is going for a variety of representation first and positive representation ultimately.

The danger of instability caused by the empathy-empowerment dynamic becomes even more urgent when placed in the context of YA fiction, because, as YALSA wrote, YA is very invested in telling “young adults the truth about the world.” YA fiction was built on an assumption of representing the universal human experience, meaning teaching truths that will resonate equally for all readers. Therefore, research must lead to authentic representation, and the empathy gap must be closeable. Because if there is no universal human experience to teach to, no one true reality that we can all come to understand through research, then what is there?

⁶⁰ writingwithcolor. “Stereotyped vs Nuanced Characters and Audience Perception...” *Writing With Color*, writingwithcolor.tumblr.com/post/155450813377/stereotyped-vs-nuanced-characters-and-audience/.

CHAPTER TWO

The Empathy Gap

I. EMPATHY / PITY

It could be alarming to think of empathy as a harmful force when it is rather unanimously thought of as an emotional skill that prevents discrimination and lessens prejudice. But in examining the requirements for empathy and its effects, it is possible that this assumption will unravel. The definition of empathy is “the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.”⁶¹ *Understanding* the feelings of another is a process that could involve physical and emotional distance, as a one could come to understand the feelings of another without having to play any role in their life. But the next addition – to *share* the feelings of another – indicates that a person is experiencing a closeness to another’s circumstances that allows them to literally feel the same feelings.

It could be assumed that in the ideal empathetic scenario a person with empathy develops an understanding of another’s feelings, gives them kindness and support, and then steps back and lets them live their life. But this would be solely an assumption, as the definition of empathy does not elaborate on what effects or actions might stem from an empathizer’s compassion. For example, Jeff Garvin would surely say that the reason Solo saved Riley while others stood by was because Solo had developed empathy for Riley. But having empathy for Riley was also what led Doctor Ann to minimize Riley’s struggles and encourage them to pay more attention to other

⁶¹ “Empathy.” *oxforddictionaries.com*. English Oxford Dictionaries.

people. Additionally, Garvin developing empathy for Riley is what led him to write their assault. There is something else happening here, something that currently remains unmentioned in the common conception of empathy as a force for good.

In exploring this issue, it is helpful to use a framework set forth by Nietzsche in his critique of pity. Nietzsche's criticism is explained by Michael Ure in "The Irony of Pity: Nietzsche Contra Schopenhauer and Rousseau."⁶² Ure begins by stating:

It has almost become an unwritten law among those who defend Nietzschean ideals of self-cultivation to skirt the issue of his critique of pity, dismissing it as an extraneous diatribe or an embarrassing fulmination.⁶³

Even those who support Nietzsche struggle to support his critique of pity, because pity is connected to *compassion* and valuable connections between people. Unable to endorse the critique of an emotional skill, they often label it as a mistake or a misguided rant that was out of character for Nietzsche. At this point in the thesis, I could imagine a reader thinking similar thoughts about my arguments. However, I do not want anyone to shy away from the idea of critiquing empathy just because it has been celebrated as a hallmark of kind behavior. It is imperative to study the *impacts* of these kind behaviors in order to ultimately characterize whether they are as kind as they are thought to be.

In this thesis, I am looking at the empathy described both by YALSA and WNDB, which is said to allow for an understanding of others or overcoming of differences. Also integral to this empathy is its ability to help young adults "become

⁶² Ure, Michael. "The Irony of Pity: Nietzsche Contra Schopenhauer and Rousseau." *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 32, 2006, pp. 68–91.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 68.

civilized.” This phrasing is so important because it indicates that the non-marginalized authors who embrace this empathy have a great investment in what they consider to be civilized behavior. As this empathy is further unraveled, I encourage readers to stay open to the possibilities of empathy being used in a way that is not actually about helping others, just as pity could be thought of as not always a selfless act.

Pity is defined as “the feeling of sorrow and compassion caused by the suffering and misfortunes of others.”⁶⁴ Ure explains that Schopenhauer believes pity is a solution to the anti-social dangers of self-interest. Schopenhauer fears that egotistical self-interest might prevent people from ever caring for or interacting with each other. This sounds similar to YALSA’s fear that if readers do not encounter representations of those different from them in books, they might “forever remain strangers or – worse — irredeemably ‘other.’”⁶⁵ This statement is rather incredible, because the vibrant language clearly reveals YALSA’s anxieties. First, to be other is not just to be different but to be *irredeemably* different, meaning unsolvable, unimprovable, uncorrectable. Second, the difference of the other is irredeemable not just because they are different, but because this difference will cause them to never forge a relationship with the normative reader. Schopenhauer’s solution to this disastrous scenario is that pity will instead drive people to live for others instead of for themselves. However, we can only transcend our egotistical self-interest and gain the ability to feel pity by eradicating the differences between us.

⁶⁴ “Pity.” *oxforddictionaries.com*. English Oxford Dictionaries.

⁶⁵ “The Value of Young Adult Literature.”

Schopenhauer's plea for the eradication of difference sounds similar to the reasoning that an empathy gap is preventing non-marginalized authors from writing diversity correctly. If it is the case that non-marginalized authors can come to understand how the reality of a marginalized person is inherently different from theirs through *empathy*, then empathy can save us from the separation of experience that causes some people to not want to interact with others (they will remain "irredeemably 'other'"!). However, the belief in the empathy gap can sound rather mystical, as it is a belief that empathy can overcome differences in human experience due to identity-based oppressions that have existed for thousands of years. This sort of miracle is the foundation of Schopenhauer's belief that, "those who pity, in short, recognize and love their own true inner nature in all others; the partition that normally separates them from others dissolves through this 'mystical' act of recognition."⁶⁶ Difference must first be eradicated for us to pity others because we can then *recognize ourselves* in others. Once this boundary has been broken, pity can become an extension of our egotistical self-interest.

Referring to this union as "mystical" already points to its flawed nature. But even if one were to believe in the dissolving of the partition, there is a catch: once we have a universal human identity, pity "does not arise from *imagining* ourselves in the position of the sufferer and believing we are suffering *their* pains in *our* person. Rather, Schopenhauer believes that pitiers experience the other's suffering in just the same way as they experience their own but *in* the other person."⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ibid., 73.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 73.

There are two parts to this complication. First, a person can only experience pity if the other person is *suffering*. Second, in the process of pitying the other, the pitier experiences their suffering not inside their own body, but in the body of the sufferer. Here, pity goes far beyond *understanding* or *sharing* feelings to experiencing suffering in a way where the pitier become the sufferer, literally now *inside* the sufferer's body. It becomes less clear, then, what the value of pity is for the sufferer. Schopenhauer would say that it is this immense closeness that drives the pitier to do good for the sufferer, but as with empathy that action is not included in the definition. It is also suspicious that the one action that can overcome egotistical self-interest requires a person to feel *pain*. Surely sharing each other's feelings of happiness could also lead to growing closeness within a community? Yet, Schopenhauer writes that it is "*only* the suffering of others and *not* their joy that motivates the moral agent."⁶⁸ In order for good actions to take place, the other *must* suffer. Here we have arrived at a statement eerily similar to the mission of the empathetic framework in YA fiction, in which empathy stories require marginalized characters to exist as learning tools who are pushed and shoved around for the sake of the non-marginalized character's education. If pity is supposed to overcome egotistical self-interest to bring people together, then the divisiveness of requiring another's suffering is rather contradictory.

Based on this point, Nietzsche makes a case for interpreting pity "not as a sign of living *for* others or as a form of mutuality and recognition, [...] but as a veiled means of assuaging narcissistic loss at the other's expense."⁶⁹ This means that pity

⁶⁸ Ibid., 74.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 68.

does not form mutual relationships between people, but instead establishes an unequal dynamic where the pitier is pitying someone else in order to make themselves feel better. They pity in order to guard against a narcissistic loss, which is a feeling that they are lesser in value or skill, or overall less important than someone else. An integral party of pity – and empathy – then, is narcissistic loss. It is easy enough to imagine how a person could use pity to defend against their own insecurities: a person decides that someone is not doing very well, and they pity them in order to distract themselves from the fact that it is them, the pitier, who is not doing very well. This loss is what the pitier feels when they see another person thriving, as their happiness knocks the pitier down a peg on the universal board of success and happiness. This upset of the order can only be restored by the “lucky person’s fall from grace,” in which they are made to feel like they are suffering, and the pitier is made to feel happy in comparison.⁷⁰

Even though the pitier acted out of envy, their action is called pity and labeled a triumph for human connection. And because the pitier can only gain happiness through another’s suffering, and they also fear the person who is able to gain happiness without it. Ure explains that, “as pitiers our giving is motivated by the desire to usurp the position of imagined omnipotence, rather than by the other’s desire for our pity.”⁷¹ The pitier wants to regain the position of power that they feel they might have lost or are at risk of losing, and the decision to pity is made with no consideration of the person who will be pitied. And yet, if the person dares *reject* this pity, or insists that they are fine, that is an offensive crime. How dare they not need

⁷⁰ Ibid., 74.

⁷¹ Ibid., 81.

the reassurance that the pitier so desperately craves? The fear of egotistical self-interest that underlies Schopenhauer's concept of pity is ironic considering the narcissistic nature of requiring another's suffering to do good, and the accusation of narcissism thrown at the person who tries to escape the pain-filled trap of pity. The sufferer's self-sufficiency becomes a sign of their self-interest, and the pitier can happily claim that the sufferer is refusing to be a part of a social exchange that benefits the community at large.

This tenuous relationship can be seen in the dynamic between non-marginalized authors writing diversity and marginalized authors and readers who complain about their use of negative stereotypes. Non-marginalized authors have pounced on the diversity movement as an attempt to maintain their power in the genre. They dismiss the criticisms of marginalized voices to say that they should be thankful non-marginalized authors are even writing diversity. It doesn't matter that marginalized voices never asked to be given a voice by non-marginalized authors – they should still be thankful for it. And those marginalized authors who try to write their own stories, thus taking attention away from the non-marginalized authors, are accused of being narcissistic for wanting to write about themselves instead of trying to write about an other.

The threat of this narcissistic loss is important to the entanglement of the author and the represented characters in YA fiction. There are two layers of empathy at work in the current method for addressing the diversity deficit, and two empathy gaps that must be closed. The first is within the books. A marginalized character must be given empathy by non-marginalized characters, and this empathy allows the non-

marginalized to the learn the truth about the other – or speak what they think about them as if it is the truth. Solo’s original opinion that Riley *brought on* the hate they experienced was privileged over what Riley thought about their own experience. And Doctor Ann’s approach to helping Riley was to encourage them to interact with more people in order to get out of their own head. It was Riley’s focus on their own problems that was a problem, and the solution was not for Riley to ignore those who had treated them badly, but for Riley to go empathize with them. The guides for non-marginalized authors writing diversity warn against the writing of a problem novel, but really a problem novel is what is wanted by non-marginalized authors and readers, because it fulfills the Nietzschean framework of empathy that restores a narcissistic loss at the expense of the other.

For the second level, it must be acknowledged that empathy is not the simplest approach to YA fiction’s diversity problem. The guide states that the goal of the diversity movement is to get “positive representation first and foremost, but a variety of representation ultimately.”⁷² However, it has been established that the easiest way to get positive representation is not to *train* non-marginalized authors but have marginalized authors write their own experiences into their own YA novels. While one could say that YA fiction’s diversity problem stemmed from an empathy gap in writing, it’s more likely that it stemmed from the population of YA fiction authors being mostly white and straight. These white straight authors then wrote white straight characters, because that is the experience that comes most easily to them. Publishing more marginalized voices would solve this problem and solve the

⁷² writingwithcolor. “Stereotyped vs Nuanced Characters and Audience Perception...”

diversity deficit by jumping through far fewer hoops. But it would also de-center most established YA authors, and subscribing to the concept of the empathy gap avoids this narcissistic loss.

In his analysis of pity and envy, Nietzsche took three logical steps that I plan to emulate in my analysis of empathy and empowerment. First, he believes that “pity is deeply complicit in envy.” I believe that the same is true of empathy and disempowerment. Second, pity “ultimately tends towards a diminution of others.” It will come to be seen that empathy has a similarly sacrificial effect. Lastly, “the twinning of pity and envy [...] blocks out ability to live well with others.”⁷³ Similarly, the empathy-empowerment dynamic does not ultimately serve to the benefit of marginalized identities but helps the non-marginalized at the expense of marginalized authors and readers.

While I do not intend to follow these steps exactly, they will naturally unfold as the contradiction embedded in YALSA’s definition of YA fiction is further unraveled. This contradiction will then extend to the use of We Need Diverse Books in maintaining the focus on non-marginalized authors, and will ultimately reveal a movement “oriented around the need to assuage the feelings of self-lack,” that plague the non-marginalized author.⁷⁴

II. “DIFFERENT, YET THE SAME, ALL AT ONCE”

⁷³ Ibid., 69.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 76.

The empathy gap in YA fiction largely depends on the fact that YA is supposed to show its readers they are “a viable part of a larger community of beings who share a common humanity.”⁷⁵ While this “common humanity” sounds very unifying, it can ultimately be used as a tool to ignore or destroy difference. For example, in *Symptoms of Being Human*, the “sameness” portrayed does not at all account for power dynamics. The book does not acknowledge that some identities are more legitimated by social structures and are therefore given more power to influence people’s behaviors and lives. Jeff Garvin skips over the nuances of this by saying that Solo and Riley are the same because they both have qualities that cause them to be marginalized in some way: Solo’s weight and race and Riley’s gender identity. However, to say that these circumstances are the *same*, or would lead to Solo and Riley experiencing life in the same way, is flawed. While this neglect of power dynamics could be assumed to be integral to the concept of a “common humanity,” let us first ask whether it is possible to say that Solo and Riley contain a common human quality without ignoring the ways that their differences irrevocably change the way they experience life. In other words, can the praise that empathy stories are “a moving portrayal of what it means to be different, yet the same, all at once” be interpreted in a way that doesn’t ignore power dynamics?

In her book *Precarious Life* Judith Butler theorizes that we all possess a common human vulnerability – meaning we are all similarly vulnerable to being hurt by each other, the world, etc. based on our identities.⁷⁶ However, Butler writes that

⁷⁵ “The Value of Young Adult Literature.”

⁷⁶ “Violence, Mourning, Politics.” *Precarious Life*, by Judith Butler, Verso, 2006, pp. 19–49.

this vulnerability “cannot be properly thought of outside a differentiated field of power and, specifically, the differential operation of norms of recognition.”⁷⁷ This means that this common vulnerability will manifest itself differently depending on where a person is situated within power dynamics. For example, Solo experiences vulnerability as a black fat man very differently than Riley does as a gender fluid person. And while they have a common vulnerability due to their marginalized identities, to equate Solo’s exact experience in high school with Riley’s, as Solo did in the book, might not be a move supported by Butler’s theory.

A common human vulnerability might be a way for people to connect with each other without believing that one person can come to completely understand the experiences of another. And while it could still be a pathway to a form of empathy, it might not be compatible with an empathy that asks for the creation of “vividly realized portraits of the lives” of the other. Butler might criticize YA fiction’s attempts to establish understanding through research because of how this often involves creating direct parallels between an author’s own experience and the imagined experiences of their marginalized character. For example, Garvin created a mirroring between Riley and the people who miss-gender them by showing how Riley *also* made this mistake with other people. This likely also allowed Garvin, as someone who was just learning about genderfluidity, to better identify with Riley. But this mirroring ignores how the process of representation keeps the author and the character tied in their normative positions within in the field of power dynamics. When Garvin is creating a representation of Riley as a genderfluid person, he must

⁷⁷ Ibid., 44.

first *recognize* Riley, meaning place them somewhere in a pre-established framework for how to sort and categorize people. In this process of recognition Garvin will likely fall back on the norms of how he, as a white man, views other people. This maintains that Garvin is normal while Riley's genderfluidity makes them an anomaly, different, *other*. And when Garvin tries to find similarities between people in his social position and Riley, he then erases these differences in order to make Riley also seem *normal*, instead of redefining what "normal" means. Therefore, both him and Riley stay within the normative positions of power – Garvin in the center, Riley in the margins – and this representation both ignores and reinforces power dynamics as they currently are.

This is the danger of the empathetic framework and what Butler is trying to avoid with the theory of a common human vulnerability. However, Butler's theory is not easily embraced by non-marginalized YA authors because it maintains that there are parts of one another's experiences that we cannot come to understand. That being true reveals the contradiction in the empathy-empowerment dynamic and threatens non-marginalized authors' place in the diversity movement. And so they desperately try to make empathy work.

Another way to employ empathy is to write about a group of differently marginalized characters that must come to see each other's sameness. This group dynamic can be seen in *Kids of Appetite* by David Arnold, a YA novel that follows the empathetic journey of a diverse group of five kids. The five kids are: Vic, who has Moebius Syndrome, which causes facial paralysis; Mad, who has lost both her parents and lives with her abusive uncle; Baz, a refugee from Congo; Zuz, Baz's brother and

refugee from Congo; and Coco, an 11-year old orphan. These kids are all homeless, or have run away from home, and now live together in an abandoned greenhouse. The book begins with Vic discovering the group and being initiated into their rituals. Vic learns that they call themselves the Chapters because, as Baz explains to him, “we are all part of the same story, each of us different chapters. We may not have the power to choose setting or plot, but we can choose what kind of character we want to be.”⁷⁸ With this quote, Arnold is immediately suggesting that there is an inherent unity between these five kids because they have all been rendered helpless in the same way by their identities. Butler might say that while all of these kids have characteristics that make their bodies vulnerable to violence, it would be a mistake to assume they are all affected by this in the same way. But Arnold has them speaking of each other like they can all fit together in one smooth plot arc. And, what is most important now is not changing the ways in which they continue to be marginalized by the process of recognition (setting or plot), but choosing who they want to be on the *inside* (what kind of character).

One of the ways in which the kids absolve their differences is through their mutual obsession with *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. Mad tells Vic that they are all stuck in the Hinton Vortex: “The last lines of S.E. Hinton’s masterpiece are, word for word, the same as the first,” she explains to him. “I guess you could say I keep reading because I haven’t finished yet.”⁷⁹ Mad is referring to the line: “When I stepped out into the bright sunlight from the darkness of the movie house, I had only

⁷⁸ Arnold, David. *Kids of Appetite*. Viking Press, 2016, 104.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

two things on my mind: Paul Newman and a ride home.”⁸⁰ The repetition of this line at the beginning and end of the book signifies that *The Outsiders* was really the essay that Ponyboy wrote for his English class. He wrote down the events of his friends getting killed by the Socs because he felt that “it was too vast a problem to be just a personal thing. There should be some help, someone should tell them before it was too late. Someone should tell their side of the story, and maybe people would understand then and wouldn’t be so quick to judge.”⁸¹ Ponyboy wanted to tell the story of the Greasers versus the Socs so that maybe he could make people understand – or empathize with – the Greasers, and then one day the class divide wouldn’t be so big. The kids being stuck in the Hinton Vortex means that they are inspired by Ponyboy’s bravery and long for a similar change.

There is significance in *The Outsiders* being the book that David Arnold/the kids chose. As previously mentioned, YALSA’s hesitance over how to categorize *The Outsiders* kicked off the YA fiction genre. It is, one could say, the first empathy story, meditating on class warfare, violence, and the Greasers and Socs trying to come together to earn redemption. The book’s structure of the first and last sentence being the same is meaningful because it reveals at the end that Hinton’s words were actually Ponyboy’s. Hinton has achieved the feat to which non-marginalized authors currently aspire, where her writing was so accurate and authentic that it became what would have been written by an actual Ponyboy. *The Outsiders* was not just a fictional representation of difference, but a book written *by* the other. Take that and combine it

⁸⁰ Hinton, S.E. *The Outsiders*. Viking Press, 1967, 1.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 165.

with the book's empathetic message – what a perfect framework for writing diversity in YA fiction!

Arnold writes that the kids identify so strongly with *The Outsiders* because it helps them believe that people who are different are really the same. They use the book as their guide to protect each other's vulnerabilities, and once they are protected – meaning, one cohesive group – they are safe to consume the world. Based on this thought, they give themselves another name, along with a mantra:

And when the kids needed someone most, someone to love and trust, they found one another, and they called themselves the Kids of Appetite, and they lived and they laughed and they saw that it was good.⁸²

The kids repeat this mantra to each other when they need a reminder to stop wishing to be someone else – like literally to be inside another human body, one without a disorder or a certain skin color or certain feminine vulnerabilities. But they decide that, within their human bodies, they are all the same, in that they want the same things and want to live the same way. They are the Kids of Appetite because they have an appetite for life, and they use each other as their mutual protection from the trials of being marginalized and misunderstood. This quote is so troubling because instead of asking questions about the way these kids experience life – Is living the same for Baz and Zuz as it is for Vic? What does it mean to see “that it was good” for each of them? – *Kids of Appetite* jumps straight into a scenario in which these kids really know each other and are better off once they decide to be the same. *Kids of Appetite* does not acknowledge the necessity for Butler's common human vulnerability to acknowledge power, and instead uses it to create a divide between

⁸² Arnold, David. *Kids of Appetite*. Viking Press, 2016, 156.

their group – the *outsiders* in this case – and the rest of the world. It therefore completely skips over the process of them asking each other for recognition and negotiating how their vulnerabilities cause them to be different within the group.

This glaring absence is well demonstrated by the relationship between Vic and Mad. Upon first meeting Mad, Vic falls immediately in love with her, and a majority of his narrative is dedicated to extrapolating on how gorgeous she is and how much he wants to kiss her. He often spaces out while staring at her in awe. In one of these moments, Mad notices and stares back at him. “You’re sort of staring,” she says. “So are you,” he responds, and then he thinks, “Maybe the two worlds we lived in weren’t so different.”⁸³ This quote, which was lifted straight from *The Outsiders*, is assumedly supposed to show Vic realizing that him and Mad have similarities that transcend their differences. But Butler might say that they are never actually recognizing the *difference* in one another, because recognizing difference means recognizing the ways in which someone’s vulnerability causes them to differently experience violence.⁸⁴ The idea that Vic could understand Mad’s pain as an orphaned girl subjected to physical abuse by her uncle by simply staring into her eyes, or later on kissing her, holds no substance.

Additionally, Arnold never makes clear that Mad holds a desire to be treated in this way, and her thoughts are almost completely silent in the moments that Vic is “recognizing” her. When Mad turns to Vic to tell him he is staring, Vic simply decided that this is her *staring back*, and this observation is never refuted in the narrative. This is important because a necessary part of the other – or less powerful –

⁸³ Ibid., 116.

⁸⁴ Butler, 43.

being recognized is that they *desire* recognition, just as the pitier demands that the sufferer desires pity. What is meaningful is not that Vic wants to stare at Mad, but that Mad *wants* him to stare at her, and stares back in order to complete the process of recognition. However, the book's analysis of the situation comes entirely from Vic's point of view, and therefore the scene feels like one where Vic realizes that Mad is not in a different world because she is *attainable* for him, which keeps Mad subjected as an object and Vic as an attainer.

Vic's thought that maybe he and Mad aren't so different is extended more eloquently in a later scene. While watching Mad sleep, Vic muses that "we both know the pain of losing a parent. [...] We both know what it's like to want more than what is offered to us, to see an iron bell and feel the urge to ring it, to seek out the simmering underneath, to understand that none of us, for better or worse, are chained to our history."⁸⁵ And while the fact that they both lost a parent is true, saying that someone is not chained to their history is not the same as saying that two people with largely different histories will come together to experience an identical future. Vic's realization that he and Mad are the same does not allow Mad to exist as a person who he has to relate to, and instead makes her a body that he assigns his same inner experiences to. Vic's understanding of Mad, and his decisions about how she is and what she wants, are spoken as the truth. Mad is never consulted or given a chance to speak about herself. Vic does not come to understand Mad, but simply sees her through his male gaze. This is similar to Solo deciding that Riley is bringing bad treatment on themselves – in other words, *asking* for it. The fact that Riley is not given a

⁸⁵ Ibid., 309.

chance to speak their own thoughts on this with a similar authority shows whose power the narrative is grounded in.

Butler might find fault in Vic's realization about Mad because she sustains that, in struggling for recognition "I will not discover myself as the same as the 'you' on which I depend in order to be."⁸⁶ The process of recognition does not just refer to the ways in which we place others in a social framework of power, but how we rely on the placements of others to understand where *we* are positioned. Vic relies on his male-gazed version of Mad to understand himself as boy. In seeing Mad he simply reinforces the version of her that he expects to see, instead of discovering a version of her that also requires him to discover a new version of himself. For Arnold, a meaning relationality between Mad and Vic can only come from creating a mirroring of their outward circumstances that then yields identical inner experiences. Ultimately, Mad's suffering is sacrificed so he can say that Vic and Mad are the same.

This is the hypocrisy of *Kids of Appetite*: the kids are described as having an appetite for the world, but in reality they have an appetite for each *other*. Instead of consuming the world, they spend most of the book consuming each other's *difference*. They wear matching wristbands as an "outward sign of their inward transformation."⁸⁷ They insist that they all have the same inward experience of living in the world. The identities of the Kids of Appetite become that they are the Kids of Appetite, that they are "merged or without boundaries."⁸⁸ The extremeness of this

⁸⁶ Butler, 44.

⁸⁷ Arnold, 197.

⁸⁸ Butler, 27.

goal becomes most clear in a scene where Mad tells the other kids a bedtime story about *The Outsiders*. First, Mad recites a quote from *The Outsiders* that also appears as the epigraph for *Kids of Appetite*:

It seemed funny to me that the sunset she saw from her patio and the one I saw from the back steps was the same one. Maybe the two different worlds we lived in weren't so different. We saw the same sunset.⁸⁹

Mad extends this moment to imagine a world in which Ponyboy and Cherry then “walked into that sunset, because it was something no one had ever done or heard about, or seen at all anywhere.”⁹⁰ In this image, they don’t just *see* the same sunset, but walk into it together, leaving behind the difference that once separated them. This is a fantasy of not only finding one’s sameness but then allowing it to consume all difference. And while this fantasy is portrayed in *Kids of Appetite* as being part of Ponyboy’s dream for everyone to be better understood, it can become frightening if thought about more literally. Ponyboy and Cherry, teenagers from different sides of the track, walk into the sunset together to show the world how difference can be overcome. They sacrifice themselves, allowing the sun to burn them and everything else in their lives that might prevent them from being the same. Here, empathy is not just a tool for understanding but for eradication, and Ponyboy and Cherry must sacrifice themselves in order for empathy to prevail. The nature of this image becomes more troubling in the context of the ritualistic fervor with which so many non-marginalized authors and readers embrace it – and *The Outsiders* – as a beautiful demonstration of empathy’s power.

⁸⁹ Arnold, 1.

⁹⁰ Arnold, 119.

In *Kids of Appetite*, Arnold engages with the framework of *The Outsiders* to make his characters' diversity a purely outward quality that has no effect on inner experience. While Arnold shows the characters as sometimes being discriminated against – Vic for his facial paralysis, Baz and Zuz for their skin color, Mad for her bruises – the individual characters rarely stand up for themselves, and instead believe that they don't need to engage with this treatment because they are creating a better world within their group. However, in order for this to happen they would have to actually de-center the perpetrators of violence and ask for new ways to be seen. By wanting to literally be their own group of *outsiders*, they leave the “normal” people in the center. And, within this new outside group Arnold shows no efforts of them trying to be seen in different ways by each other. The kids “extend, not challenge, the norms of recognition,” and therefore do not change.⁹¹

Kids of Appetite is a very good example of what happens when a YA diversity book does not displace the normative and instead allows it to absorb the “diverse.”

Butler might criticize this format because:

[when] one speaks for another, to another, there is no way to collapse the distinction between the Other and oneself. When we say ‘we’ we do nothing more than designate this very problematic. We do not solve it. And perhaps it is, and ought to be, insoluble.⁹²

By using the language of diversity, YA fiction has set itself up for a contradiction in which the other both exists and should not exist. It's disempowering use of empathy comes from an attempt to say that the gap between the other and oneself can be closed, but YA fiction created a necessity for this gap with the terminology of the

⁹¹ Butler, 39.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 25.

“diverse.” Butler’s theory points out the feedback loop they are stuck in and might suggest that the empathy gap *cannot be closed* and instead should be embraced for the problems that it designates.

It is valuable to note that Judith Butler might still believe in the use of empathy and therefore in the existence of some sort of empathy gap, even if she is not trying to close it. Her theory of a common human vulnerability pitches a new form of empathy that would “be different from [...] asking for recognition in ways that assume that we are all fixed and frozen in our various locations and subject-positions.”⁹³ Butler’s empathy might ask for the displacement of the Vics of the world and allow for Mad’s own point-of-view to have equal authority. But it would still be *empathy*, as she ultimately still values the process of asking for recognition.

However, Butler is still radical to non-marginalized authors because she believes in the possibility of an irreducible difference between us that they cannot endorse. The panic non-marginalized authors feel at the idea that they can’t learn to completely understand the experience of a marginalized identity has caused them to rename this “insoluble” difference as an “empathy gap” and declared that it can be closed through the proper use of empathy when writing diversity in YA fiction. And while this is often framed as a radical way to end discrimination, the more radical stance might be to say that the empathy gap cannot be closed, at least not entirely. This stance would allow the empathy-empowerment dynamic to hold, because then marginalized identities could achieve equal representation without having to be absorbed by those who have been centered. But it is difficult to imagine what this

⁹³ Ibid., 47.

would look like within the context of YA fiction, as this type of story would likely upset a large part of the base readership.

III. WHITE AUTHORITY / PROSTHETIC MEMORIES

Even though this thesis has explored why the empathy gap might not be closeable, it is valuable to explore how non-marginalized authors go about defending the worthiness and success of research in allowing them to empathize with the other. *Symptoms of Being Human* and *Kids of Appetite* revealed that an integral part of empathizing with marginalized characters is showing that they are the same as the non-marginalized characters (and the imagined non-marginalized reader). This already involves the author enacting a large amount of authority to say how it is that a marginalized character experiences life. But for the empathy gap to be fully closed these non-marginalized authors must come to know the marginalized character so well that they can write the book that the marginalized character would have written themselves – as with *The Outsiders*. Their authority must extend from just empathizing with the other – understanding and sharing their feelings – to literally *being* the other, inside the other's body. Ultimately, these empathy books reveal how this process of closing the empathy gap through research disempowers the marginalized characters and empowers the non-marginalized characters and non-marginalized authors writing them. To see how this plays out, let us first get inside the mind of one of these non-marginalized authors and ask: if it is possible for non-marginalized authors to completely close the empathy gap between them and their marginalized characters, how can this be done?

In her paper “Memory, Empathy, and the Politics of Identification” Alison Landsberg theorizes that people can come to empathize with each other through “prosthetic memories.”⁹⁴ Prosthetic memories are “sensuous memories” that a consumer of media can come to possess after experiencing “mass-mediated representations,” of a person different from them.⁹⁵ Once a person acquires these prosthetic memories they can use them to overcome identity boundaries. In other words, Landsberg believes that by consuming representations of the other the audience becomes connected to them in an intimate way and takes on their memories of their experiences. These memories are then *the audience’s* memories, embedded in *their* minds, which allow them to have a natural understanding of the other’s experiences, feelings, desires, etc.

However, the audience must consume representations of *trauma* in order to succeed in “this complicated form of identification across boundaries.”⁹⁶ Landsberg is acknowledging that this cross-identification is complicated because of the power dynamics that draw such thick lines between identity experiences, but she also believes that power dynamics can be overcome through the sharing and observing of representations of *suffering*. This is a parallel between prosthetic memories and Schopenhauer’s pity, as Nietzsche critiqued Schopenhauer’s requirement that the subject must be suffering to trigger feelings of pity. I find it suspicious that this same requirement exists for prosthetic memories, demanding that the other must suffer and this suffering must be shared with the audience for identity boundaries to be

⁹⁴ Landsberg, Alison. “Memory, Empathy, and the Politics of Identification.” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 22, no. 2, June 2009, pp. 221–229.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 221.

disseminated. Furthermore, the theory of prosthetic memories first suggests that the audience can experience the other's suffering inside their own body. But these memories then allow the viewer to *become* the other, meaning they could potentially literally be the other, inside the other's body. This same move is made in Schopenhauer's pity, saying that the pitier can experience the sufferer's suffering as they would if they were inside the sufferer's body.

It is worth noting that Landsberg's use of the word "prosthetic" in this theory is perhaps a misuse. Prosthesis refers to an artificial body part that is created to replace an original body part that is now missing. One could say that prosthetic memories are providing non-marginalized consumers with a replacement for something that is missing, as they have never experienced life as the other does, and those experiences of suffering are necessary to feel empathy. But prosthetic memories do not create an artificial replacement; they take an original leg from the other and give it to the consumer, allowing them to now have three legs while the other has one. While Landsberg's theory appears to focus on the other and bringing an end to their suffering, the real winners of these empathetic projects are the empathetic, who use these prosthetic memories to legitimize their authority at the cost of the other's self-empowerment.

I echo Nietzsche's critique of pity to say that Landsberg's theory of prosthetic memories relies on the cannibalization of the original memory holder's physical and mental being in order for the non-marginalized audience to learn. Landsberg praises Roman Polanski's *The Pianist* as a pinnacle example of this kind of empathetic project. Specifically, she admires how the film shows the protagonist, Wladyslaw,

suffering an increasing amount of pain in the face of the Holocaust, until at the end of the film he appears to be only a shell of a man, broken down and abandoned, “almost inhuman.”⁹⁷ This inhumanity, Landsberg writes, is unbearable and makes the viewer want to turn away, but we must fight to look past the inhumanity to see our common humanity. And the audience does this out of the goodness of their hearts: “It is challenging to stay with [Wladyslaw], as there is precious little gratification for the viewer, but persist we must.”⁹⁸ In this framework, the other becomes the martyr, sacrificing themselves for the noble cause of discovering a common humanity, while the audience members are the saviors who welcome the other into their arms. Except, Landsberg clarifies that the other isn’t really sacrificing themselves, because without the action of the audience, “the Other [would] die alone.”⁹⁹ There is a narcissistic loss being defended against here, where the audience must feel they are giving the other a gift by choosing to see them as human and empathize with them. Not only can the empathizer feel truly good and knowledgeable, but the other is doomed to suffer whether the empathizer is there or not. This is a troubling assertion of a power dynamic within a theory that is meant to undo power dynamics.

In the context YA fiction, the concept of acquiring prosthetic memories through representations of suffering gives non-marginalized authors a way to gain even more authority over their marginalized characters. Once an author acquires prosthetic memories, they can say they understand the life of the other because they understand their suffering, thus denoting suffering as the defining and essential

⁹⁷ Ibid., 225.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 227.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 227.

quality of the other's experience. And because they have done the work of *rescuing* the other by portraying the humanity in them despite their suffering, the non-marginalized author perhaps even understands the other better than the other understands themselves. This gives non-marginalized authors the power to use research to break free from the limitations of "positive representation" and "reality," because the only possible positive representation – *positive* meaning an empowering representation of the marginalized character's reality – stems from a place of the marginalized character's suffering. Ultimately, it is no longer that the non-marginalized author must be taught to write positive representations, but that they must teach the other what their reality is truly like.

An example of this authority at work is Scott Westerfeld's *Afterworlds*. The book has a story-within-a-story set up. The outer story follows Darcy Patel, an 18-year-old girl who has just signed a two-book contract with a major YA publishing house. The inner story is Darcy's soon-to-be published manuscript, a YA paranormal romance titled *Afterworlds*. Darcy's *Afterworlds* is about 16-year-old Lizzie, who survives a terrorist attack by wishing herself into the Afterworld, a place that mostly serves as a sanctuary for ghosts. According to Lizzie's story, there are many Afterworlds, each one watched over by a psychopomp, which is a guider of souls. Lizzie's Afterworld is ruled by Yamaraj, also known as the Hindu God of Death. Upon arrival, Lizzie immediately falls in love, or lust, with him, and insists that she will figure out how to get back to this Afterworld and return to him.

Afterworlds was published in 2014, and the YA publishing world that Westerfeld creates for Darcy's story is a partially satirical version of the real YA

publishing world at that time. This means that Westerfeld was commenting on the changing culture caused by increasing interest in and demand for diversity, a change that was also putting a lot of attention and pressure on him as an established white male author. Upon arriving in New York City, Darcy attends a party with other YA authors, most of whom have also written paranormal romances. They discuss the subjects of their books, which range from selkies to pyromancers – subjects that have not yet been used in YA fiction but largely resemble the current paranormal trends of vampires, werewolves, and zombies. Darcy is the only person of color at this party, and the only author of color to have a new paranormal romance published in 2014. While discussing the plots of their books, the other white authors begin to question Darcy’s decision to have a white girl fall in love with the Hindu God of Death:

“You wanted every girl to want him.” Kiralee was smiling again. “So you chose a white girl from California.”

Darcy suddenly wished she had drunk less, even as she took another drink. “Pretty much?”

“Makes perfect sense.” Kiralee swirled her ice. “In a problematic way. But life is problematic, so novels must be too.”¹⁰⁰

Up until this moment, Darcy had never thought about her use of Yamaraj being potentially problematic. Darcy was also surprised to learn that many of these authors have gotten in trouble for their use of non-white characters or paranormal aspects from non-western cultures:

Kiralee shrugged. “As a whitefella who plunders indigenous mythos, I’ve had my share of squabble, all of it richly deserved. But at least I pass on my own wisdom by hassling you young people.”

“You get in trouble for your books? But they’re so...inspiring!” After reading *Dirawong*, Darcy had done her sixth-grade final project on the Bundjalung people. “I mean, it feels like you *believe* everything you write. You’re a lot more respectful than I am about the Vedas.”

¹⁰⁰ Westerfeld, Scott. *Afterworlds*. Simon & Schuster, 2014, 83.

Kiralee laughed. “Well, I never used anyone’s god for purposes of YA hotness.”

Darcy stared at her.¹⁰¹

The main intellectual conflict of Darcy’s story then becomes whether she has appropriated Hinduism. Most of her fellow YA authors believe that this is the case. Only one author, named Imogen, insists that cultural appropriation cannot take place here because Hinduism is Darcy’s own culture. However, Darcy is not so sure about that. She explains that, in her *Afterworlds*, Yamaraj isn’t actually the Hindu God of Death, but just a psychopomp who happens to share his name and likeness. Like Lizzie, “Yamaraj was just a normal guy who’d discovered, more or less by accident, that he could walk among ghosts.”¹⁰² In other words, even though Darcy herself is Hindu, in *Afterworlds* she has used an image of Hinduism that is separated from any of its actual cultural meanings, and she worries that this is appropriation. This still doesn’t account for the fact, never acknowledged in the book, that cultural appropriation involves an adoption of aspects of a minority culture by a majority, which is a power dynamic that does not exist in Darcy using aspects of Hinduism in her *Afterworlds*. This conflict, which spans the whole book, creates a troubling reality in which Darcy is forced to take on a responsibility that normally belongs to a white author.

Darcy shares her worry of appropriation with one of her Hindu friends, Sagan, asking him if he found the book offensive. Sagan says that he didn’t find it offensive because there wasn’t any Hinduism in the *Afterworlds* universe, meaning that Darcy

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 85.

¹⁰² Ibid., 86.

wasn't representing Hinduism, but creating something new altogether. He goes on to propose a theory called the "Angelina Jolie Paradox":

"You know when you're watching a movie starring Angelina Jolie? And the character she's playing looks just like Angelina Jolie, right?"

"Um, yes. Because that's who she is."

"No, she's a regular person in that world, not a movie star. But the other characters never mention that she looks exactly like Angelina Jolie. No one ever comes up to her on the street and says, 'Can I have your autograph?'"

"Because that would mess up the movie," [Darcy's other friend] Carla said.

"Exactly. So when you cast Angelina Jolie in a film, you're creating an alternate universe *in which actress Angelina Jolie does not exist*. Because otherwise people would be noticing the resemblance all the time. This is what I call the Angelina Jolie Paradox."¹⁰³

According to Sagan's theory, by including the Hindu God of Death as someone who is not actually the Hindu God of Death, Darcy has made clear that her book takes place in a universe where Hinduism does not exist. Therefore, this representation of Yamaraj erases the whole religion from reality. And, Sagan explains, the paradox lies in the fact that "the only way *not* to erase Angelina Jolie is to never cast her in a movie. [...] Which would *also* erase Angelina Jolie."¹⁰⁴ So even to remove Yamaraj from *Afterworlds* all together would suggest that Hinduism does not exist, thus creating an unsolvable problem of representation.

This dilemma is resolved in bouts of indecision. Initially, Darcy goes back to her manuscript and starts editing her Yamaraj to make him seem more like the actual Hindu god. She feels that, "by making Yamaraj a character, it's like I'm erasing him from scripture. But getting rid of him would erase him too. So all that's left is me

¹⁰³ Ibid., 238.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 240.

making him real. I owe him that much.”¹⁰⁵ This is an interesting investment in a real, authentic Yamaraj who possesses the essential essence of Hinduism, one that is far more real than the Yamaraj Darcy originally created. However, following this line of thought involves forgetting again that Darcy *is* Hindu, and that all of her thoughts are being created by a white man. Her journey of struggling to write the authentic Yamaraj is suspiciously similar to a white author trying to write an authentic marginalized character. While it is surely possible for a Hindu writer to create a representation of Yamaraj that other Hindus find offensive, and unlike Sagan some Hindus might dislike the use of Yamaraj in the book altogether, Westerfeld is stating that there is one right answer, one proper representation of Yamaraj that Darcy might discover. He is not acknowledging the diversity within the Hindu community, and is attempting to moderate a discussion that he himself has no direct knowledge of.

By the end of the book, Darcy decides that it is okay for her Yamaraj to exist in a reality that divorces him from the Vedas, because this just creates an opportunity for that relationship and Yamaraj’s god status to be rediscovered. She conjectures that, “maybe that was the point of truth – you could erase it all you wanted, and it was there to be discovered again.”¹⁰⁶ Here, Westerfeld has proposed a theory of reality as transmittable through writing. Darcy – or Westerfeld – comes to believe that by creating a representation of reality that representation *becomes* reality, and so it is to be treated as such.¹⁰⁷ If it is the case that the authentic truth of something will always be rediscovered or reappear in representations of it, that seems rather convenient for

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 258.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 459.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 269.

the non-marginalized author writing diversity! This theory, again penned not by an actual Indian-American girl but *Westerfeld*, rids non-marginalized authors of all the responsibility and risk that has been placed on their shoulders by the diversity movement. Non-marginalized authors have the power and authority to write whatever they believe to be the truth about their marginalized character's experiences, because it will *become* the truth. The Angelina Jolie Paradox is not to be feared because, while the representation erases reality, it also creates it, and this creation will still hold the essence of truth that the reality did in the first place. Nothing will be lost, and so Westerfeld's representation of Darcy is just as real as Darcy's representation of Yamaraj.

However, it must be remembered *Darcy is not white*. It can be easy to forget about Darcy's Indian-American identity because of the way Darcy is treated. *Afterworlds* consists of Darcy being told what is right and wrong about her Yamaraj, and she never gets to have an opinion of her own. Not only that, but she is *grateful* for the advice, and is constantly believing that she needs to be taught and guided by her elder YA authors, which posits that they know more than her about how to accurately represent Hinduism. The whole scene where the white authors notify Darcy of the potentially problematic nature of Yamaraj is rather disconcerting. Westerfeld's own opinions about the growing diversity movement and its criticism of harmful representations of diversity are almost impossible to block out when Darcy, still torn over what to do about Yamaraj, goes back to the established author Kiralee for advice:

Darcy sighed. "So I have to figure this out for myself."

“You write as respectfully as you can, and then you publish. You uncover your mistakes by launching your books into the world.”

“But people might yell at me!”

“Yes, it’s a bit like learning French. When you open your mouth, you risk sounding like an idiot. But if you don’t take that chance, you’ll never speak at all.”¹⁰⁸

Kiralee’s instructions might reveal that Westerfeld has some negative feelings about a culture of criticism that many non-marginalized authors interpret as censoring. But Darcy being educated on the etiquette of writing diversity by *white* YA authors removes her from her Hindu community and gives her the plight of the white author, the plight of Scott Westerfeld. Westerfeld himself could grapple in his book with the dilemma of using the image of Yamaraj, but instead he has a Hindu girl do it. And Westerfeld’s representation of Darcy is further complicated by her emotional journey in *Afterworlds*, during which she falls in love with Imogen, her fellow YA author, thereby confirming to herself that she is gay. This makes more troubling the fact that Darcy not only wrote a white girl in her YA novel, but a heterosexual romance.

Westerfeld’s fantasies about Darcy’s life and role as a female author of color in 2014’s YA fiction industry are so intricate that it is overwhelming to try to unravel them. But ultimately there is a *three*-fold reality here where Scott Westerfeld, a straight white man, is writing about Darcy Patel, a gay Indian-American girl, and also writing the reality that he thinks she would write, which in this case is a paranormal romance about a white straight girl. What is communicated in *Afterworlds* is that Westerfeld can imagine Darcy’s reality, but Darcy cannot possibly imagine her own. Westerfeld’s representation of Darcy privileges the white author’s knowledge of her reality as more important than what she knows it to be, thus utterly disempowering

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 299.

her. And Darcy not only engages in a white reality, but questions why her own culture was there at all, instead of why the whiteness was there. In the end, the Yamaraj dilemma both signifies her diversity and takes it away from her completely.

The differences between Darcy and Lizzie are never discussed in the novel, save for the one mention of Lizzie being white when the other YA authors are teaching Darcy. However, Westerfeld has discussed it outside of the text, in interviews. When asked by the Los Angeles Times why Darcy wrote about a white straight girl, Westerfeld responded:

She thought that the average reader of paranormal romances didn't get to see the kind of guys she was attracted to, these kinds of Bollywood actors. To make it even more universal, she made him attractive to a white girl heroine. It wasn't just about *her* wanting him, it was about *everyone* wanting him. She wants to validate her own desires by making them white desires, which is, of course, super problematic.¹⁰⁹

Westerfeld believes that when Darcy, a gay Indian-American girl, gets the chance to write her own YA fantasy novel, she wants to write a book not for other people like her but for the *average reader* of paranormal romances, which is assumedly a white straight girl. The point of her *Afterworlds* was not to celebrate her own experiences in the way she'd always wanted to, but to make her culture more attractive to white people. Darcy is a *tool*, used by Westerfeld to make a point that helps *him* as a white author. And while Westerfeld acknowledges that Darcy's desire to make her desires white was "of course, super problematic," he does not address this problematic desire except to have Kiralee say in *Afterworlds* that "life is problematic, so novels must be too." He thereby normalizes this problematic desire as a desire that Darcy and girls

¹⁰⁹ Benfer, Amy. "Scott Westerfeld on Writing His Novel-within-a-YA-Novel 'Afterworlds!'" *Los Angeles Times*, 8 Oct. 2014, www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-et-jc-scott-westerfeld-afterworlds-20141007-story.html.

like her actually have in reality, even though it is a desire that he has put on her. And, since he has stated that reality will be destroyed and then-reaffirmed in his creations through the Angelina Jolie Paradox, his representation of Darcy dooms her to eternally desiring white approval of her desires.

Looking at Westerfeld's *Afterworlds* as an example of a white author deploying empathy for and understanding of their marginalized character's life, the book further reveals the fallacies of Landsberg's theory of prosthetic memories. It is unclear what research, if any, Westerfeld did for this story. His plot line is essentially a debate over how to write diversity. One could wonder whether his point was that YA fiction's culture of criticism is so over the top that even the marginalized might get criticized about the accuracy of their representations of their own identities. But it is much more likely that he projected his own anxieties onto a marginalized character to prove a point. While prosthetic memories allow the white author to gain authority when writing the experiences of the other, the theory's empathetic mission still implies that the story focuses on the other's life and gives them a voice. But Westerfeld's voice does not become Darcy's in *Afterworlds*. Instead, Darcy is burdened with Westerfeld's memories, a reversal of an already tenuous exchange that does not at all acknowledge power dynamics. This exchange keeps Darcy in her normative subject position of marginalization and keeps Westerfeld in his as an all-powerful creator. And while Westerfeld might say the outcome was that Darcy's identity was understood enough to be represented by him, the conflict in *Afterworlds* is still all about white people and their complaints.

The insistence on an empathy gap as the reason why non-marginalized authors struggle to correctly write diversity is brilliant because it prevents non-marginalized authors from being the whole problem. Instead, this *gap* becomes the enemy at which all forces can be targeted. Forgotten then is the possibility that there might be some realities non-marginalized authors can never come to understand without living them, and forgotten is the fear this possibility instills. What can be observed in *Afterworlds* is a dexterous flip in which the empowerment of the marginalized character was turned into the empowerment of the non-marginalized author. Westerfeld created a journey for Darcy that caused her to empathize with white authors so that the white reader could then empathize with her. *Afterworlds* works because it attacks the empathy gap, the true enemy, and demonstrates how non-marginalized authors can take the diversity movement back into their own hands.

CHAPTER THREE

#ownvoices / Empowerment

I. “NOT ALL DIVERSE STORIES ARE CREATED EQUAL”

While non-marginalized authors have succeeded in molding the mission of We Need Diverse Books into something that works in their favor, there is not a similar opening for them in #ownvoices. As previously mentioned, #ownvoices is the other main organization that has formed out of the diversity movement in YA fiction. The group’s name also stemmed from a Twitter hashtag, which was tweeted in September 2016 by YA author Corinne Duyvis as a way to collect recommendations for YA fiction novels “about diverse characters written by authors from that same diverse group.”¹¹⁰ While #ownvoices is a categorization given to any marginalized YA author that writes about their own identity, it has not been established as an official non-profit or organization. The campaign has no website, except for a page about its origins on Corrine Duyvis’s author site. And yet the hashtag is incredibly well-known, and is used and discussed almost every day on major social media sites.

For non-marginalized authors who are participating in the diversity movement and are working to write diverse characters, WNDB can serve as a good resource for them on how to write diversity correctly. Conversely, the creator of #ownvoices, Corrine Duyvis, has defined their mission as to “center the voices that should matter most: those being written about.”¹¹¹ This blatant valuing of marginalized voices over non-marginalized voices is a big hit – a narcissistic loss – to non-marginalized

¹¹⁰ Duyvis, Corinne. “#Ownvoices.” *Corinne Duyvis*, www.corinneduyvis.net/ownvoices/.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

authors. And while neither group has ever said that non-marginalized authors shouldn't write diversity, just being told that some voices matter more than others is enough to send them into a panic. What is unbearable here is the idea that non-marginalized authors might not be able to write diversity just as well as or even better than authors who share the identity they are writing about. But the root of this panic is of course not being acknowledged by non-marginalized authors, and instead many of them have focused on criticizing the #ownvoices mission.

The main critique of #ownvoices is that they are “promoting censorship [and] wish to exclude white, cis, able-bodied authors from writing diverse characters.”¹¹² The use of the word “censorship” in critiquing #ownvoices is important, as it will continue to appear in conversations about the role of #ownvoices in the diversity movement. “Censorship” invokes strong feelings due to its connection with first amendment rights and oppression by a totalitarian government. It is meant to send the YA community into a panic by making them think that the overall freedom of writing YA fiction is at risk. But I maintain that the use of “censorship” is more a sign of the complete panic that has developed in many non-marginalized authors. The focus of #ownvoices on the importance of marginalized voices in the writing of diversity, combined with the growing visibility of the diversity movement, has created what sounds to non-marginalized authors like a threat to push them out of the YA fiction genre. WNDB has in the past acknowledged and tried to assuage the fears of non-marginalized authors who feel threatened, as seen in some of the Tumblr posts from Ellen Oh that were cited earlier. #Ownvoices does not concern itself at all with such

¹¹² Herrera, Denice. “#Ownvoices.” *The Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association*, 22 Aug. 2017, www.oif.ala.org/oif/?p=10638.

matters. The lack of effort on the part of #ownvoices to make non-marginalized authors feel comfortable only makes non-marginalized authors dislike them more. While there is no main spokesperson for the campaign, some #ownvoices authors have individually responded to their complaints to say: “If helping someone (presumably underserved readers) is dependent on *you* feeling welcome, who are you really trying to help?”¹¹³

This wonderfully pointed response refuses to baby the feelings of #ownvoices critics and instead calls out the growing focus on the complaints of non-marginalized authors in the diversity movement. It points out that what non-marginalized authors are identifying as censorship is simply a shift from their voices having all of the power to marginalized voices having an equal amount. To make clear the difference between active exclusion and focusing on other identity groups, one #ownvoices author stated that the point of the mission is not asking who has the right to tell diverse stories, but that “not all diverse stories are created equal.”¹¹⁴ But this de-centering of non-marginalized authors as the most powerful writers of YA fiction stories is still upsetting. The conflation by non-marginalized authors of discrimination and de-centering is a pattern that continues in their discussions about the diversity movement. The power of #ownvoices lies in their disregard for the accusations lodged against them by non-marginalized authors, and their focus on creating a space where marginalized authors can write the YA stories they have

¹¹³ Giles, Lamar. “Reading Our #OWNVOICES.” *Book Riot*, 21 Sept. 2015, bookriot.com/2015/09/21/ownvoices-and-the-hell-of-my-own-choosing/.

¹¹⁴ Rodarme, Susie. “Our Own Voices, Or Why Not All Diverse Stories Are Created Equal.” *Book Riot*, 14 June 2016, bookriot.com/2016/06/14/our-own-voices-or-why-not-all-diverse-stories-are-created-equal/.

always wanted to write, separate from a diversity discourse that focuses largely on how to write an “authentic” diversity story.

The second main criticism of #ownvoices is that #ownvoices stories are self-centered and pandering. In writing about themselves and not engaging with the politics of writing the other, #ownvoices authors are painted by non-marginalized authors as withdrawing from a social environment focused on community. In an essay response to this criticism, one author wrote:

When a white woman writes about the experiences of people of color especially in relation to her own, acknowledging her privilege, she is usually heralded as courageous and compassionate. However, when a person of color writes about their experiences relative to the mainstream population, it is often viewed solely as a grievance.¹¹⁵

This author is lamenting the fact that when non-marginalized authors write about diversity they are praised for their work because it involved the use of *empathy*, which is thought of as an emotion that removes people from their narcissism. When non-marginalized authors write about themselves, they are taking part in narcissism by not valuing empathy over focusing on themselves. Nietzsche tracked the same dynamic with pity, for according to Schopenhauer the goal of pity is to fight egotistical self-interest, and those who reject the pity of others or do not take part in pitying others are contributing to a narcissistic dynamic that could harm society. Yet this point of view ignores the potential harm that can be done to the sufferer by the pitier, and how defending oneself against pity is also a way to avoid suffering. When a white woman writes about diversity, she is proving that she is compassionate,

¹¹⁵ Das, Kavita. “On Parsing.” *VIDA: Women in Literary Arts*, 6 Feb. 2016, www.vidaweb.org/on-parsing/.

empathetic, and not at all narcissistic, and her writing is therefore celebrated even if her representation does direct harm to the identity group in question.

With these two criticisms, #ownvoices is being backed into a corner: not only are they censoring non-marginalized authors, but in writing their own stories they are also over-indulging in their own experiences. Thus, many authors criticize #ownvoices as mean, aggressive, and a “gang”¹¹⁶ – while We Need Diverse Books is reasonable and friendly. These characterizations of the two organizations by non-marginalized authors speak volumes about the climate of the diversity movement and who is being centered in conversations about writing diversity and the resulting books.

While #ownvoices books have still struggled to escape the shadows of diversity books written by non-marginalized authors, there is one book that has gained an unprecedented amount of attention and praise. In mid-2016, an untitled manuscript described as a Black Lives Matter-inspired project was submitted to YA fiction publishers. The author, Angie Thomas, started writing the book in 2009 after the shooting of Oscar Grant. She was spurred to finish the manuscript after the many shootings of black men by police in 2012-2014. This immediately became a topic of discussion in the mass media, and pro-diversity sources speculated that the manuscript could revolutionize diversity in YA fiction. Later titled *The Hate U Give*, the book was the subject of a bidding war between 13 major publishers.¹¹⁷ Upon

¹¹⁶ Thomas, Angie. Acknowledgements.

¹¹⁷ Kirch, Claire. “Balzer + Bray Prevails in 13-House Auction for YA Debut.” *Publishers Weekly*, 25 Feb. 2016, www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-book-news/article/69501-balzer-bray-prevails-in-13-house-auction-for-ya-debut.html.

release in 2017, it immediately hit number one on the New York Times Bestseller's List and remained there for multiple months.

The Hate U Give begins with 16 year-old Starr Carter attending a party in her hometown of Garden Heights. While there, Starr sees her friend Khalil for the first time in a while. They were best friends growing up, but have become more distanced since Starr started attending Williamson Prep, a private school about an hour away from Garden Heights. While at this party, a gang fight breaks out, and Khalil and Starr leave. Khalil offers to drive Starr home, and on the way they are pulled over by a policeman. Even though Khalil and Starr comply with the policeman's requests, they are not told why they were pulled over. When Khalil starts to get frustrated and gets out of the car to talk with the policeman, the policeman shoots him in the back. The policeman then points his gun at Starr until backup arrives, and Starr holds Khalil while he dies. Khalil's death becomes a national headline, and Starr's life is marked by her grief. Since attending Williamson, Starr has mastered the art of codeswitching between Williamson Starr and Garden Heights Starr. She has amassed white friends and a white boyfriend at Williamson. But most of her life is still in Garden Heights with her mom, dad, and two brothers. After Khalil's death, it becomes even more difficult for her to balance the two parts of her life.

While *The Hate U Give* was strongly supported by many white readers pre-release, upon publication complaints surfaced that *The Hate U Give* was racist against white people. "If a person were to stop talking with someone because they felt uncomfortable with that person's skin color, wouldn't that be racism?" writes a one-star reviewer. "Wouldn't treating someone with hostility just because of their race,

something they can't help, and are born with, be racist? Then what, I ask you, is this.”¹¹⁸ And then they quote the following scene from the book, an argument between Star and her white boyfriend, Chris:

“You can’t even tell me what’s going on!”
 “You’re white, okay?” I yell. “You’re white!”
 Silence.
 “I’m white?” he says, like he’s just hearing that for the first time.
 “What the fuck’s that got to do with anything?”
 “Everything! You’re white, I’m black. You’re rich, I’m not.”¹¹⁹

The focus on the empathy gap in YA fiction has acclimated white readers to the portrayal of differences as the enemy that must be overcome in order for us to return to our universal human identity. As previously mentioned, it is difficult to imagine how a YA novel could refute the necessity and inevitability of closing the empathy gap. But that is exactly what is being done in *The Hate U Give*. In that scene, Starr maintains that there are parts of her experience as a black girl that Chris will never be able to understand. Perhaps Chris could come to understand why Starr was upset if she spent the time explaining it to him – if, as so many white reviewers suggested, *Starr* made the effort to try to close the empathy gap between them. But Starr tell Chris at multiple points in the book that he won’t understand due to his experiences as a white man. She also makes no attempts to convince him to understand and expresses no sense of urgency that he must understand in order for her to feel okay. This unresolved empathy gap is so horrifying to many white readers that it is being conflated with discrimination.

¹¹⁸ Review of *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. *Goodreads*, 18 Nov. 2016, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1815871183>

¹¹⁹ Thomas, Angie. *The Hate U Give*. Balzer & Bray, 2017, 161.

To use YALSA's words, in this way Starr and Chris "forever remain strangers." They do, however, also remain friends. Ironically, while so many white readers are upset with how Starr treats Chris, Chris the character doesn't remain fazed by it. Chris stands by Starr after the grand jury doesn't indict the cop, and goes with her to the protests, even if he doesn't understand. More dramatic is the change in relationship between Starr and her best friend Hailey. Hailey continuously states that Khalil deserved to die because he was a gang member and tells Starr that she needs to get over what happened to him. Starr does not try to convince Hailey that she is wrong, and instead distances herself from her. When Hailey continues to demand that Starr apologize to her for how she's acted since Khalil's death, saying that "the cop probably did everyone a favor," Starr punches her in the face and they get into a huge fight in the halls of Williamson Prep.¹²⁰

The Hate U Give is not an empathy novel but an *empowerment* novel. Starr does not cater to Chris's insistence that he should be able to understand and instead values her own understanding of her feelings over his. She does not exist as the object of a lesson for Hailey about why her racism is bad. And finally, Starr learns that her voice matters without having to be told so by a white character. *The Hate U Give* is empowering because it represents Starr's experience in a way that would not have been done by a white author. Because Angie Thomas shares the racial identity of Starr, she did not have to try to understand a different reality to represent Starr's grief. If *The Hate U Give* had been written by a white author, it would have become a problem novel, or a "Special Story About Racism," because the white author would

¹²⁰ Ibid., 341.

only know how to represent Starr's grief in a way that relied on her feelings being understood and accepted by white characters. The fact that Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* is so different from a white author's version reroutes the root of YA fiction's diversity problem from an empathy gap to the authors themselves. This is terrifying because, when it comes to writing diversity, non-marginalized authors are terrified of doing it wrong but also don't want to be told they can't do it right. And so they cling onto the empathy story as one that can bring us all back to our innate humanness, ignoring the ways that this might make true empowerment of marginalized characters impossible.

This panic can be seen in the controversy surrounding a book called *The Black Witch* by Laurie Forest. *The Black Witch* is a fantasy YA novel about unlearning prejudices, in which Elloren, who is the descendent of the all-powerful Black Witch, attends a prestigious university that admits "all manner of people," meaning breeds that she has been taught are lesser. The synopsis reads:

Everything Elloren thought she knew will be challenged and torn away. Her best hope of survival may be among the most unlikely band of misfits...if only she can find the courage to trust those she's been taught to hate and fear.¹²¹

Seven weeks before the book's publication date, a bookstore employee and book blogger named Shauna Sinyard received an advanced reader's copy of the book. After reading it, Sinyard published a lengthy review on her blog describing how *The Black Witch* was "the most dangerous, offensive book" she had ever read.¹²² In her review, she pointed out that the process of Elloren un-learning her prejudices was extremely

¹²¹ Forest, Laurie. *The Black Witch*. Harlequin Teen, 2017.

¹²² Sinyard, Shauna. Review of *The Black Witch* by Laurie Forest. *Blogspot*, 16 Mar. 2017, <http://b00kstorebabe.blogspot.com/2017/03/review-black-witch-by-laurie-forest.html/>.

drawn out, and first involved many scenes that showed the other fantastical characters in the novel – whom were coded as characters of color – treating Elloren terribly. This bullying at the hands of the other characters serves to only support and strengthen Elloren’s belief that they are lesser. Elloren then only starts to respect the others when she discovers that her own blood is “un-pure.” This creates a dynamic where Elloren must come to love the others in order to love herself, and she is not necessarily learning that she was wrong but adapting under pressure. This is an ironic twist on un-learning prejudice as an escape from egotistical self-interest, where Elloren develops pity and empathy only so she can maintain her self-interest. And within Elloren’s redemption arc she always remains the hero, meaning she never suffers consequences for the terrible ways she previously treated others. Essentially, Sinyard stated that *The Black Witch* was “ultimately written for white people,” and Laurie Forest did not think about how the characters of color had to be disempowered in order for Elloren to learn.¹²³

A much less comprehensive summary of Sinyard’s review was later described in an article on Vulture.com that believed Sinyard had unfairly targeted *The Black Witch*. The article, written by Kat Rosenfield, stated in its tagline that “Young Adult books are being targeted in intense social-media callouts, draggings, and pile-ons – sometimes before anybody’s even read them.”¹²⁴ The article criticized the way in which Sinyard’s sharing of her review on Twitter led to many authors – #ownvoices authors and mostly people of color – banning together to ask readers to avoid the

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Rosenfield, Kat. “The Toxic Drama on YA Twitter.” *Vulture*, 7 Aug. 2017, www.vulture.com/2017/08/the-toxic-drama-of-ya-twitter.html.

book and Harlequin Teen to delay or cancel its release. Rosenfield dislikes that Laurie Forest, “a newcomer with a minimal presence online,” was “bullied” in this way and believes that these sorts of Twitter-driven discussions are a sign of “growing dysfunction in the world of YA publishing.”¹²⁵

Ironically, the article argues that Sinyard did not fully read *The Black Witch* and yet quotes from their review in a way that suggests Rosenfield might have not read the full review. Sinyard’s review, while definitely harsh on *The Black Witch*, is not 9,000 words of chatter, but comprehensive and at points does very good analysis. Rosenfield’s main dislike of the review comes from the assumption that most readers’ dislike of the book stemmed *solely* from the review, meaning they never gave the book a fair chance. Even if this was so, the idea that a person of color should have to read the whole 600-page book before deciding if it is truly harmful does not take into account the ways in which they differently experience life and harm. Ultimately, Rosenfield privileges the opinions of those who “agree that the book is firmly anti-prejudice” over those who say it is racist and refuses to acknowledge that it could potentially be both – that Forest intended to have an anti-prejudice message while doing it in a way that relies on the disempowerment of characters of color.¹²⁶

While Rosenfield believes in *The Black Witch*’s pro-learning message, she seems unwilling to learn from those who criticize it. She comes down on those upset about *The Black Witch* much harder than Sinyard did on the book itself, and with a greater impact. *The Black Witch* still has an above average rating on sites like Amazon and Goodreads and was published according to plan. On the other hand, the

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

critics were admonished for being cruel, judging, and unfair. Their aggression towards books they disliked was labeled the cause of YA fiction's dysfunction, and no responsibility was put on Forest for not thinking through the impact of her novel. Rosenfield's article went viral and was even later showcased on NPR.¹²⁷ Meanwhile, the reactions of Forest's critics were embraced by many mass media sources as a flaw in YA fiction's diversity movement.

This accusation was protested by an article published one week later on Bustle.com that also received a decent amount of exposure. YA authors Sona Charaipotra and Zoraida Cordova wrote that what Rosenfield called censorship is really growing pains. And the ones experiencing the pains are white authors:

Most YA books are about white people and are written by white people. That's what must change and that's what most of those so-called 'toxic' twitter debates are about. A book is criticized and white sensibilities are hurt. [...] When people who've historically held positions of privilege feel their privilege threatened, or like they won't get a 'free pass' anymore, they can sometimes perceive that as reverse discrimination rather than an evening out of the playing field.¹²⁸

Charaipotra and Cordova are re-asserting that an original goal of the diversity movement was for more marginalized voices to write and publish books, and this goal has been obscured by a focus on non-marginalized authors. While criticism of books will always exist, and that might be a sensitive topic in its own right, non-marginalized authors panic when criticized for writing diversity because this is a displacement of their power, both within the books – it is *Chris*, who is pushed to the

¹²⁷ Simon, Scott. "YA Books Are Targeted In Intense Social Media Callouts, Rosenfield Says." *Weekend Edition Saturday*, NPR, www.npr.org/2017/08/12/542998573/ya-books-are-targeted-in-intense-social-media-callouts-rosenfield-says.

¹²⁸ Charaipotra, Sona, and Zoraida Córdova. "How YA Twitter Is Dismantling White Supremacy, One Book At A Time." *Bustle*, 18 Aug. 2017, www.bustle.com/p/how-ya-twitter-is-trying-to-dismantle-white-supremacy-one-book-at-a-time-76946.

side, not Starr – and in writing YA fiction in general. Ultimately, this perception of criticism as reverse discrimination is reflective of the responses to *The Hate U Give* and those who have spoken up for #ownvoices. Now, the mass media have entered this YA fiction-centric debate to highlight the cruelty of marginalized voices, thus helping the transformation of the diversity movement into something far more conservative. The connection between author and representation is severed in order to re-focus the movement on issues of censorship and privilege intentions of empathy over results of empowerment.

II. THE HOMO SAPIENS AGENDA / SENSITIVITY READERS

In the pushback against #ownvoices, YA fiction has been placed under a spotlight regarding the amount of resources dedicated to teaching non-marginalized authors to do it right, and so they need to point to a book that *has* gotten it right. While books like *Symptoms of Being Human* and *Kids of Appetite* have been used as examples of positive representation by non-marginalized authors, they have not been hailed as a large-scale success of the empathetic framework, and their publicity never matched that of *The Hate U Give*. Members of the YA community who want to maintain the focus on non-marginalized authors need a book that is even *better* – and that book has been found in *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli. The book is about 16 year-old Simon Spier, who has fallen in love with a boy from his school that he has been communicating with through email. They both use pseudonyms when communicating, so neither of them know each other's identities, and no one in Simon's school or family knows he is gay. However, his secret is

threatened when a boy named Martin gets ahold of one of Simon's emails and says he will out him to the school if Simon doesn't help Martin get a date with Simon's best friend Abby.

Albertalli's book follows the same plot structure as *Symptoms of Being Human*, where the protagonist must decide whether to come out or be outed. About a third into the novel, Simon fails to get Abby to date Martin, as Abby has no feelings for him, and in a fit of rage Martin outs Simon to the school on Christmas Day, forcing Simon to come out to his family and friends. However, the book avoids some of the pitfalls of *Symptoms of Being Human* and similarly plotted YA novels. While the blackmail plotline kicks off the beginning of the story, there are many other plotlines that overtake it, especially once Martin has outed Simon. Once the abuse of Simon is discovered, Simon is never blamed or criticized for his responding behavior, as Riley was. Ultimately, the book does not end with Simon dis-empowered in the face of his outing, as the story is primarily a love story that ends happily for him.

Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda laments a world in which everyone is encouraged to be the same:

Why is straight the default? Everyone should have to declare one way or another, and it shouldn't be this big awkward thing whether you're straight, gay, bi, or whatever.¹²⁹ [...] White shouldn't be the default any more than straight should be the default. There shouldn't even be a default.¹³⁰

This default is the "homo sapiens agenda" that Simon is up against, and he must overcome it in his forced outing and adjustment to being gay. He also must be taught to practice what he preaches. Simon spends a lot of time trying to guess the identity

¹²⁹ Albertalli, Becky. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. Balzer & Bray, 2015. 146.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 269.

of his crush, without success. At the end of the book, his crush is revealed to be a black boy, and Simon admits that he assumed his crush would be white. In this way, Simon also learns to extend his empathy while those around him learn to accept his sexuality.

The book does veer into suspicious territory when Martin returns after his outing of Simon to hysterically apologize for his actions. “I just seriously didn’t think it would be such a big thing [to out you],” Martin says to Simon after an incident where he is bullied at school. “I mean, I didn’t think people still did shit like that.”¹³¹ Simon does not accept his apologies and tells him to leave him alone, but Martin continues to get space in the book for his apologies and insistences that he had no idea Simon would be treated like this. While Simon is never forced to accept Martin’s apology, here Martin’s empathetic journey is still shown as a redemptive arc after his continual blackmailing of Simon for the first half of the book. This is an aspect of the storyline that many reviewers of the book appreciated, even though Simon must endure public humiliation at school for the rest of the semester.

Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda came out in 2015, and while it was initially met with a pretty neutral response, it is now being praised by many in the industry and the media as one of the best and most revolutionary YA books of this moment in the diversity movement. Albertalli, who is a straight white female author, has been praised for her ability to authentically portray the experiences of a gay boy.

¹³¹ Ibid., 195-196.

Specifically, the book is being held up as a feat of empathy – as one reviewer wrote, “It takes a great degree of empathy to be a good author; Albertalli has it in spades.”¹³²

This phrasing should sound familiar – it is no coincidence that *empathy* is being employed here. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* displays the success of the guides for non-marginalized authors, the perfection of the empathetic framework, and tops it off with all the characters coming to understand each other a little bit more than they did before. Similar to Jeff Garvin, Albertalli has her own research story. She worked as a clinical psychologist for years, and she was inspired to write this book from her experiences working with LGBTQ and non-binary children. She has said that “Simon sort of showed up in my head fully formed” and she never struggled to connect with him as a person.¹³³ But much of the story focuses on the process of him coming out, which Albertalli couldn’t directly relate to, and she is ultimately speaking on behalf of LGBTQ youth who have experienced it.

While the book is currently the object of a praise fest, it was criticized upon its release in 2015:

Simon, the sweet but clueless protagonist, muses that girls have an easier time coming out than boys, because their lesbianism strikes others as alluring. At a book signing, several people approached Albertalli to complain that the scene played too readily into a narrative they’d heard many times before. Online, commenters condemned the “fetishization of queer girls” in the book as ‘offensive.’ Albertalli hadn’t originally given the passage a second thought: the character was obviously unworldly; elsewhere, he asserts that all Jews come from Israel.¹³⁴

¹³² Whyte, Marama. “Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda' Book Review.” *Hypable*, 19 Mar. 2015, www.hypable.com/simon-vs-the-homo-sapiens-agenda-book-review/.

¹³³ “Author Interview: Becky Albertalli.” *YA Fictionados*, 27 May 2015, yafictionados.blogspot.com/2015/05/author-interview-becky-albertalli.html.

¹³⁴ Waldman, Katy. “Is My Novel Offensive?” *Slate Magazine*, 8 Feb. 2017, www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2017/02/how_sensitivity_readers_from_minority_groups_are_changing_the_book_publishing.html

In reaction to this criticism, Albertalli has said in interviews that she was “crushed that her book had alienated members of the exact community she had hoped to reach.”¹³⁵ She is now very out-spoken about the importance of white authors not getting defensive when their books are criticized, and the importance of trusting the opinions of voices who share the characters’ identities. In an amplification and perfection of the John Green effect, Albertalli has become a spokesperson for the good, empathetic white author that we all need, who *can* write diversity correctly. I am critical of the praise given to *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* within this diversity movement where the empathy of stories written by non-marginalized authors continues to be celebrated more than stories written by #ownvoices authors. The embracement and celebration of *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* by non-marginalized authors as an empathetic success designates how the book could be used as a reason why we *don’t* need more content created by LGBTQ-identifying authors when straight authors can do it just as well, or perhaps even do it better.

While Albertalli is being praised for her ability to close the empathy gap, she has also said in interviews that she relied on several sensitivity readers to check Simon’s story for problems and make sure his voice was accurate.¹³⁶ “Sensitivity readers” are a type of beta reader, utilized when an author is writing about an identity that they do not share. They became widely used under that name in YA fiction in early 2017, and while authors can request that their publisher assign them sensitivity

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ro, Christine. “On the Use of Sensitivity Readers in Publishing.” *Literary Hub*, 18 Jan. 2017, lithub.com/on-the-use-of-sensitivity-readers-in-publishing/.

readers, many YA publishers are now requiring non-marginalized authors to use them.

Albertalli's use of sensitivity readers is interesting considering that, at the same time as *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* is being praised by the press, sensitivity readers are coming under fire from many skeptics in the mass media. In December 2017 the New York Times published an article called "In an Era of Online Outrage, Do Sensitivity Readers Result in Better Books, or Censorship?"¹³⁷ While the article incorporates opinions from people who fear the censoring power of sensitivity readers and people who find them to be an integral part of the process, in the end the author Alexandra Alter veers on the side of worrying that critics who deem books as harmful are being too sensitive.

Alter rehashes the story of *The Black Witch* and then details the fate of *American Heart* by Laura Moriarty, a book about a dystopian American where all Muslims are being sent to detainment camps, and a teenage girl who eventually learns to overcome her prejudice against Muslims. *American Heart* was heavily criticized in a similar manner to *The Black Witch*, but despite all the bad reviews it was still released on time and has an above average rating on Amazon and Goodreads. In response to her critics, Moriarty says she is worried about the state of affairs in the YA diversity world: "I do wonder, in this environment, what books aren't being released. There was no sensitivity reader in the world that was going to make

¹³⁷ Alter, Alexandra. "In an Era of Online Outrage, Do Sensitivity Readers Result in Better Books, or Censorship?" *The New York Times*, 24 Dec. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/12/24/books/in-an-era-of-online-outrage-do-sensitivity-readers-result-in-better-books-or-censorship.html.

[*American Heart*] O.K.”¹³⁸ Moriarty says that her book is incredibly important for fighting against the islamophobia that is increasing in today’s political climate. But if, as Moriarty felt, no Muslim reader was going to find *American Heart* good for publication, that surely should say something to Moriarty about who was being harmed by her novel. While the opinions of the entire Muslim population of the United States are surely widespread, writing off the ones of those who dislike *American Heart* as censorship is completely dis-empowering them in favor of what is supposedly an empathetic mission.

Here Moriarty – and this article in general – is returning the accusation of censorship as a powerful distraction from issues of harm and dis-empowerment. A defense against the censorship accusation was published by *Vulture.com* in the form of an interview with Dhonielle Clayton, a YA fiction author and sensitivity reader who was quoted in the *New York Times* article.¹³⁹ Clayton tweeted her frustration with how she was portrayed in the article, writing: “the reason I’ve done over 35 sensitivity reads this year alone is [because] publishers aren’t hiring black content creators but everyone wants to write about black people.”¹⁴⁰ This echoes the issue that, while writing diversity in YA fiction is on the rise, the majority of the authors are still white. In her *Vulture.com* interview, Clayton explained that this spike has taken place because:

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Shapiro, Lila. “What the Job of a Sensitivity Reader Is Really Like.” *Vulture*, 5 Jan. 2018, www.vulture.com/2018/01/sensitivity-readers-what-the-job-is-really-like.html/.

¹⁴⁰ @brownbookworm. "I'd also like to discuss how the reason I've done over 35 sensitivity reads this year alone is b/c publishers aren't hiring black content creators but everyone wants to write about black people." *Twitter*, 24 Dec. 2017, 10:32 AM, twitter.com/brownbookworm/status/944968984725721090.

When *We Need Diverse Books* came out, good-meaning white folks wanted to answer the call. It's like, 'I'm not racist, I'm not ablest, I'm not homophobic.' [...] The fact is that sensitivity reading is a band-aid over a hemorrhaging problem in our industry. That's what we should really be talking about — that's what real censorship looks like. The systematic erasure and blockage of people of color from the publishing industry.¹⁴¹

Clayton, who is also one of the executive chair members of WNDB, is directly acknowledging the contradiction that has taken place with non-marginalized authors' embracement of WNDB. Clayton refers to the non-marginalized authors' good intentions, but points out that their desire to prove they aren't racist, homophobic, etc. by writing diversity does not address those actual issues. If the hemorrhage goes back to an all-white all-male panel of authors talking about publishing diversity, then this problem isn't going to be solved by white authors writing diversity. If the true empowerment of marginalized identities in YA fiction will come from #ownvoices stories, then empathy cannot bridge this gap. But as long as conversations surrounding diversity are centering non-marginalized voices, crutches like sensitivity readers will continue to be created in order to support the conclusion that non-marginalized authors can *learn* enough empathy to write diversity in YA fiction in a way that will also be empowering for marginalized readers and characters.

In other words, there are reasons to criticize the use of sensitivity readers, but that reason is not censorship of non-marginalized authors. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* is less dis-empowering than the majority of its peer books, but even all the empathy in the world can't allow Becky Albertalli to literally *know* the reality of a boy like Simon. Yet Albertalli's book is being praised as a groundbreaking feat over YA books written by a Simon, and her empathy is highlighted as the way out of

¹⁴¹ Shapiro, Lila.

this diversity deficit, while the voices who helped her to “know” Simon’s reality are accused of censorship. The real censorship here, as Clayton writes, is the continued usage of sensitivity readers to prevent the inclusion of marginalized voices as YA authors. As another article on the practice states, “the stomach-churning image of a white person wafted down the path to literary achievement by invisible minorities remains.”¹⁴² An author can call out the Homo Sapiens Agenda in their book while still upholding it in other ways. And it remains beneficial for Vulture.com to defend sensitivity readers, because that is ultimately a defense of having non-marginalized authors write diversity in YA fiction. Meanwhile, #ownvoices authors who bring their books to publishers will continue to be told that the publisher already has a story about their experience, and maybe they should be a sensitivity reader for that story instead.

Dhonielle Clayton’s full response to the New York Times story on censorship is worth a read, as it is beautifully spot on:

Hey [New York Times], as one of the sensitivity readers quoted, I’d love to write about how children’s book publishing privileges white/cis/het/able bodied voices and censors the marginalized, how publishing gives that group license, capital, and power to use marginalized narratives. [...] I’d also like to discuss how white folks love to hold onto racist narratives like *Huck Finn* and *Mockingbird* and worry that sensitivity readers wouldn’t have allowed these ‘wonderful gems’ to exist. [...] Why are white folks so scared about these books about historical, systemic, black pain being taken away or censored? What excites you so much about these books and their depiction of the dehumanization of black folks? Or do you not want any commentary from the folks whose community you’re writing about? [...] You might have to ask our opinions if you want your narrative [to be] *gasp* *authentic*. Long story short, [...] I want to have a real conversation about sensitivity readers that doesn’t center white writers in their feelings about criticism, but rather why we’re here as a publishing industry. [...] I want to talk about how children’s books are forms of cultural indoctrination and what happens when all the mirrors and windows are written by one published group. I am tired of *not* talking about

¹⁴² Waldman, Katy.

the real issues – white supremacist systems in the publishing industry – when we have these conversations about sensitivity readers and cultural experts and people writing outside of their experience. Let’s have some real talk.¹⁴³

While there was value in exploring the reactions to the sensitivity reader debate, I ultimately wish to shift the analysis away from whether sensitivity readers should be used and back to the focus on the non-marginalized voice in conversations about writing diversity in YA fiction. Clayton’s response aptly summarizes the issue that has been the driving force behind this thesis: so much of what has been done to increase the representation of diversity has also been done to avoid an influx of marginalized authors that would upset the amount of power the established authors have over the genre. The non-marginalized authors who have spoken up in favor of diversity have put themselves in a trap, because if the goal of diversity is ever truly accomplished they will inevitably be de-centered. Empathy is their weapon of choice because it creates an exchange in which they are still needed and their presence is necessary for change.

III. THE DESERT OF EMPATHY

The dilemma of the non-marginalized author who both wants to campaign for greater diversity – because to do so is the proper liberal pro-community thing to do – and doesn’t want to lose their spot as a valued author is shown by the half-happy half-upset reactions that many pro-diversity authors showed towards *The Hate U Give*. Insisting that everyone needs to read this book *and* that we should make sure to not participate in reverse discrimination is an attempt to straddle this line. But embracing

¹⁴³ @brownbookworm. Thread of 10 tweets. *Twitter*, 24 Dec. 2017, 10:31AM – 11:12AM. <https://twitter.com/brownbookworm/status/944968733768015877/>.

empathy in this way has also doomed non-marginalized to feel this intense panic about becoming irrelevant, when that is not the way things have to be.

Nietzsche extended his analysis of pity to comment on its broader role in a society that has “a triumphant belief in progress.”¹⁴⁴ This focus on social progress asks individuals to work towards the development of the community, and pity is often directed at those who are instead working for themselves. Nietzsche feels that an obsession with pity – or empathy – as a form of relationality in this context will actually sabotage any sort of social progress. This is because “the notion of [pity] and its cognates such as *sympathy* and *philanthropy* have become little more than bywords for a communitarianism that drives toward the complete adaption of the individual to the whole.”¹⁴⁵

This statement tweaks my earlier description of a society focused on progress to say that communitarianism asks the individual to *sacrifice* themselves for the whole. Nietzsche is addressing the contradiction that pity is presented as an action that benefits the individual, when it really just benefits the overall group at the expense of the individual. This sacrifice means that there remains no balance between individual and community progress, and community progress is expected to take place even as individuals are dis-empowered and disparaged. According to Nietzsche, it is actually impossible for any true community progress to take place in this context, and all that comes from these communitarian actions is the destruction of both the social and the individual.

¹⁴⁴ Ure, 81.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

Another cognate of pity can easily be empathy, and it fits the same pattern of the empowerment of the individual being sacrificed so that those in power can learn to empathize with the other. Following Nietzsche's framework and the analysis done in the previous chapters, it is then *not* possible for diversity to be protected within an empathetic framework without also being eradicated. This issue addresses not just YA fiction's conception of empathy, but the simplicity of their approach to writing diversity. Even that word there, the monolithic *Diversity*, does not recognize a diverse group of people but "falsely produces a homogenous conception of who they are and what they want."¹⁴⁶ Diversity creates a sameness that goes back to an investment in a universal human experience. The fact that we must *find* this sameness through empathy means that the "diverse" begin with an *inhumanity*.

The problematic nature of desiring to find this sameness, this universal humanity, returns to Butler's warning that when "one speaks for another, to another, there is no way to collapse the distinction between the Other and oneself" – meaning that whatever sameness we create must also acknowledge and protect our differences. But "when we say 'we' we do nothing more than designate this very problematic."¹⁴⁷ The language we have created – words like "we" and "diversity" – are too easily used to *destroy* all difference instead of maintaining that we can sometimes be different and sometimes be the same, just as pity is used to destroy individuality instead of balancing it with community interests. If the diversity movement was successful, then the word *diversity* would no longer make sense. But this is not the path that YA fiction is currently on, because the success of the diversity movement would require

¹⁴⁶ Butler, 47.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

the displacement of the non-marginalized YA author. However, this displacement would not have to spell the *end* of the non-marginalized author. To say that it might is to worry about the non-marginalized author more than is necessary.

There are two different concerns behind the non-marginalized author's fear of displacement. The first is that, if YA fiction successfully becomes a more diverse genre in which marginalized authors are writing their own story, there will be no place for the non-marginalized author. This stems from an integral misunderstanding of what movements like WNDB and #ownvoices are invested in. Certainly no one is saying that non-marginalized authors, if they aren't writing diversity, can't write YA novels. If marginalized voices are being given equal power in YA fiction, then #ownvoices would not give any attention to what non-marginalized authors were doing – that is, of course, as long as they weren't writing harmfully stereotyped stories.

The second concern is that the non-marginalized author will continuously be expected to only write diversity, and there will be no demand for books about their own experiences. This is rather ludicrous, as the institutional power of the white straight character is so ingrained in media that it is difficult to imagine its complete disappearance. Also, the white straight readers of YA fiction will continue to be drawn to stories that they can directly relate to. There is certainly a way for the non-marginalized author to write a book that focuses on their own experience and is still popular without treading on the toes of any marginalized authors. Imagining this scenario goes back to the original request of “positive representation first and

foremost, but a variety of representation ultimately.”¹⁴⁸ For some reason, this was deemed impossible, and the mission switched to a variety of representation *first* and positive representation *ultimately*. Putting an emphasis on #ownvoices authors simply undoes this switch and allows for books like *The Hate U Give* to lead the way and books like *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* to follow.

It is ironic that non-marginalized authors fear the self-sufficiency of #ownvoices authors, because if they embodied a similar self-sufficiency and returned to writing about their own experiences then they likely wouldn't feel so panicked. But an unspoken effect of the diversity movement has been to make shameful the non-marginalized author who writes a book with a non-marginalized protagonist. This shame only has cause to exist in a scenario where non-marginalized authors are taking all the responsibility for writing diversity because of their refusal to include or listen to marginalized voices. A version of YA fiction where marginalized authors are celebrated for writing of their own experiences *and* non-marginalized authors continue to write about their own experiences avoids the problematic nature of teaching non-marginalized authors to write the other.

The argument that non-marginalized authors can write books about their own experiences without running into trouble could be complicated by pointing out that fiction novels will *always* include an *other* – meaning that even if the protagonist shares the identity of the author, there are always side characters in the novel that vary by experience in some way, even if it is not race. And ultimately I cannot oversimplify differences in experiences and say, for example, that a tall author

¹⁴⁸ writingwithcolor. “Stereotyped vs Nuanced Characters and Audience Perception...”

writing the experience of a short person avoids all problems of mis-representation. In this scenario, the definition of diversity could be extended to include even the smallest differences that effect how a person experiences life, and the issue of writing the other would become unavoidable in fiction. And to a certain extent, that is true. However, the current movement for writing diversity in YA fiction is focusing mostly on protagonists, meaning the point of view through which the story is told and the character whose experience is problematized. The latter refers to YA fiction's previously mentioned affinity for the problem novel. The genre's focus on exploring identity and teaching truths about the world requires storylines in which an experience is dissected, and all its flaws are laid out for the world to see, culminating in the teaching of a lesson about how to live or, more commonly, how to treat other people. This is when representation can become tenuous, as the characters exist not just as people but as lessons.

However, a white author writing a black secondary character whose involvement in the story only supports the protagonist's journey is different than a white author writing a black protagonist and expanding at length on what their life is like and the issues they face as someone who is black. It is true that the former is currently criticized, but again that is only in a scenario where black authors are not given a chance to write stories about the experience of being black and white authors are controlling the only opportunities for representation. The focus should not be on the fact that fiction always includes an *other*, but on the relationship between what is considered to be positive representation and who is writing said representation. Of course, YA fiction novels can and most likely always will be criticized for something

– that is simply a fact of creating art, as there will be always someone who doesn't like that art, or who finds some aspect of it problematic. Non-marginalized authors should not look for a path that leads to a guarantee of no criticism, because that path simply does not exist.

The empathetic framework instills in non-marginalized authors an irrational fear of letting people write their own stories, and this fear has led to a rather hysterical moral panic. Nietzsche believes that self-cultivation – that narcissism that is oh so feared – can actually facilitate a better relationship with difference by enriching “the relationship between self and other.” To explain this, he invokes an image of “the self-enclosed garden”: each person is free to create their own individual garden that can flourish on its own, but the garden is left open for others to come and go.¹⁴⁹ This is “Nietzsche's alternative to the desert of pity” – or the desert of empathy in which panicked conversations about research and authenticity and mastering a reality that one has never experienced run rampant. The non-marginalized author can write the books that they desire to write, which will likely focus on a protagonist like themselves, and in doing so are “[cultivating] oneself as a paradise garden.”¹⁵⁰ But the gate is open, and others can come to read while the non-marginalized author reads the work of others.

The desert of empathy is a place that has forced the diversity conversation to stay centered on non-marginalized authors. It hides the issue of the exclusion of marginalized voices from YA fiction and makes white fears the deciding factor in what “writing diversity in YA fiction” means. Not only that, but the desert of

¹⁴⁹ Ure, 84.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 85.

empathy fools so many well-intentioned non-marginalized authors into believing that empathy is truly the best way to support marginalized readers. The intention is always to have empathy for those who are categorized as “diverse,” but the result uses the “diverse” as a tool to teach empathy to others, and this ultimately does not take the concerns of the “diverse” into account.

The contradiction in YALSA’s point on empowerment once again shines through:

To see oneself in the pages of a young adult book is to receive the reassurance that one is not alone after all, not other, not alien but, instead, a viable part of a larger community of beings who share a common humanity.¹⁵¹

To not be alone is not the same as being a viable part of a community that shares a common humanity. The dangers of “common humanity” as a foreclosure of difference have already been addressed in this thesis, and to combine that with the importance of serving the *community* instead of *oneself* is even more incompatible with a concept of empowerment. This contradiction is further established by YALSA’s final point that YA fiction helps young adults to “become civilized.” To become civilized is not to know that you are valid as you are, but to know that there is a place for you within a community, a role that you need to fall into that will require you to shed some of your difference. In this conception of YA fiction’s role, for a person to be empowered in their difference is dangerous, because it might cause them to *not* embrace the humanity they share with others and, like Chris and Starr in *The Hate U Give*, “forever remain strangers.” The desert of empathy is a place where diversity must be taught as a category of people who require not just civilizing, but

¹⁵¹ “The Value of Young Adult Literature.”

saving, and this gives non-marginalized readers the moral justification they need to raise themselves further up on a pedestal.

This potential for security is why so many non-marginalized authors have chosen this discourse, perhaps not realizing what it is really saying, or perhaps grateful for the opportunity to stay centered. This is how We Need Diverse Books changed from an organization angry about the domination of YA fiction by white straight men to an organization that is embraced by the empathetic mission. In February 2018, Ellen Oh tweeted a point of view quite different from that espoused by WNDB's website, perhaps expressing her frustration at this transformation:

I'm going to say some things and a lot of people aren't going to like it. [...] So I get a lot of emails from white writers that say: 'We need diverse books, that's why I'm writing one! Can you help me?' Guys, this is another way you are centering the conversation on whiteness. This movement was never about white people. Yes you should write diversely, people your world accurately. But the diversity movement has always been about POC telling their stories. Celebrating our stories. And yes we need intersectional stories, but POC are also intersectional. White people, write your white MC stories. There will always be a market for them. But don't be afraid of peopling your world with POC, LGBTQIA, and those from the disabilities communities. But do it well. And help celebrate and boost the voices of the writers from those communities.¹⁵²

To see Ellen Oh write that the diversity movement in YA fiction was never about white people is both amazing and alarming considering that is exactly who this movement been made to be about. This statement from Oh is very different from the supportive one she gave to a white female writer in 2015, in which she wrote: "I really appreciate your asking this question and talking about your awareness of the

¹⁵² @ElloEllenOh. Thread of 4 tweets. *Twitter*, 17 Feb. 2018, 10:22AM – 10:24AM. <https://twitter.com/ElloEllenOh/status/964897877960151041/>.

privilege you have. What a big and positive step you've taken just by doing that!"¹⁵³ Now, her response would likely be that a better way for this author to become aware of her privilege is to give support to marginalized voices writing diversity, or that it is not Oh's responsibility to teach her how to write diversity.

Oh also wrote that the last time she expressed an opinion like this on Twitter, she was harassed so heavily that she left the social media platform.¹⁵⁴ This type of harassment, and the insanity of the desert of empathy, was demonstrated when a Twitter user responded, "It is all against white writers now. Racism is racism and you should knock it off. Celebrate white writers also. 'Diversity' never includes them."¹⁵⁵ This conception of "diversity" as excluding white authors is the hallmark of the place where the diversity movement in YA fiction went awry. The movement, while started by marginalized voices, was integrated into the industry as a movement built on the language of diversity, which is a way for those in power to speak about the other and not a way for the other to speak about themselves. Worrying about non-marginalized authors is only necessary if one places themselves in a desert of empathy that refuses to allow even the most powerful to experience any sort of loss.

Ellen Oh has backed this alternative for non-marginalized authors by writing that white authors should not be afraid to write their white protagonists and then have marginalized side characters. While this may seem counter-productive for the goal of

¹⁵³ elloellenoh. "Anonymous asked: Hi. I'm a straight cisgender white female writer..." *Oscr*, 22 Feb 2015, <http://elloellenoh.tumblr.com/post/111779637409/hi-im-a-straight-cisgender-white-female-writer/>.

¹⁵⁴ @elloellenoh. "I'm very aware of the fact that last time I did a thread like this, I was harassed so badly that I had to leave twitter...." *Twitter*, 17 Feb. 2018, 10:32 AM, twitter.com/ElloEllenOh/status/964900381846310912/.

¹⁵⁵ @RoseVictoria. "@elloellenoh Maybe not but it is all against white writers now...." *Twitter*, 17 Feb. 2018, 11:22AM, twitter.com/rosevictorian/status/964912936756985858/.

having a greater diversity of protagonists, it is not, because it embraces the need to give marginalized voices the space to write their own stories. Oh is reiterating the fact that it is not enough to just debate the diversity of representation within YA novels. To debate the diversity of protagonists in YA fiction is to debate the diversity of YA authors being published, and the two cannot be separated as much as non-marginalized authors have tried to do. Oh denouncing the research methods that she once celebrated is in line with Dhonielle Clayton denouncing the use of sensitivity readers as a way to keep non-marginalized authors centered.

And they are not alone in this. Justina Ireland, a fantasy YA author, spent two years maintaining and helping people use the Sensitivity Reader database. This was known as the best and most comprehensive database for authors to use when searching for a sensitivity reader. Ireland created the database as part of a group called Writing in the Margins, which has the goal of “helping underrepresented stories find their place.”¹⁵⁶ On a page about sensitivity readers that is no longer accessible on their website it said:

Here at Writing in the Margins we are most interested in helping authors from marginalized backgrounds get their stories published, but we also understand that authors will write outside of their own culture and experience, which is why we strongly suggest the use of a sensitivity reader.¹⁵⁷

However, a few days after Oh reminded twitter that this movement was never about white people, Ireland announced that she was discontinuing the database. In an article titled “Goodbye Sensitivity Reader Database,” she wrote that for years she has “mitigated disputes and advocated for publishers and authors alike to use Sensitivity

¹⁵⁶ “About Us.” *Writing in the Margins*, writeinthemargins.org/.

¹⁵⁷ “Sensitivity Readers.” *Writing in the Margins*, writeinthemargins.org/.

Readers as a way to attempt to get closer to the complicated truth of what it means to be a marginalized person.”¹⁵⁸ However, this work was time consuming and tiring for Ireland, as it meant that she was swept up in the fiery debate of whether sensitivity readers were a form of censorship or attempted exclusion of white authors. Ireland echoed Dhonielle Clayton’s sentiment that she has seen sensitivity readers be used by non-marginalized authors to maintain their power, as well as blamed by the author for any criticism or failure attributed to their book as well as not paid properly for their time. In parallel with Clayton and Oh’s thoughts, Ireland writes:

This was never the point of Sensitivity Readers, and the more I see this process abused by people already undertaking to tell the stories of others, the less I have been able to promote Sensitivity Reading as a boon to marginalized peoples. It is, in my estimation, another way for the voices already dominating the conversation to continue to talk over the oppressed. And I may not be much, but I will no longer use my time and energy to support such exploitation.¹⁵⁹

When the New York Times lodged a conservative attack at the pro-diversity side for sensitivity readers, there was potential for the pro-diversity side to retaliate by even more strongly backing their methods for supporting non-marginalized authors. Instead, they are responding by agreeing that sensitivity readers and support systems alike are damaging, or at least not in line with their original goals. Ellen Oh and WNDB distancing themselves from supporting the non-marginalized author is them returning to the original issue of an all-white all-male panel of authors. It is also an acknowledgement that empathy and empowerment do not work hand-in-hand because, as Ireland wrote, teaching empathy is “another way for the voices already

¹⁵⁸ Ireland, Justina. “Goodbye, Sensitivity Readers Database – Justina Ireland – Medium.” *Medium*, 26 Feb. 2018, medium.com/@justinaireland/goodbye-sensitivity-readers-database-e1cbc53044a9.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

dominating the conversation to continue to talk over the oppressed.” WNDB and company are leaving the desert of empathy and joining #ownvoices in a stance that refuses to entertain white fears and complaints. Left behind are those who cannot break away from a framework that values empathy at the expense of empowerment.

CONCLUSION

“We Saw the Same Sunset”

Why did *The Outsiders* stump the Young Adult Library Services Association?

For years prior to its release, many books with teenage protagonists were being marked as children’s/juvenile fiction or literary/adult fiction. But there was something different about *The Outsiders* that warranted its own category. One could argue that the book covered darker themes than other juvenile fiction novels – murder, abuse, class, etc. – and thus YALSA needed a way to signify that it was not for younger readers. But the fact that the book is often taught in middle school English curriculums signifies that this cannot be the whole story.

The Outsiders was different because it was not about the empowerment of its protagonist. It was about *recognition*. While *The Outsiders* does have a coming-of-age storyline, Ponyboy’s coming-of-age does not stem from a place of him empowering himself after the death of his friends. Instead, Ponyboy yearns to be understood by others, and desires to see himself in Cherry, and hopes that the Socs may come to understand the Greasers and vice versa. While Ponyboy is the protagonist of *The Outsiders* in that he is the narrator, it is not his growth that matters. What is highlighted at the end of the book is that Ponyboy takes on a community-wide goal of hoping to encourage change in how people see those different from themselves *everywhere*. *The Outsiders* stumped YALSA because it was an empathy story for teens the likes of had never been seen before.

With this as YA fiction's starting point, it then makes sense that the genre must follow *The Outsider's* footsteps and teach the universality of emotions like empathy, pity, and compassion. The conflict of YA fiction stories is often not an outside force that the protagonist must overcome, but the protagonist's identity. These main traits are covered by the first three points of YALSA's definition of YA:

1. YA fiction recognizes that young adults are "in evolution, in search of self and identity."¹⁶⁰
2. YA fiction allows young adults to see themselves on the page.
3. YA fiction can create understanding, compassion, and empathy in its readers.

These three points work together so well because presenting a possible identity first means problematizing it: Aza's OCD holds her back in *Turtles all the Way Down*; Riley's gender dysphoria causes them inner turmoil in *Symptoms of Being Human*; Vic's facial paralysis prevents him from communicating properly in *Kids of Appetite*; Darcy's ethnicity puts her between a rock and a hard place in *Afterworlds*; Simon's sexuality leads to him being manipulated in *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. Once the identity has been problematized, a reader can potentially recognize their hardships in the character's. And it is the character's *suffering* due to their identity that the young adult reader will identify with. This suffering then also becomes the tool for teaching young adults to respect the identities

¹⁶⁰ "The Value of Young Adult Literature."

that they don't share: Daisy respects Aza once she realizes that Aza's OCD makes life as difficult as being poor makes Daisy's; Solo apologizes to Riley once he realizes they are more vulnerable than he is; Darcy has further appreciation for the white author writing non-western characters after her dilemma with Yamaraj; Martin is apologetic for what he did to Simon after witnessing his public humiliation. Empathy is created for other identities through mirroring, which creates parallels between people's lives. This mirroring, however, ignores power dynamics in an attempt to simplify and equalize all types of suffering. The problems attributed to all of these identities then become, for a lack of better words, symptoms of being human.

The Outsiders presented us with the perfect framework for empathy, and it has become the perfect framework for writing diversity in YA fiction. In this context, writing diversity does not mean simply presenting different identities, but making them empathetic. Writing diversity is not just about allowing *all* young adults to see themselves reflected on the page but teaching young adults to empathize with identities they don't share. While this sounds very benign, and empathy is thought of as a social force that can do no harm, it is the requirement of suffering to problematize and represent an identity that allows this goal to become insidious. And despite YA fiction's empathetic origins, diversity organizations such as WNDB have presented a two-fold definition of the movement, as seen in WNDB's mission/vision statements:

OUR MISSION STATEMENT:

Putting more books featuring diverse characters into the hands of all children.

OUR VISION:

A world in which all children can see themselves in the pages of a book.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ "About WNDB."

These statements communicate the value not just of empowerment for marginalized identities, but for these marginalized identities to be understood by *all* children through reading. But while the goals of writing diversity in YA fiction are said to empathy *and* empowerment, this thesis has revealed that in these diversity novels it ends up being empathy *or* empowerment. There is a contradiction here that has stemmed from YA fiction's attachment to the idea that we can come to completely understand one another. This belief in the possibility of authentic understanding and embodiment of difference has led to an insistence on separating the author from their protagonist. And while it is certainly possible to say that to put limitations on who can write what based on real life experience is dangerous, or potentially a form of censorship, this argument ignores the existence of power dynamics and the complexities of the movement. Those who are asking for more and better representation in YA fiction are part of identity groups that have been marginalized not just through a lack of representation, but through negative stereotypes and generalized narratives created by those in power. Their empowerment would then come from representations that do not rely on the understanding of those people. To say that these identities can then be easily understood or completely known by those in power is in favor of empathy but also in conflict with empowerment.

YA fiction has attempted to avoid this contradiction by saying that there is an empathy gap, meaning the reason we currently cannot understand the experience of those different from us enough to empower them is because we are lacking empathy. But again, empathy in this context is not a selfless attempt to live for others or achieve equal recognition, but "a veiled means of assuaging narcissistic loss at the

other's expense."¹⁶² This empathy gap has been created by non-marginalized authors who are fearful of what might happen if it is decided that the writing of diversity should involve the publishing of a greater diversity of authors. In other words, the empathy gap exists to protect their power over the narratives of YA, and therefore its existence continues to make empowerment impossible.

These issues are exacerbated by the language of diversity. The use of the term "diversity" to represent all people and identities that have been marginalized in society and YA fiction designates that this movement is coming from those who are currently in power. The monolithic Diversity does not represent the interests of those who are meant to be a part of the category when leveraged by the non-"diverse." This is also true for the empathy gap – this *gap* that, if closed, will allow for perfect understanding between those in power and the marginalized is only meaningful when coming from the position of those in power. The empathy gap does not acknowledge how those that have been previously unrepresented might want to represent themselves without the help or guidance of those who have previously oppressed them. Only those in power have something to gain from the empathy gap being closed – if it were to happen the "diverse" would not get to speak and would instead be spoken for.

"Writing diversity in YA fiction" does not mean "creating representation for marginalized identities." It means "teaching a non-marginalized author to write diversity in YA fiction in a way *they* consider to be authentic." This approach, where marginalized authors are expected to train non-marginalized authors to write their

¹⁶² Ure, Michael. 68.

experiences, ensures that YA fiction and conversations about diversity stay centered on whiteness – or, more broadly, the non-marginalized author. When a Twitter user asked Ellen Oh how teaching non-marginalized authors centers whiteness, Oh responded, “[because] the call for diverse books is for [people of color] to tell their own stories not for white people to tell them for us.”¹⁶³ This Twitter user responded, “Wouldn't you want there to be more representation in the first place? There would be if you let people, [even] white ones, write things they want to write.”¹⁶⁴

This harkens back to a statement made in the “Writing with Color” guide: “With how limited representation is in the first place, marginalized people need non-stereotyped, positive representation first and foremost, but a variety of representation ultimately.”¹⁶⁵ This statement was assumedly meant to say that it is most important to first publish more marginalized authors who are writing about their own experiences instead of focusing on training non-marginalized authors. But this is the opposite of what the Twitter user is assuming marginalized readers would want. In the minds of those driving the diversity movement this statement has been flipped to say that it is most important to first have the pre-established YA authors write diversity – the John Greens of the world, standing on a rooftop, shouting “We Need Diverse Books!” – and only a secondary priority to get #ownvoices authors published. This method, which is the hole that the industry chose to jump into, is a much more complicated

¹⁶³ @ElloEllenOh. “Bc the call for diverse books is for POC to tell their own stories not for white people to tell them for us.” *Twitter*, 17 Feb. 2018, 9:36PM. twitter.com/ElloEllenOh/status/965067401623728128.

¹⁶⁴ LiberalDisappointment. “Wouldn't you want there to be more representation in the first place?...” *Twitter*, 17 Feb. 2018, 10:15PM. twitter.com/LDisappointment/status/965077236075450368

¹⁶⁵ writingwithcolor. “Stereotyped vs Nuanced Characters and Audience Perception...”

journey than that of publishing #ownvoices authors. But it is also the way to prevent the de-centering of the non-marginalized author and preserve the framework pioneered by *The Outsiders*.

The alternative is the mission of #ownvoices, which is truly empowering in that it allows those who have been silenced to speak with their own voices. But these books would not be empathy stories, as proven by *The Hate U Give*. They buck the recognition that Ponyboy desired in *The Outsiders* and say that those who have been marginalized do not need the understanding of the marginalizer to be empowered. In fact, they need the opposite, as the only way for them to leave behind their marginalized status is for the marginalizer to lose their status as the recognizer.

WNDB and company have made it clear that those who have been marginalized in YA fiction do not need empathy to acquire representation. In the words of Dhonielle Clayton, “I want to talk about how children’s books are forms of cultural indoctrination and what happens when all the mirrors and windows are written by one published group. [...] Let’s have some real talk.”¹⁶⁶

I’ll ask again: if there is no universal human experience to teach to, no one true reality that we can all come to understand through research, then what is there? This is a huge fear for those invested in YA fiction. While the genre has been thought of as rule-bending and ever-changing, it does have several principles that it relies on, and one of those is teaching a *truth* about the world. It therefore is built around the concept of universality. To say that experience contains irreducible specificities is to threaten the crux of the genre. But what is left behind are many particularities that

¹⁶⁶ @brownbookworm. Thread of 10 tweets. *Twitter*, 24 Dec. 2017, 10:31AM – 11:12AM. <https://twitter.com/brownbookworm/status/944968733768015877/>.

make experience complicated and make identities diverse categories within a larger category of humanity. Universality often erases all of these specificities in favor of a reminder that we are all human, which then marginalizes those who live those specificities. If we're going to truly diversify YA fiction we will have to accept that life and experience is much more complicated, and that there are some parts of experience that a writer will never be able to completely understand.

This is the loss that YA fiction is struggling with in relation to its aspirations for diversity. For established YA authors and community members to say that the genre should represent a diversity of identities and experiences still preserves universality, because it contains an unspoken caveat that the benefit of this diversity is that those in power can be exposed to it and expand their worldview. To practice the writing of diversity is scarier, because it reveals the specificities of experience that power dynamics have immortalized and the ways in which universality harms those who have been marginalized. It is then not just non-marginalized authors who might feel they are experiencing a loss, but all who are invested in YA fiction, because a departure from universality could feel like a mourning of something integral. However, to continue in this way is to fight against the empowering missions of WNDB and #ownvoices, even if that is not what we intend to do.

The characters in *Kids of Appetite* were stuck in the Hinton Vortex, and so are we. When S.E. Hinton revealed that Ponyboy was the author of *The Outsiders*, she created a loop of her writing Ponyboy, but also writing what Ponyboy would write if he experienced the death of his friends during a class war. This loop is so comforting because it promises the transference of experience through writing and assures the

author that their work could be seen as so authentic it is then attributed to the very character they created. This is the loop that we have tried to stay in through the investment in research as a way to vicariously live the life of a marginalized identity; or empathy as a way to embody the suffering of another; or sensitivity readers as a fool-proof way to fact-check the authenticity of a representation; or the sanctity of the author's intentions through the re-affirmation of truth in the Angelina Jolie Paradox.

To be invested in universality in the context of YA fiction is to believe in the transcendence of identity in Ponyboy saying, "we saw the same sunset." Seeing the similarities between him and Cherry might have made Ponyboy feel less alone, but it did not eradicate their differences, and believing that it does is a symptom of the Hinton Vortex. Members of the YA fiction community are worshipping this moment in *The Outsiders* because it speaks to the fantasy of eradication, but it does not first address the power dynamics and made Ponyboy and Cherry live different lives in the first place. The level of obsession with this dream of sameness is further indicated by the moment in *Kids of Appetite* where the characters dream about the spectacle Ponyboy and Cherry walking into the sunset and allowing it to burn – figuratively or literally – all difference. To leave behind the empathetic framework is not to lose YA fiction all together, but to depart from this place of desperation. To allow for the true inclusion and empowerment of those who have been marginalized, we must require an identification that does not rely on the recognition of those in power. We must aspire to have stories where no character feels they have authority over another because they see the same sunset, and where no character desires to be consumed by that sunset all together.

YA NOVELS DISCUSSED IN THIS THESIS

1. *Turtles all the Way Down* by John Green
2. *Symptoms of Being Human* by Jeff Garvin
3. *Kids of Appetite* by David Arnold
4. *Afterworlds* by Scott Westerfeld
5. *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas
6. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli