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***Fiction as Protest: Storytelling  
and the Spirit of BLM in YA  
Literature***

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*Ai miei genitori che mi hanno sempre sostenuta,  
ai miei nonni che mi sono sempre stati vicini,  
e a tutta la mia famiglia.*



# Table of contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	6
<b>1. Young Adult Literature and the Black Lives Matter Movement</b> .....	8
1.1 The Origins and Core Values of the Black Lives Matter Movement.....	8
1.2 Young Adult Literature as Activism: Narratives of Protest and Resistance.....	10
1.3 Race and Representation in Young Adult Literature.....	13
<b>2. Themes and Narrative Strategies in Black Lives Matter -themed Young Adult Texts</b> .....	18
2.1 Racism, Police Brutality, and the Struggle for Justice.....	18
2.2 The Representation of Black Identity in Young Adult Literature.....	22
2.3 Narrative Forms: Letters, Dual Perspectives, and Testimony.....	27
<b>3. Novels in Dialogue with the Black Lives Matter Movement</b> .....	34
3.1 <i>Dear Martin</i> by Nic Stone: Letters and the Search for Self.....	34
3.2 <i>All American Boys</i> by Jason Reynolds & Brendan Kiely: Dual Voices and Shared Responsibility.....	38
3.3 <i>Light It Up</i> by Kekla Magoon: Multi-Voiced Narratives of Protest and Community Response.....	44
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	51
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	53
<b>Riassunto in Italiano</b> .....	55

# Introduction

In the United States, literature has always been a reflection of social and political struggles, and this is particularly true for stories about race. From the Harlem Renaissance to contemporary Young Adult fiction, writers have used their work to challenge injustice, give voice to marginalized communities, and inspire reflection and activism. The Black Lives Matter movement, which emerged in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin, represents one of the most important and visible forms of this struggle today. It is not only a response to police violence against Black people but also a broader call to recognize systemic racism, inequality, and the social, economic and political structures that allow racial injustice to continue. Its values of solidarity, accountability, and intersectionality make it particularly relevant for young audiences, who are forming their own identities and understanding of the world.

This thesis is focused on how contemporary young adult literature engages with the themes, questions, and urgency of the Black Lives Matter movement. YA literature is particularly well-suited to address these topics because it speaks directly to adolescent readers, who are at a stage in life when their moral reasoning, empathy and social awareness are developing. By presenting stories of racial injustice, police violence and activism, these novels not only provide representation for Black readers but also encourage all readers to reflect on the systemic inequalities that shape society. More than entertainment, these texts function as tools for education and social reflection, showing how literature can be both artistic and political.

The first chapter of this thesis introduces the theoretical and social context for the analysis. It examines the origins and core principles of the Black Lives Matter movement, explaining its goals, strategies, and the ways it addresses systemic injustice. It then situates young adult literature within this context, exploring how YA novels can act as forms of activism by creating narratives that reflect real social struggles. Finally, it considers the representation of race in literature, showing how adolescent protagonists navigate worlds shaped by discrimination and prejudice, and how these representations affect readers' understanding of identity, morality and justice. This framework is essential to understanding the novels analysed in later chapters, as it clarifies the connection between literature, activism and social awareness.

Chapter 2 focuses on themes and narrative strategies in YA texts that engage with Black Lives Matter issues. It first examines how racism, police brutality and the struggle for justice are represented, showing how novels allow readers to confront difficult realities and consider ethical responses. It then analyses the depiction of Black identity, highlighting how protagonists navigate multiple social spaces and

reconcile internal and external pressures. Finally, it explores the narrative forms used, including letters, dual perspectives, and testimonial storytelling. These strategies are not just artistic choices; they shape the way readers experience injustice, empathy, and reflection. By giving readers access to different perspectives, YA texts encourage critical thinking and moral engagement.

Chapter 3 presents three case studies: *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone, *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, and *Light It Up* by Kekla Magoon. These novels exemplify the themes and narrative strategies discussed in Chapter 2. *Dear Martin* explores personal reflection through letters, *All American Boys* uses dual perspectives to emphasize shared responsibility, and *Light It Up* employs multiple voices to illustrate collective grief, activism and community response. By examining these texts, this thesis shows how YA literature transforms personal experiences into collective memory, fostering empathy, awareness and social responsibility in young readers.

Overall, this thesis is not about providing simple answers or moral judgments. Its goal is to explore how YA literature mediates the experiences of Black youth, the ethical challenges of witnessing or experiencing racial injustice, and the ways readers are invited to think critically about systemic inequality. The questions guiding this work are: how can literature encourage empathy and reflection? How can storytelling reflect the complexity of social movements like Black Lives Matter? And how can YA texts balance personal narrative and collective social critique to engage young readers with justice and activism? These questions frame the investigation of contemporary YA novels, and the answers will reveal the ways literature continues to function as a tool for social awareness and change.

# Chapter 1: Young Adult Literature and the Black Lives Matter Movement

## 1.1 The Origins and Core Values of the Black Lives Matter Movement

The Black Lives Matter movement is now known worldwide as a protest against racial discrimination. Beyond that, it was founded against police violence in the United States. It started as a Black social media hashtag in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a white neighbourhood watch volunteer who, in 2012, murdered seventeen-years-old Trayvon Martin. Then, it grew nationally in 2014 after the deaths of Michael Brown in Missouri and Eric Garner in New York. When there was yet another murder at the hands of police officers, with the death of George Floyd, the protest became known worldwide. People began protesting on the streets all over the world under the slogan “Black Lives Matter” against these cruel acts of violence by the police force and the ongoing racial injustice experienced by the Black community.<sup>1</sup> This historical background is essential to understand how BLM later becomes not only a political movement but also a cultural and narrative form of protest.

Today, the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation operates as an international movement whose mission is to fight against white supremacy, support Black communities and promote cultural and social change. According to the organisation’s own description, this mission includes policy advocacy, community investment and a strong commitment to arts and culture as tools for social transformation.<sup>2</sup> This approach distinguishes Black Lives Matter from earlier civil rights movements. As Fredrick C. Harris explains, instead of focusing mainly on formal civil or political rights, the movement emphasizes issues such as policing, mass incarceration, and the affirmation of Black humanity<sup>3</sup>. In this way, BLM seeks not only legal reform but also greater cultural recognition and visibility for Black lives and experiences.

Although the Black Lives Matter movement is relatively new and it adopts new strategies, like social media activism and international networks, it is part of a long history of Black resistance in the United States. For instance, like civil rights and

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<sup>1</sup> Black Lives Matter, “About,” *Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation*. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/> accessed January 20, 2026.

<sup>2</sup> Black Lives Matter, “About,” *Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation*. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/> accessed January 20, 2026.

<sup>3</sup> Fredrick C. Harris, “The Next Civil Rights Movement?” *Dissent*, vol. 62, no. 1, Winter 2015. <https://dissentmagazine.org/article/black-lives-matter-new-civil-rights-movement-fredrick-harris/> accessed January 20, 2026.

Black liberation movements of the 1960s, BLM addresses issues such as police violence and discrimination by the state. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor argues that the protests after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson show that Black people continue to fight against racism, violence and inequality, just like in the past. Even if the methods and context are different today, the goal of defending Black lives and challenging racial oppression is the same. Taylor explains that BLM also shows that the idea of a “post-racial” society is false, because structural racism continues.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, the movement continues the long fight of Black people for justice, while adapting it to new forms of protest and new contemporary challenges. This continuity helps explain why contemporary YA narratives often frame racial injustice as part of a long-standing struggle rather than isolated events.

However, a defining characteristic of the Black Lives Matter movement, that distinguishes it from earlier movements of protest, is its decentralized structure. Unlike earlier civil rights organizations that relied on centralized leadership, BLM operates through social media and locally organised protests. Thanks to this there is a much broader participation, particularly among young people. Social media has played a crucial role in this process, enabling individuals to document and circulate instances of police violence and racial injustice without censure. This happened with the killing of Mike Brown in Ferguson, as explained by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. After witnesses recorded and posted the video of the episode on social media, outrage sparked in the community but especially in young people. Protesters came from all over the nation to commemorate Brown and rally against police officers.<sup>5</sup> This new way of protesting, with its decentralized and media-driven structure, directly influences the circulation of narratives about racial injustice. This dynamic is not only present in social movements but is also reflected in YA literature, which frequently centers young people’s voices and portrays how they utilize digital forms of activism.

Since the Black Lives Matter movement was founded by three Black queer women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, one of its main focuses is inclusivity inside and outside of the organisation. In her account of the origins of BLM, Garza explains that the movement was created to bring to the front those marginalized groups that had often been left in the background or completely excluded from earlier forms of activism.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, Black women, queer and transgender individuals are placed at the core of the struggle for liberation, an intersectional approach to the question of racism that pays attention to other axes

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<sup>4</sup> Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016. pp. 1–6.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, pp. 153-162.

<sup>6</sup> Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014. <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/> accessed January 22, 2026.

of oppression, which clearly distinguishes Black Lives Matter from previous civil rights movements. This approach challenges dominant social structures that have historically privileged white, heterosexual, cisgender men, while rendering other forms of violence less visible. As scholars have pointed out, violence against Black women and other marginalized individuals has frequently been overlooked in public discussions of racial injustice. Taylor notes that cases such as those of Rekia Boyd, Shelly Frey, Miriam Carey and Alberta Spruill received far less attention compared to other widely known incidents of police violence.<sup>7</sup> By drawing attention to these experiences, Black Lives Matter exposes how white supremacy and state violence operate unevenly and reaffirms its commitment to defending Black lives in all their diversity. This inclusivity within the movement is particularly relevant for YA literature, which is often centred around youth voices. YA literature also explores how, during adolescence, identity formation is shaped by social structures and experiences of oppression.

Taken together, the origins, structure, and core values of the Black Lives Matter movement show that it was created as more than a response to isolated acts of violence. It is rooted in a long history of Black resistance, but at the same time it's influenced by contemporary forms of activism. BLM combines political protest with cultural intervention, emphasizing voice, visibility, and collective identity. Its decentralized organization and inclusivity reflect a broader understanding of justice that extends beyond legal reform to include representation and recognition. For this reason, Black Lives Matter operates not only as a social movement but also as a cultural force that influences how stories about race, violence, and resistance are told and received. This connection between activism and storytelling provides the foundation for the following section, which examines YA literature as a space of protest and resistance.

## **1.2 Young Adult Literature as Activism: Narratives of Protest and Resistance**

Literature has always functioned as a powerful tool through which individuals can express their own thoughts and experiences, particularly when their voice is not considered or silenced. Throughout history, writing has been used by people not only for entertainment but also as a political act, especially by marginalized communities. In this sense, literature becomes a space where oppressed people can assert their presence and challenge the system that ostracized them. bell hooks reflects on this in her book *Talking Back*, where she describes how writing helped her express ideas that were often dismissed or resisted in other contexts. She also emphasized that publishing such works exposes authors to criticism, especially when their writing challenges dominant social norms. For hooks,

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<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, p. 164.

negative responses, including those from personal and social environments, are part of the difficulty of using writing as a form of resistance.<sup>8</sup> Her reflection is particularly relevant to YA literature, because of its younger audience. It is a space for these marginalised voices to express their protest and resistance to the oppression of society and unnecessary criticism can negatively influence their perception of their worth in the community.

Representation has always been very important for every community within a society. That is because it is not a simple reflection of reality, but an active process that gives meaning and shapes how individuals and groups are perceived by the public. Stories written by people who lived certain experiences and were affected by them help readers understand these realities more deeply, as they allow them to see the world from a different perspective. According to Stuart Hall in “*The Work of Representation*”, stories, images and texts do not merely describe reality, but they create meaning and influence how people think and form their opinions. For this reason, representation can be seen as a form of power: who tells the story matters, because it can shape public understanding and show a different perspective than what is usually shown to the public.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the representation of race in narrative texts and YA literature has clear political implications, since it can either reinforce existing stereotypes or question and resist them.

Historically, politics and literature have often been closely connected, even though they operate in very different ways. Political discourse tends to rely on simplified oppositions, such as pro and against or left and right, which often reduce complex social realities into fixed positions. Literature, on the other hand, allows space for individual experiences and subjective perspectives, considering how personal history, social background and lived experience shape the way people understand the world. As discussed earlier, literature has frequently been used to represent those voices that are overlooked or excluded from prevailing views. Barbara Harlow argues in *Resistance Literature* that literary texts produced in contexts of oppression often function as forms of resistance, giving visibility to experiences that are ignored or marginalized within formal political systems.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, while both literature and politics contribute to shaping society, literature and YA narratives place particular emphasis on individual and collective experiences that challenge dominant narratives and bring attention to social injustice.

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<sup>8</sup> bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, Boston: South End Press, 1989, pp. 5-9.

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. By Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 1-3, 16-17, 23-25.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 1-2.

Literature is not only a contrast to politics, but it can also shape people's political awareness, because it broadens perspectives and exposes readers to experiences different from their own. Reading about injustice in literary texts helps readers understand systems of power in real life, as it shows that change is possible when individuals challenge unjust authority. Literature can also represent forms of power that readers may not have encountered directly, helping them recognise how power operates in society. Power, in its many forms, plays a key role in shaping narratives, particularly in Young Adult literature. Roberta Seelinger Trites, in *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, explains that power in YA novels both suppresses and enables adolescents. Young protagonists are often forced to confront external institutions that seek to control them, while at the same time developing an internal sense of agency that allows them to question authority and resist injustice.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, YA literature becomes a space where resistance and political awareness can emerge together, showing how young people learn to navigate, challenge, and sometimes transform systems of power.

Because of its intended audience, representation plays a particularly crucial role in Young Adult literature. Adolescence is a formative stage in which readers begin to shape their sense of identity and belonging, and the narratives they encounter can strongly influence how they perceive themselves and others. Traditionally, however, YA novels have largely centred white, heterosexual protagonists, while characters from marginalized communities were often confined to secondary or supporting roles. This imbalance has significant consequences, as it limits the range of identities through which young readers are invited to imagine themselves. For this reason, questions of representation in YA literature are not merely aesthetic but deeply political, particularly when narratives engage with race and racial injustice. Examining how characters of colour are portrayed becomes essential to understanding how YA fiction can either reinforce dominant stereotypes or challenge them, a dynamic that will be explored in the following section.

The political implications of representation in Young Adult literature become especially evident when examining the portrayal of race. As Ebony Elizabeth Thomas argues in *The Dark Fantastic*<sup>12</sup>, characters of colour in popular YA and fantasy narratives are frequently associated with darkness, danger or marginality, reflecting cultural fears rather than lived realities. The author further suggests that challenging this traditional marginalisation of minority characters can open the way to a wider range of narratives in which people of colour appear as complex

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<sup>11</sup> Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), pp. IX-7.

<sup>12</sup> Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to The Hunger Games* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), pp. 1-5.

protagonists whose experiences and struggles drive the story forward.<sup>13</sup> This would also help young Black readers see themselves as characters who drive the story onward and feel represented in a more authentic way.

Young Adult literature plays a crucial role in the development of critical thinking, especially because of the age group it addresses. Although YA novels are often associated with teenage readers, they are not limited to them, as they also speak to adult audiences through themes of identity, resistance, and social responsibility. This genre focuses on a particularly important phase of life, the transition between childhood and adulthood, during which individuals begin to question authority, form personal values, and understand their position within society. Because these years are formative, the narratives young readers engage with can strongly influence how they interpret power, justice, and inequality. In this context, YA fiction becomes a space where political awareness and resistance can emerge. Alexandra Sirovy, in her article “Political Resistance in Teen Lit”, argues that one of the most recurring themes in Young Adult literature is the questioning of authority, a theme that is often criticized for being disruptive or dangerous. However, Sirovy explains that this disruption is precisely what makes YA literature valuable, as it encourages young readers to recognise when authority becomes oppressive or unjust.<sup>14</sup> While acts of resistance in YA narratives are often shown to have consequences, these stories underline the importance of speaking up rather than remaining passive in the face of injustice. In the contemporary context, where the refusal to obey authority is frequently framed as a threat to social order, YA literature instead presents it as a necessary step toward building a more just and inclusive society.

### **1.3 Race and Representation in Young Adult Literature**

The representation of race in Young Adult literature is closely connected to themes of power, identity, and visibility. This is because stories written for young teens do not simply reflect reality or how society views people of colour but actively shape how these groups are seen and valued within the community. As Stuart Hall argues, representation is a process through which meaning is produced, and for this reason it plays a key role in influencing how people think about race and difference.<sup>15</sup> Young Adult literature is especially influential because it is written for readers in their formative years, when they are still searching for their identity and their place in society, and are therefore more susceptible to external influences. YA novels help develop critical thinking and show young readers that their opinions and experiences matter. Seeing protagonists challenge injustice and fight for what

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic*, pp. 15-20.

<sup>14</sup> Alexis Soloski, “Political Resistance in Teen Lit,” *Book Riot*, 5 June 2020, <https://bookriot.com/political-resistance-teen-lit/>, accessed 1 February 2026.

<sup>15</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” pp. 15-17.

they believe is right can inspire readers to reflect on their own values and sense of responsibility. For this reason, it is important to consider who gets to be the hero of the story, since representation allows readers to recognise themselves in the narrative. When a certain race is mainly portrayed through marginalised characters, stereotypes, or as villains, this can negatively affect both society's perception of that community and the self-image of young readers who belong to it. Such patterns of representation can therefore have political consequences, as they contribute to shaping ideas about race, belonging, and social worth.

While representation can be empowering, it can also be restrictive when it relies on stereotypes and limited narrative roles for characters of colour. In Young Adult fiction, non-white characters are often relegated to side roles or background positions, frequently lacking emotional depth or narrative agency. They are often used as symbols of suffering or are linked to violence and trauma, reflecting the biased way people of colour are often viewed in society. As a result, these characters are rarely allowed complexity, joy, or a rich interior life. As scholar Ebony Elizabeth Thomas explains in *The Dark Fantastic*, this pattern is recurring in both fantasy and Young Adult fiction. Through her analysis of well-known modern YA and fantasy texts, Thomas shows how Black characters are frequently associated with darkness, danger, and sacrifice.<sup>16</sup> These representations do not reflect reality, but rather cultural fears that have been reinforced through repeated stereotypical portrayals of people of colour. Because adolescents form their sense of identity through the stories they consume, such representations can have negative consequences. For young readers of colour, seeing themselves only in roles defined by suffering or villainy can affect self-worth and reinforce feelings of exclusion. At the same time, these portrayals can strengthen fear and prejudice among white readers, contributing to harmful real-world assumptions about Black communities. For this reason, challenging stereotypical representation in YA literature becomes essential to create narratives that allow young readers of colour to imagine themselves beyond marginalisation and limitation.

In response to these harmful patterns of representation, contemporary Young Adult fiction authors are increasingly trying to publish stories with protagonists of different ethnicities, or to include minority characters who are complex, emotionally developed, and reflective of the struggles that people of colour face in everyday life. In recent YA novels, Black characters are more often presented as agents of their own stories, not only when they are protagonists, but also when they appear as secondary characters. They are portrayed as authentic individuals who are no longer associated only with negative symbols, but also with joy, love, friendship and personal ambitions. The essay *Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors* by Rudine Sims Bishop helps explain why this shift in representation is so

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic*, pp. 15-20.

important in literature aimed at young readers. Bishop uses the metaphor of books as mirrors and windows to show how literature reflects human experience and allows readers to either see themselves or learn about others. This is crucial for both white readers and readers of colour. For white readers, diverse representation helps prevent ethnocentrism by challenging the idea that only one group's experiences matter. For readers of colour, seeing themselves represented in meaningful and positive ways is essential, as the absence of such representation can suggest that their lives and experiences are less valuable.<sup>17</sup> Although Bishop originally discusses children's literature, her arguments can also be applied to Young Adult fiction, since adolescence is a formative period in identity development. During these years, self-confidence is still fragile, and representation can strongly influence how young people see themselves and their place in society. Seeing characters who face and overcome struggles similar to their own can support both emotional growth and political awareness. In this sense, these changes in representation reflect broader cultural movements that demand visibility and justice, such as the Black Lives Matter movement.

Representation, however, is not only important when characters from marginalized communities are present in a narrative, but also in how they are portrayed and understood within the story. Contemporary Young Adult fiction increasingly represents racism as an everyday and systemic experience rather than as a series of isolated or exceptional events. This distinction is important because racism is often misunderstood as individual prejudice or as something that only occurs during extreme moments, such as explicit acts of violence or the use of racial slurs. While these are valid and visible examples of racism, many people experience racial injustice in more subtle and normalized ways during their everyday lives. Young Adult literature that depicts these daily forms of discrimination helps reveal racism as a structural condition embedded in social institutions and cultural practices. This approach closely aligns with the Black Lives Matter movement's critique of systemic racism. In *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explains how racial inequality operates through everyday structures, such as unequal access to education, housing, and employment opportunities. She highlights, for example, how Black graduates face higher unemployment rates than their white counterparts, how Black families are often steered toward under-resourced neighbourhoods and how racial disparities persist within schools and other institutions.<sup>18</sup> When novels aimed at adolescent readers portray these everyday experiences of racism, they allow young people to recognize injustice in situations that may otherwise appear normal or unavoidable. This is particularly significant because such forms of

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<sup>17</sup> Rudine Sims Bishop, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1990, pp. 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, pp. 27-28.

inequality are often normalized for both white and Black audiences. By making these dynamics visible, YA literature encourages critical awareness and fosters a sense of agency among young readers. In this way, representation does not merely reflect social reality but actively supports youth resistance, reinforcing the idea that recognizing and challenging everyday injustice is a shared responsibility.

As a result of the way violence and discrimination against teens of colour are portrayed, Young Adult literature often represents conflict between youth and authority figures. As Roberta Seelinger Trites explains in the introduction to *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, adolescence is the stage of life in which individuals begin to understand how power functions in society and where they are positioned within these structures. For teenagers of colour, this moment of awareness is often accompanied by direct experiences of racialized authority, such as being unfairly disciplined at school, constantly monitored, or treated with suspicion by figures who hold institutional power.<sup>19</sup> Black teenagers in particular are frequently represented by the media as threatening, aggressive, or disrespectful toward authority, which contributes to their over-policing and mistrust in real life. These representations reinforce a social narrative in which Black youth are seen as inherently dangerous, even when they have done nothing to justify such treatment. YA novels that challenge this narrative by showing young characters questioning or resisting harmful authority figures offer an alternative way of understanding power. When readers see protagonists confront unjust institutions, they are encouraged to reflect on similar power dynamics in their own lives and to recognize that authority is not always neutral or fair. Given that police violence and institutional discrimination continue to affect Black teenagers today, YA literature plays an important role in helping young readers identify injustice early on. By portraying youth resistance as meaningful rather than reckless, these narratives suggest that questioning authority can be a necessary step toward social change, rather than a threat to social order.

As Stuart Hall argues, representation is a form of power because it shapes how individuals and groups are understood within society.<sup>20</sup> For this reason, representation in literature has political consequences, especially in Young Adult fiction, where stories are addressed to readers who are still forming their identities and beliefs. YA literature becomes a space for early political awareness, as it introduces young readers to ideas of justice, inequality, and resistance through characters they can identify with. For Black teenagers, seeing themselves represented as complex characters who are deserving of justice and dignity can significantly affect their sense of self-worth. These narratives challenge the internalization of marginalization by presenting Black youth not as passive victims,

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<sup>19</sup> Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*, pp. X-XI.

<sup>20</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation", pp. 15-17.

but as agents capable of reflection, resistance, and change. In this way, YA fiction helps young readers imagine alternatives to injustice and prepares them for forms of civic engagement and social participation. While literature does not replace activism, it supports it by shaping the imagination and ethical awareness that make activism possible. Stories that depict resistance, even when it comes at a cost, reinforce the idea that standing up against injustice is meaningful and necessary. Although YA novels are fictional, they often reflect real experiences of racial violence and exclusion. In a context where acts of discrimination and abuse of authority against people of colour persist, these narratives can inspire readers to question injustice, recognize systemic inequality, and envision a more just future.

# Chapter 2: Themes and Narratives

## Strategies in Black Lives Matter-themed Young Adult texts

### 2.1 Racism, Police Brutality and the Struggle for Justice

Police brutality has become one of the central issues addressed by the Black Lives Matter movement and by Young Adult novels that engage with racial injustice. These narratives highlight the excessive and often unnecessary use of force against Black people in the United States, even during routine police checks or situations involving minor suspicion. Police violence is deeply intertwined with race because, although it affects people of all backgrounds, racial minorities such as Black, Native American, and Hispanic individuals are disproportionately targeted by the police force. Research conducted by the Vera Institute of Justice shows that Black people in the United States are killed by police at nearly three times the rate of white people, and that unarmed Black individuals are significantly more likely to be shot. The Vera Institute is an independent research organisation that studies inequalities within the American criminal justice system, especially racial disparities in policing.<sup>21</sup> These statistics suggest that police violence is not a series of isolated cases, but part of a broader structural problem that disproportionately affects Black communities. For this reason, the fear and mistrust of the police often represented in Young Adult novels should not be seen as exaggerated narrative devices, but as reflections of a social reality supported by empirical data. In this way, YA literature connects personal experiences of trauma to a wider system of racial inequality. The Black Lives Matter movement emerged to challenge this reality and to frame police brutality not as a series of isolated incidents, but as the result of systemic violence directed at racial minorities. As scholars such as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor argue, the over-policing of Black communities in the United States has historical roots and has long functioned as a form of racial control.<sup>22</sup> This history has contributed to the normalization of stereotypes that portray people of colour as dangerous or as criminals. Through protest, activism and cultural production, BLM reframes police violence as a structural problem and demands accountability from state institutions. This struggle for justice takes place not only on the streets or in courts, but also within

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<sup>21</sup> Vera Institute of Justice, “*Truth in Numbers: Racial Disparities in Fatal Police Shootings*”, <https://www.vera.org/news/truth-in-numbers> accessed February 7, 2026.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, pp. 2 – 6.

cultural spaces, including literature where narratives of violence, resistance and survival are shaped and contested.

Beyond its structural causes, police violence has profound effects on the everyday lives of Black youth, affecting how they move through public spaces, interact with authority and feel safe. Statistics from the Vera Institute show that one in three people in the US will experience arrest by the age of 23, but the rate among Black youth is almost one in two.<sup>23</sup> These numbers explain how unfair the system is and the vast disparity between white people and people of colour, which also explains why young Black people often don't trust the police. This mistrust and fear of law enforcement is reflected in YA literature. Books that tell the stories of Black teenagers often include encounters with police, showing how these experiences can be stressful or even dangerous. For example, characters may avoid certain places or feel anxious just thinking about police interactions, which reflects the reality for many young people. Studies support this connection as research by the National Institute of Health (NIH) found that being exposed to police brutality, either directly or indirectly, increases the risk of anxiety, depression and PTSD in adolescents.<sup>24</sup> Teens who worry about experiencing police violence, either because it happened to them or to people around them have worse mental health than teens who do not have this stress. This shows how police violence affects not only safety, but also the mental health and daily life of Black youth, and YA literature helps readers understand these experiences.

Black youth are more likely to have direct encounters with police violence, and these encounters often escalate more quickly than for white youth. Direct encounters can include profiling, arrest or physical abuse and contribute to the higher rates of Black people in prison. Indirect encounters, on the other hand, happen when a person witnesses or hears about police violence affecting family, friends or people in their community. Today, the most common indirect exposure is through social media, where videos of Black people being harmed or killed by the police circulate widely. Even though research shows that indirect experiences are more common than direct ones, they are still understudied and there is limited data available. These direct and indirect experiences have a strong impact on trust in institutions, feeling of safety and mental health. YA literature reflects these effects by showing how Black characters live in fear, experience PTSD and anxiety, or even avoid the outside world entirely. By portraying these experiences, fiction helps readers understand how police violence shapes the daily lives and

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<sup>23</sup> Vera Institute of Justice, "*Data-Backed Outrage: Police Violence by the Numbers*", <https://www.vera.org/news/target-2020/data-backed-outrage-police-violence-by-the-numbers> accessed February 9, 2026.

<sup>24</sup> Lindsey Webb, "*Anticipation of Racially Motivated Police Brutality and Youth Mental Health*", *Journal of Criminal Justice*, vol. 83, 2022, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11156263/> accessed February 9, 2026.

emotional wellbeing of Black youth. The psychological effects of these encounters are not only theoretical but are lived every day by real people and are thus represented in books, making the story more real and recognisable.<sup>25</sup>

While police violence affects the mental health and daily life of Black youth, YA literature also shows how characters respond, resist, and cope with these challenges, in ways that are similar to real life reactions to trauma. Whether the experience of police violence is direct or indirect, it often represents a turning point in a person's life, changing the way they see the world around them. People react differently and use different coping mechanisms. Some YA literature characters search for security and reassurance through family, friends, or the community. This helps them regain a sense of safety that was lost and reminds them that they are still alive and supported. Others change their routines, avoid places they consider unsafe, or even stop going out completely as a way to protect themselves from further harm. These coping strategies, both in real life and in YA narratives, can be seen as forms of resilience, showing an attempt to live with trauma rather than be overwhelmed by it. Not all responses, however, are focused on seeking safety. Some characters react with anger toward the injustice they experience and choose to transform that anger into action. This often leads to participation in protests, school movements or community initiatives. A clear example of this is shown in *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds, an African American author, and Brendan Kiely, a white author.<sup>26</sup> The novel ends with a march that reaches the police station to protest the act of police brutality against Rashad, a Black teenager who is falsely accused of shoplifting and violently beaten by Officer Galluzzo. Among the protesters is Quinn, Rashad's classmate, who witnessed the beating but initially remained silent because of his loyalty to the officer, who was a father figure and a close family friend. During the march, the repeated chant "No justice, no peace" functions not only as a political slogan but also as a narrative turning point. The rhythm of the chant mirrors the emotional intensity of the scene and transforms individual anger into a collective voice. For Rashad, hearing his name spoken publicly helps reclaim his identity from the police narrative that portrayed him as a suspect. For Quinn, participating in the protest represents a shift from passive silence to active solidarity. The novel presents both of their perspectives of the same events, and this dual structure symbolically bridges racial division while also addressing an interracial readership. White readers may recognise themselves in Quinn's hesitation and

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<sup>25</sup> Katherine G. Quinn "A Qualitative Examination of How Direct and Indirect Police Violence Shapes Perceptions of Police, Sense of Safety, and the Mental Health of Black Adults in Chicago." *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 374, June 2025, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277953625003685> accessed February 10, 2026.

<sup>26</sup> Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, *All American Boys* (New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2015), pp. 271–288.

gradual awareness, while Black readers may identify with Rashad's vulnerability and anger. In this way, the march becomes more than just a scene of protest: it represents the transformation of personal trauma into collective resistance, reflecting dynamics that are central to the Black Lives Matter movement. By showing collective resistance and solidarity, these narratives underline the importance of standing together as a community against police brutality and the systems that continue to oppress minority groups.

Protests and resistance are not only political acts, but also moments where communities come together to stand against a common enemy. The community can be represented by family, friends, schools, or neighbourhoods, and this dynamic is visible both in lived social experiences and in fictional narratives. When institutions fail to protect people and make them feel safe, the community becomes a space where individuals can retreat and feel supported. Community gives a sense of safety, but it also allows characters to rely on others to process the emotions that follow a traumatic event, such as fear, anger and grief. Sharing trauma with people who understand the situation, because they have lived or are still living through similar experiences, makes it less isolating and helps individuals move forward while carrying this trauma. The presence of a supportive community helps rebuild trust and a sense of belonging, especially because returning to daily life after an episode of police violence is extremely difficult. The fear does not disappear but knowing that others are willing to share this burden makes it easier to keep going. YA literature often represents this collective support through vigils, marches, conversations and moments of shared mourning, where characters listen to each other's stories and offer mutual support. These moments are not only emotional but also political, because they resist silence and erasure imposed by systems of oppression. This reflects the values of the Black Lives Matter movement, which is based on collective voices standing against the erasure of acts of police violence. By showing even these quiet moments of strength, fiction highlights the importance of solidarity and seeking support, encouraging empathy and showing that unity can be a powerful form of resistance.

Beyond the depiction of protest and collective resistance, *All American Boys* offers a powerful literary representation of the immediate psychological impact of police violence through Rashad's arrest scene.<sup>27</sup> The episode unfolds rapidly, and the narration emphasises confusion and sudden escalation rather than clear cause and effect. Rashad initially does not understand what is happening to him; the interaction begins as an ordinary moment in a store and quickly transforms into physical aggression. The abrupt shift from normality to violence reflects how routine situations can become dangerous for Black youth, reinforcing the idea that vulnerability is constant rather than exceptional. This sudden loss of control

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<sup>27</sup> Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, *All American Boys*, pp. 15 - 20, 34 - 37.

reflects also the unpredictability that many Black teenagers associate with encounters with police officers. The language used in Rashad's perspective focuses on bodily sensations, disorientation and shock, which mirrors the experience of trauma. The reader does not receive a detached description of the event but is instead immersed in Rashad's fragmented perception, which increases emotional immediacy. The fragmentation of his thoughts reflects how traumatic experiences are often processed in incomplete and chaotic ways, rather than through logical narration. This literary choice makes the violence feel intrusive and overwhelming, allowing readers to understand not only what happens, but how it feels from inside the experience. At the same time, Quinn's perspective reveals a different kind of psychological conflict. While Rashad experiences physical pain, confusion and fear for his life, Quinn is stunned by the scene and even more by recognising the police officer as one of his friend's bother, his first instinct is to go and help him but then he decides to go away to escape questioning as a witness and to forget it even happened. His internal monologue shows how loyalty, fear of social consequences and ingrained assumptions delay his response. This contrast highlights that police violence affects individuals differently depending on their racial and social position, not only physically but also ethically. The dual narration therefore exposes both the embodied trauma of the victim and the moral discomfort of the witness. By structuring the novel around these two interior experiences, Reynolds and Kiely demonstrate how systemic racism operates not only through acts of physical force but also through silence, complicity and uncertainty.

## **2.2 The Representation of Black Identity in Young Adult Literature**

Adolescence is a crucial moment for identity formation, and Young Adult literature often focuses on teen characters who are trying to understand who they are and where they belong. Identity, and especially Black identity, is shaped by race, society, and historical and social contexts, because it is strongly influenced by outside factors. Being Black is not only a personal experience, but also a social one. The way society and people outside the community see Black individuals can have a strong impact on Black teenagers, especially while they are still forming their sense of self. Since adolescence is a very vulnerable moment in someone's life, representation matters. Seeing oneself represented in literature in a fairly objective way can validate personal feelings and struggles, allowing young readers to recognise themselves in fictional characters. At the same time, it gives visibility to the lives of Black people in society and helps readers outside the community to understand and empathise with experiences different from their own. Black identity in YA literature can also be connected to the Black Lives Matter movement, as it highlights resistance, visibility and social awareness. In this context, identity becomes political, because simply existing, being seen and

telling one's own story challenges systems that have historically silenced or marginalised Black voices. YA literature shows how everyday experiences, emotions and self-definition can act as forms of resistance, both in real life and in fiction. For this reason, it is important for adolescents to read books with diverse characters, as they are introduced to experiences they may or may not encounter in their own lives, helping them build empathy, awareness and understanding.

While adolescence is a crucial moment for self-discovery, Black teenagers often have to form their identity in a society shaped by racism and inequality. As a result, identity is not formed freely, but under constant external pressure, because Black people are often seen as “different” or as the “other” by society. There are also many stereotypes imposed on Black youth, which cause them to be perceived as dangerous or someone to be avoided or feared. This makes it difficult for them to fully feel part of society, especially when they are constantly judged and misunderstood. Another important aspect is that Black teenagers often become aware of their race at a very young age, because of the way society treats them differently. Children notice these differences early on. Racism forces early maturity, meaning that Black youth are often expected to grow up faster than others. They are frequently seen as more adult-like and more mature, which, paradoxically, also makes them appear more threatening at an earlier age. This awareness is also reflected in the characters of YA novels that deal with these issues. Many of them realise that their identity is read through race before anything else, as people often see their skin colour before getting to know who they are as individuals. This can lead to internal conflicts between who the character feels they are and how society labels them, resulting in feelings of anger, confusion and self-doubt. There is also the risk of internalising these negative stereotypes and starting to believe them. In YA texts, these emotions and this internal turmoil are often expressed through internal monologues or moments of self-questioning, which highlight the tension between self-identity and social identity. One example of this is *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone, where the protagonist, Justyce, processes his experiences of racial profiling by writing letters to Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>28</sup> In the novel, Justyce begins writing these letters after he is wrongfully arrested by a police officer, despite attending an elite private school and trying to follow what he believes are the “right” rules. The experience forces him to question whether his achievements and behaviour can truly protect him from racism. By addressing Martin Luther King Jr., Justyce searches for guidance and moral clarity, asking how he should respond to injustice in a society that claims to be equal but continues to treat him as suspicious. The letters function as a private space where he can express doubts and frustrations that he cannot easily share with others. Through this epistolary form, the reader gains direct access to his internal conflict, especially his struggle to reconcile how he sees himself with how society

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<sup>28</sup> Nic Stone, *Dear Martin* (New York: Crown Books for Young Readers, 2017), p. 13.

perceives him. Although he views himself as thoughtful, intelligent and ambitious, he realises that others may see him primarily as a Black male and therefore as a potential threat. This tension between self-perception and social perception highlights how racial identity shapes his coming-of-age process. The act of writing becomes a way for him to reclaim control over his narrative and to resist the stereotypes imposed upon him. Because of these pressures, many YA narratives emphasise the importance of voice and self-expression as tools to reclaim identity. At the same time, they allow readers outside the Black community to understand the impact of everyday racism, encouraging empathy and more awareness toward these experiences.

In response to racism and stereotypes, characters in YA literature often highlight the need to speak for themselves. Having a voice means existing on one's own terms, because telling the story of one's own community through the lens of those who live it every day is empowering. In YA literature, voice is often presented as a form of resistance against a society that tries to silence the Black community. To convey this message to readers, authors use different narrative strategies. One of the most common is first-person narration, as seen in *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, which allows readers to directly experience the protagonist's thoughts, emotions, and reactions to racial injustice.<sup>29</sup> Other authors choose an epistolary style, using diaries or letters through which characters express their inner thoughts, fears and frustrations, such as in *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone.<sup>30</sup> Another narrative strategy is the use of second-person point of view, which directly addresses the reader and creates the impression that the author is speaking to them personally. This can be seen in *Have I Ever Told You Black Lives Matter* by Shani Mahiri King, a text written to help young people learn about Black history and achievements. The second-person narration is used to inspire readers and to emphasise that people who belong to minorities are an important part of the American narrative.<sup>31</sup> Through these strategies, literature becomes a safe space where characters, and readers as well, can process trauma and emotions. Fiction allows emotions to exist freely and identity to be explored without judgment. Even when dealing with heavy topics, YA literature can help young readers process complex feelings such as grief, anger and trauma. Seeing characters who experience similar struggles and learn how to cope with them can help readers reflect on their own emotions in a healthier way. This has a strong impact on both Black and non-Black readers: Black readers feel seen and validated, while non-Black readers are encouraged to empathise with realities they may have never personally experienced.

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<sup>29</sup> Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give* (New York: Balzer + Bray, 2017).

<sup>30</sup> Nic Stone, *Dear Martin*.

<sup>31</sup> Shani Mahiri King, *Have I Ever Told You Black Lives Matter* (London: Quarto Publishing Group USA, 2021).

While individual voice is essential in reclaiming identity, YA literature also highlights the importance of community and collective belonging, because identity becomes stronger when it is shared. Community fills the gap left by society, which often abandons young people of colour when they face episodes of police violence, racism or injustice. These support systems can be found in family, groups of friends, neighbourhoods or schools, since these are the spaces where young Black teenagers feel safer and more connected. The circulation of videos showing police violence has made it even harder for young people to feel safe, especially Black teens, who statistically have a higher probability of being treated with hostility or even killed by police officers compared to their white peers. In YA literature, community is often represented as a safe space for characters. Whether it is school, family or the neighbourhood, it becomes a place where they feel understood and protected. This is usually presented in direct contrast to the police force, which is frequently depicted negatively in this type of fiction. Within these communities, Black youth can find others who share similar experiences and who can offer support, protection and guidance. Shared experiences of racism create strong bonds, because both fictional characters and real people feel “less alone” in their struggles. Communities also play an important role in organising marches, vigils and spaces for collective mourning. Standing together against injustice becomes a political act that shows how the community refuses to remain silent or compliant when violence occurs or when lives are taken prematurely. One of the goals of the Black Lives Matter movement is to invest in and support community-based initiatives through the funding of the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation. These initiatives aim to build safer spaces for Black teenagers and children, where they can grow up and live without constant fear of surveillance or police violence.<sup>32</sup> Through these representations, YA literature shows that Black identity is shaped not only by personal experience, but also by collective resistance and solidarity.

As Black identity is reclaimed through voice and community, YA literature often shows how this awareness leads to action and resistance. Identity is not stagnant, but something that continuously grows, changes and adapts through experiences. Adolescence is an important period in life for discovering one’s own identity, because it is a moment when individuals begin to question who they are and how they are seen by others. For Black teenagers, this process cannot be separated from race, since society often assigns meaning to their identity before they have fully defined it themselves. For this reason, understanding Black identity and its political and social implications becomes a necessary part of growing up. As said

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<sup>32</sup> Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, “*Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation Continues Investment in Black Communities with Latest Round of Community Grants,*” *BlackLivesMatter.com* <https://blacklivesmatter.com/black-lives-matter-global-network-foundation-continues-investment-in-black-communities-with-latest-round-of-community-grants/> accessed February 16, 2026.

in the article by M. Keith Claybrook Jr. in *Black Perspectives*, Black identity is “the most political social identity used to identify people of African descent in the United States”, because it was reclaimed by Black people in the 1960s and redefined to exercise the right to be treated with respect as equals and human beings.<sup>33</sup> Reclaiming Black identity is therefore closely connected to activism and social engagement, which YA literature frequently depicts through protests, school movements, speaking up in class or online advocacy; overall through the refusal to remain silent. Even small actions can be meaningful, both in real life and in fiction. YA novels reflect BLM values such as affirming the dignity of Black lives, resisting racial stereotypes and reclaiming narrative control over Black identity. In addition, they educate and inspire people, by encouraging to question authority and taking collective responsibility to do something against injustice. This can have a great impact, especially on young readers, as seeing characters their own age stand up for themselves and their communities can foster a sense of empowerment and possibility for change. At the same time, these narratives encourage critical thinking for everyone, people of colour and white people alike. Through such representations, YA literature presents Black identity as active, future-oriented and deeply connected to the struggle for justice.

The development of Justyce’s identity is particularly visible when comparing the first and last letters of the novel. In the opening letter, written shortly after his wrongful arrest, his tone is marked by uncertainty and confusion. He turns to Martin Luther King Jr. not only for guidance, but almost as a moral authority who can provide clear answers. His language is tentative and reflective, structured around questions and doubts about how he should respond to racism and whether he has done something wrong. The letter reveals a young Black man who still believes that behaving “correctly” and following the rules should protect him from discrimination. He even reflects on what he was wearing that night, suggesting that he momentarily searches for personal responsibility in a situation shaped by racial prejudice. This detail highlights how deeply he has internalised the idea that his behaviour must be flawless in order to deserve fair treatment.<sup>34</sup> However, by the final letter, his tone has shifted noticeably. While he still reflects on injustice, his voice is more self-assured and less dependent on external validation. Instead of searching for simple answers, he acknowledges the complexity of his situation and recognises that systemic racism cannot be solved through individual behaviour alone. This change from questioning to a more defined stance mirrors his broader development throughout the novel.<sup>35</sup> The epistolary structure therefore stages his coming-of-age process, showing how his

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<sup>33</sup> M. Keith Claybrook Jr., “Black Identity and the Power of Self-Naming,” *Black Perspectives*, 10 September 2021, <https://mixedracestudies.org/wp/?p=27614> accessed February 17, 2026.

<sup>34</sup> Nic Stone, *Dear Martin*, p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> Nic Stone, *Dear Martin*, p. 202.

understanding of himself as a Black young man evolves in response to lived experience. Through the contrast between the first and last letters, the novel demonstrates that identity formation is not a passive process but an active negotiation shaped by confrontation with injustice.

### **2.3 Narrative Forms: Letters, Dual Perspectives, and Testimony**

When stories address injustice or deal with racism and police violence, narrative form plays a crucial role in shaping their meaning and impact on readers. Since these are delicate topics rooted in real-life experiences, it is important that they are told with sensitivity and respect. The way a story is told strongly influences how it is understood by the public, and as a result, narrative form affects empathy, credibility and the emotional engagement of the reader. If a book aims to encourage reflection, its form must be able to move readers and make them think about the issues even after finishing the story. This is especially important when narrating the experiences of marginalised communities, as narrative form becomes a way to affirm that these lives matter and deserve to be represented with dignity and humanity. Different narrative forms can create space for Black voices by offering a platform where they can be heard and recognised. In YA literature, this is particularly significant because it shows Black adolescents that they can be protagonists of their own stories, that their experiences are meaningful, and that they belong in literature. At the same time, these forms allow minority authors and characters to tell their stories in their own voices, sometimes using specific language or structures that reflect their lived realities. Narrative form therefore becomes a political tool, as it resists silencing and erasure. By telling these stories, literature challenges exclusion from history and asserts the right of marginalised communities to speak and be heard. There are three narrative forms commonly used in YA Black Lives Matter texts: letters and epistolary narration, dual or multiple perspectives, and testimony. Among these, letters and personal writing are particularly powerful tools for expressing trauma and self-reflection, as they allow readers direct access to the characters' thoughts and emotional processes.

Among the narrative forms used in YA literature, epistolary narration stands out as a powerful way for characters to process trauma and reflect on injustice, because it offers a private and safe space to express one's emotions. Letters protect vulnerability, as they allow characters to write without judgment, since there is no immediate audience to comment or criticise what is being said. This creates a space where thoughts and feelings that cannot be spoken out loud can finally be expressed. Writing letters can also function as a coping mechanism, as putting emotions into words is often the first step toward processing trauma and making sense of painful experiences. Because of this sense of safety, epistolary narration

can take on a political meaning, especially in YA literature that deals with racism and police violence. When characters write about hostile encounters with the police or experiences of discrimination, their private reflections expose broader systemic issues. Even though the letters are personal, their content transforms individual pain into a form of social critique, showing how personal experiences are deeply connected to institutional injustice. A clear example of this narrative form can be found in *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone.<sup>36</sup> In the novel, letters alternate with prose narration and become a space where the protagonist, Justyce, processes intense emotions, racial profiling and the impact of discrimination in his daily life. The letters are addressed to Martin Luther King Jr., whom Justyce refers to as Martin or Dr. King, creating a symbolic dialogue with the history of the Civil Rights Movement. This dual narrative structure allows readers to understand both how events unfold and how they emotionally affect the protagonist. Through epistolary narration, readers gain access to Justyce's most intimate thoughts, which encourages empathy and invites deeper reflection on the lasting effects of racial injustice.

The function of the epistolary form becomes particularly visible in the third letter Justyce writes after his confrontation with Jared and Trey. The encounter places him between two opposing forms of racial pressure. Jared, his white and privileged classmate, questions whether Justyce truly deserves his acceptance to Yale, implying that his success may be linked to race rather than merit. Trey, on the other hand, criticises him from within the Black community, suggesting that attending an elite, predominantly white university means distancing himself from his background and that he will eventually return because he will never fully belong there. Caught between these perspectives, Justyce experiences what can be described as a form of double consciousness: he becomes painfully aware of how he is perceived both by white peers who doubt his legitimacy and by Black peers who question his authenticity. In the letter, he articulates this tension through the metaphor of "climbing a mountain," describing how "one fool [is] trying to shove me down so I won't be on his level, and another fool tugging at my leg, trying to pull me to the ground he refuses to leave." This image vividly captures the contradictory forces acting upon him. Jared's prejudice attempts to push him down by implying he does not belong in spaces of academic excellence, while Trey's resentment seeks to anchor him to a social position he is trying to move beyond. The metaphor reveals that Justyce's struggle is not only external but also internal: success does not free him from racial expectations but instead intensifies the pressure from both sides. The tone of the letter reflects frustration and confusion, yet it is also analytical. Rather than reacting impulsively, Justyce uses the letter to examine the implications of their words and to question how he should respond. Writing becomes a private space where he can admit his anger

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<sup>36</sup> Nic Stone, *Dear Martin*.

while still measuring his reactions against the moral example of Martin Luther King Jr. He expresses a desire to rise above the hostility he encounters, but he also acknowledges how difficult it is not to feel resentment. The epistolary form therefore allows him to stage his internal conflict between anger and restraint, ambition and loyalty, individuality and racial identity.<sup>37</sup>

While epistolary narration offers access to an intimate and individual voice, dual or multiple perspectives expand the narrative by presenting different interpretations of the same event. Dual-perspective narration in YA literature is characterised by the alternation of two narrators throughout the story, allowing readers to observe the same events through distinct, and sometimes conflicting, points of view. Often, the narrators come from different backgrounds, have different levels of maturity or belong to different racial or social positions. This contrast highlights how someone's environment and lived experiences shape the way they interpret and react to a situation. To emphasise these differences, the same event is frequently described through two separate lenses, helping readers understand how each character processes the situation in a unique way. This narrative strategy demonstrates that truth is not perceived in the same way by everyone and that perspective plays a crucial role in shaping one's reality. A clear example of dual-perspective narration in YA literature is in *All American Boys*, written by Jason Reynolds, an African American writer, and Brendan Kiely, a white author.<sup>38</sup> The novel features two narrators: Rashad, a Black teenager who becomes the victim of police brutality, and Quinn, Rashad's white classmate who witnesses the beating. Rashad's perspective focuses on the physical and emotional trauma caused by the assault, as well as his hospitalisation and the lasting impact the event has on his life. Quinn's narration, on the other hand, centres on his internal moral conflict, since the victim is his classmate and the police officer responsible for the violence is a close friend of his family and a father figure after his own father's death. The dual structure of the novel highlights how the same traumatic event is experienced and processed differently due to race and social position. Quinn becomes a representation of growing racial awareness and of the struggle to confront privilege and the consequences of being a passive bystander. This is further reinforced by the fact that the novel is co-written by two authors of different racial backgrounds, which mirrors the perspectives of the two protagonists. This type of narration carries a strong political meaning, as it exposes systemic injustice from multiple angles and challenges the idea of a single, dominant narrative. By encouraging readers to engage with both perspectives, the novel promotes dialogue and reflection. In particular, white readers are invited to listen to Black voices and to recognise that remaining passive in the face of injustice can become a form of complicity. Through multiple

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<sup>37</sup> Nic Stone, *Dear Martin*, p. 67.

<sup>38</sup> Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, *All American Boys*.

points of view, the novel fosters empathy across racial lines and pushes readers to question their own position, often by creating a sense of discomfort that leads to deeper understanding.

The impact of dual-perspective narration becomes particularly clear when Quinn watches the video recording of Rashad's beating, which forces him to reconsider the event he had previously witnessed. After avoiding the video for several days, Quinn finally decides to watch it because he no longer wants to pretend that nothing happened or distance himself from the situation. When he first saw the encounter in person, he immediately assumed that Rashad must have done something wrong and that the police officer was simply doing his job. In the days that follow, Quinn often defends the officer when other people question the incident or tries to minimise the seriousness of the event. However, after arguments with his friends and teammates, who strongly disagree with his interpretation, he begins to reflect more critically on what he saw and eventually decides to watch the video. Seeing the scene again through the recording forces him to acknowledge the brutality of the officer's actions. Quinn is shocked both by the level of violence used against Rashad and by the realisation that his first reaction had been shaped by unconscious racial assumptions. His loyalty to the officer, who is a close family friend and the older brother of one of Quinn's best friends, had influenced how he interpreted the situation. At the same time, Quinn becomes aware of his own privilege: unlike Rashad and his Black classmates, he has the option to walk away from the situation and return to his normal life. Rashad's perspective, however, reveals a very different emotional response to the same event. While Quinn initially avoids confronting the reality of the beating out of discomfort, Rashad tries to distance himself from it because of trauma and fear. During his hospitalisation he often avoids watching the news or talking about what happened, wishing instead to return to his normal life and move past the event as quickly as possible. In contrast, his older brother Spoony immediately recognises the beating as an act of police brutality and insists that what happened should not be ignored. The situation becomes even more visible when Rashad's classmates spray-paint the phrase "Rashad is absent again today" on the sidewalk in front of the school. This message turns Rashad's absence into a public reminder of the violence he experienced and transforms a private injury into a collective statement of protest. The slogan also echoes the language used in real Black Lives Matter demonstrations, where the names of the victims of police violence are publicly repeated so that they cannot be forgotten. In this sense, the phrase functions not only as a sign of solidarity with Rashad but also as a symbolic act of resistance against the silence that often surrounds police brutality. The appearance of the phrase makes the event impossible to ignore, both for the school community and for Quinn himself. Through the contrast between Rashad's attempt to cope with trauma and Quinn's gradual recognition of injustice, the novel highlights how race and social position shape the way violence is

experienced and understood. While Rashad immediately lives the physical and emotional consequences of police brutality, Quinn must confront and question his own assumptions before he can recognise the event for what it truly is. Through this dual narrative structure, the novel exposes the gap between witnessing injustice and understanding it, encouraging readers to reflect on the dangers of silence, indifference and passive complicity.

While private reflection in epistolary narration and multiple viewpoints in dual perspective narratives are important to represent racism and police violence, another key narrative form in YA literature is testimony. Testimony is the act of bearing witness to an event and speaking publicly about it, and in YA literature it is often used when a narrator becomes a witness to injustice and refuses to remain silent. This form of narration carries a strong moral urgency, because it insists that what happened must be remembered and acknowledged. In this way, testimony transforms a personal experience into collective memory, since speaking out allows others to share responsibility for remembering and responding to injustice. For this reason, testimony is inherently political. Telling the story becomes an act of resistance, because it challenges erasure and questions institutional narratives, especially in cases of police violence. It directly opposes police reports and media representations that often justify or minimise violence by portraying victims as responsible for what happened to them. Testimony instead insists that Black suffering is real and must be taken seriously, recognising Black people as human beings deserving dignity and respect. This dynamic is visible in the Black Lives Matter movement, where naming victims and telling their stories becomes a way to resist silence and counter media distortion. In YA literature, testimony is particularly powerful because young characters are positioned as witnesses to injustice, even though society often dismisses youth voices. By giving adolescents the role of witnesses, these narratives show that young people have the right to speak up and be heard. Testimony gives them narrative authority and turns their voice into a tool of truth-telling. Moreover, testimony allows readers to confront injustice directly, without narrative distance. Since these stories are often told in the first person, readers experience events through the emotional perspective of the witness. They are not protected by detachment or neutrality but are forced to acknowledge that injustice affects real lives and demands a response. This dynamic can be seen in *Light It Up* by Kekla Magoon, where the story follows a group of teenagers who react to the police shooting of a 13-year-old Shae Tatum, a Black girl in their community. Through the voices of different young characters, the novel reconstructs the event and its consequences, showing how witnesses interpret, remember and respond to the violence. The narrative gives space to their fear, anger and confusion, while also highlighting their desire to demand justice. In this way, the act of telling the story becomes a form of testimony that challenges official narratives and insists that the victim's life cannot be reduced to a statistic. Testimony removes the comfort of distance. Distance allows denial and neutrality,

reducing injustice to “just a story.” Testimony instead places the reader in front of the event, making it difficult to look away and reinforcing the idea that young people are directly affected by ongoing forms of violence. For this reason, testimony becomes one of the most powerful narrative forms of resistance in YA literature.

The testimonial narrative form in YA literature is particularly visible in the opening scene of *Light It Up* by Kekla Magoon. The novel begins with the shooting of thirteen-year-old Shae Tatum, who is killed by a white police officer while walking home. From the very first pages, the narrative places the reader directly in front of the violence of the encounter, removing any narrative distance. Shae is described as tall for her age and bundled in a thick coat, details that make her appear older than she actually is. She is also wearing headphones while running home, which prevents her from hearing the officer’s commands. The narration repeatedly uses the word “maybe” to describe the small details and assumptions that lead to the fatal moment: maybe the officer thought she was older, maybe he believed she was ignoring him, maybe he misinterpreted her movements. By listing these possibilities, the text highlights how a series of misjudgements and racialised assumptions ultimately result in the death of an innocent child. Immediately after the shooting, the reader briefly enters the perspective of the police officer, who realises what he has done and begins to panic. The narrative then shifts again to the point of view of a witness who happens to be walking nearby and sees the officer crouched beside Shae’s body. When the witness asks what happened, the officer claims that the victim had a gun, even though this is not true. When the witness challenges this explanation and asks whether he shot her, the officer reacts aggressively, pointing his weapon at the witness and ordering them to step back. The situation quickly becomes chaotic, and when other police officers arrive, they arrest the witness after seeing the officer with his gun raised, further complicating the narrative of the event. Following this moment, the novel expands beyond the immediate scene and presents the reactions of different members of the community, showing what they were doing at the time of the shooting or when they later heard the news. Through these multiple voices, the event begins to circulate within the community, transforming a single act of violence into a shared experience of shock, grief and anger. In this way, the narrative functions as a form of testimony: it records the event, preserves the memory of the victim, and challenges the official narratives that often attempt to justify or minimise police violence. By placing the reader in direct proximity to the shooting and then showing how the story spreads through the community, *Light It Up* demonstrates how testimony in YA literature can transform a personal tragedy into collective memory and a call for justice.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Kekla Magoon, *Light It Up*.

In conclusion, this chapter has examined how different narrative forms in contemporary young adult literature are used to represent racism, police violence and the experiences of Black youth. Epistolary narration, as seen in *Dear Martin*, allows the protagonist to engage in private reflection, creating an intimate space where he can process the racial tensions and social pressures that shape his identity. Dual-perspective narration, illustrated through *All American Boys*, highlights how the same event can be interpreted differently depending on racial background and social position, revealing the gap between lived experience and external perception. Finally, testimonial narration, exemplified by *Light It Up*, positions characters and readers as witnesses to injustice, transforming individual acts of violence into collective memory and political awareness. Together, these narrative strategies demonstrate how YA literature can confront systemic racism while giving voice to young characters who are often excluded from public discourse. By encouraging readers to engage emotionally and critically with these stories, such narratives challenge silence and indifference, presenting storytelling itself as a form of resistance.

# Chapter 3: Novels in Dialogue with the Black Lives Matter Movement

## 3.1 *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone: Letters and the Search for Self

The novel *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone, published by Crown Publishing Group in 2017, is the author's debut work and was inspired by a series of race-related events, including the 2012 murder of Jordan Davis. As a contemporary YA novel, it explores racism, morality and identity formation through the perspective of Justyce McAllister, a Black teenager navigating the challenges of growing up in a racially unequal society. Justyce is a high-achieving student at Braselton Preparatory Academy, a predominantly white private school, where he attends on a full scholarship. He is also preparing to enter Yale University, a milestone that highlights both his ambition and the pressures of moving between two social worlds. He lives in the dorm of his school, while his mother stayed in his childhood home in a predominantly Black neighbourhood affected by gang activity, including the Black Jihad, which presents an image of danger often associated with young Black men. Justyce's life is thus defined by contrasts: the expectations of elite academic spaces and the realities of a racially stratified society. Before his encounter with the police, Justyce believes that only individuals fitting the "thuggish" stereotype, like members of the gang, would be targeted by law enforcement. This belief is shattered when Justyce attempts to help his intoxicated ex-girlfriend into her car. Despite wearing a sweater identifying him as a student of Braselton Prep, so someone who's trustworthy in his opinion, a police officer violently pulls him away and handcuffs him. In that moment, Justyce realizes that his Black identity marks him as inherently suspicious in the eyes of authority, regardless of his accomplishments, intentions or behaviour. The experience prompts him to begin writing letters to Martin Luther King Jr., using the epistolary form as a space to process trauma, reflect on moral questions and explore his own sense of self.

The letters allow Justyce to grapple with the tension between his personal identity and the societal labels imposed upon him, while also negotiating his understanding of justice, dignity and belonging. Through this narrative device, Stone stages Justyce's coming-of-age journey, showing how identity formation in adolescence is inseparable from the racialized realities he faces. The epistolary structure thus becomes both a reflective and political tool, highlighting the intimate interiority of the protagonist while connecting his personal experiences to broader questions of systemic racism. By giving Justyce a voice to interrogate his

own actions and the social forces around him, *Dear Martin* demonstrates how YA literature can simultaneously explore identity, morality and resistance. The first letter in *Dear Martin* is written immediately after Justyce returns to his dorm, following the traumatic encounter with the police officer. He begins by introducing himself and listing his academic and personal achievements: he is a senior on a full scholarship at a prestigious prep school, ranked fourth out of 83 graduating students, captain of the debate team and has high SAT and ACT scores, which are tests that colleges use to evaluate students. Despite growing up in what he calls a “bad” neighbourhood, Justyce emphasizes that he has worked hard and is on track to attend Yale University. Yet he immediately undercuts these accomplishments with the statement: “Sadly, during the wee hours of this morning, literally none of that mattered.” This phrase underscores his shock and confusion, revealing that he believed his good behaviour, achievements and social standing would protect him from discrimination. The officer’s perception of Justyce as threatening, intensified by the prep school hoodie he wears, demonstrates that his race outweighs all markers of privilege or respectability. Justyce recounts how even after his ex-girlfriend’s parents arrived to clarify the misunderstanding, and with the intervention of an attorney friend, he remained in handcuffs for hours, sitting on the sidewalk until nearly morning. The sense of helplessness is palpable, and he doubts that filing a formal complaint will achieve anything, highlighting his growing disillusionment with a legal system that consistently fails Black youth. He then reflects on a previous incident in June, when Sherman Carson, a Black teenager, was shot four times by a white officer. With no witnesses, the police report painted Sherman as a criminal, whereas his friends and family described him as a responsible and active member of his community. This comparison emphasizes the pervasive racial bias within law enforcement and how systemic injustice operates, even in cases where evidence is ambiguous.

The letter also reveals Justyce’s internal struggle with appearance and stereotype. Although he does not fit the “threatening” image often imposed on Black youth, he realises that society will perceive him as dangerous regardless of his actions or attire. His reflection on his identity shows a tension between being an upstanding citizen and being judged solely based on race, a tension that fuels both anger and a desire for moral growth. Justyce resolves to emulate Martin Luther King Jr., aspiring to respond to injustice without perpetuating the stereotypes or allowing anger to dictate his behaviour.<sup>40</sup> The epistolary form amplifies the intimacy and vulnerability of Justyce’s voice. By addressing Martin directly, he externalizes his thoughts, creating a space for reflection and self-questioning. The language is accessible, blending formal expression with slang and occasional curse words, mirroring a teenager grappling with trauma in a way that feels authentic and

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<sup>40</sup> Nic Stone, *Dear Martin*, p. 13.

immediate. The frequent questions in the letter underscore his inner turmoil, self-doubt, and search for guidance in navigating systemic racism. The first letter functions as a window into Justyce's mind immediately after his encounter with the police, revealing both his initial confusion and the beginnings of critical consciousness. It establishes the epistolary form as a tool for processing trauma, negotiating identity and exploring moral and social responsibility. By presenting his personal experience in such an intimate and reflective format, the novel emphasizes how Black youth confront the tension between societal stereotypes and their own self-perception, while also laying the groundwork for Justyce's growth throughout the narrative.

In the second letter, Justyce reflects on an incident that occurred after a classroom debate about equality in the United States. A white classmate, Jared, claimed that everyone has the same opportunities and used one of their wealthy Black classmates as an example. In contrast, another classmate SJ, a white girl and the daughter of the attorney who helped Justyce after his encounter with the police, argues that Black people face far more injustice than white people and do not enjoy equal rights. What infuriates Justyce the most is that his close friend Manny appears to side with Jared, even though Justyce senses that Manny is conflicted. This moment highlights the tension of navigating different perspectives within both privileged and familiar spaces. Feeling alienated, Justyce initially retreats to his mother's neighbourhood, where he feels understood by people who share his experiences and recognize the realities of systemic racism. However, encouraged by his mother to return to his school, he turns to his letters to Martin Luther King Jr. as a space to process his anger and confusion. The epistolary form allows Justyce to articulate the complexity of his emotions and to ask difficult questions about morality and justice, reflecting his struggle to reconcile personal principles with societal inequities. He wonders how Martin would have responded to the knowledge that Black people are still being killed for demanding equal rights, while striving to maintain nonviolence and moral integrity.<sup>41</sup> This letter underscores the dual role of epistolary narration in the novel. On one hand, it functions as a private, safe space where Justyce can explore his feelings of betrayal, frustration, and moral uncertainty. On the other, it transforms these personal reflections into a moral inquiry that resonates with readers, inviting them to confront the tension between ideals of equality and the realities of systemic oppression. By documenting his inner conflict in a direct dialogue with Martin, Justyce's letters make visible the challenges of forming a Black identity in a society that constantly questions his right to exist and thrive. This passage reinforces the theme of voice and self-expression, demonstrating how epistolary narration

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<sup>41</sup> Nic Stone, *Dear Martin*, p. 38.

enables the protagonist to navigate his own moral and social consciousness while processing the impact of racism on his everyday life.

After observing Justyce's initial attempts to make sense of racism in his first two letters, the final letter reveals how these experiences have shaped his understanding of himself and the society around him. He begins this letter from his dorm at Yale University, marking the achievement of a major personal goal. Reflecting on the journey that began with his first letter, Justyce considers the purpose of his "to be more like Martin" project and the lessons he has learned about identity, morality, and justice. In this letter, he describes feeling out of place, particularly after an encounter with his new white roommate, who immediately judges him based on his name and racial identity. Justyce recalls the traumatic events that brought him to this point: the violent encounter with a police officer that left him wounded, the death of his friend Manny, and the subsequent court case where both he and Manny were portrayed as volatile and dangerous. The trial ends inconclusively, and the officer is later killed in prison, leaving a lingering sense of injustice. These experiences weigh heavily on Justyce, and he poses a series of poignant and troubling questions to Martin, asking whether the cycle of racial judgment and discrimination will ever end. Despite this, the letter also shows his growth. He recognizes that his heightened awareness of race, that any interaction can be interpreted through the lens of racial bias, is a natural response to systemic injustice. Yet he balances this realism with hope and self-reflection, acknowledging that he is young and still has time to define who he is and what he believes. The epistolary form allows readers to witness this intimate process of self-examination firsthand; Justyce's direct address to Martin creates a dialogue that is both confessional and analytical. Through the letter, readers see how the private act of writing becomes a tool for processing trauma, negotiating identity, and asserting agency in a society that often imposes limiting narratives on Black youth. In conclusion, the final letter demonstrates that identity formation is an active, ongoing process. Justyce moves from uncertainty and reliance on external validation toward a more self-aware, resilient understanding of himself as a Black teenager navigating a racially unjust society. The epistolary form not only stages his moral and emotional development but also invites readers into a deeply personal engagement with the consequences of racism and the strategies young people employ to make sense of their place in the world.

Beyond personal reflection, Justyce's letters function as a lens through which readers can examine social injustice and the challenges that Black youth face in their everyday lives. Through the personal experiences he recounts, the narrative invites readers to engage with these realities on an intimate level, almost forcing them to confront the emotional and psychological impact of racism alongside the protagonist. By writing these letters and externalizing his thoughts and concerns, Justyce begins to recognize patterns of inequality that he had previously ignored

due to his naïve belief that police brutality and systemic racism would not affect him because of his academic achievements, lifestyle, and appearance. Over time, however, he realizes that police violence, racial profiling, and systemic discrimination are much closer to his own life than he initially believed. This realization is particularly evident in one of the letters written in the middle of the novel, in which Justyce reflects on a conversation with his friend Manny and Manny's father, Mr. Julian, the Executive Vice President of a respected company. During this discussion, Mr. Julian recounts a moment when a colleague referred to him using a racial slur, despite his professional status and success. He also admits that this was not an isolated episode but something that he has dealt with all his life and professional career. Mr. Julian also expresses regret for not having prepared his son more thoroughly to confront racism and learn how to navigate it, acknowledging that such experiences are almost inevitable. This moment deeply unsettles Justyce, as it challenges his lingering hope that success and respectability might shield him from discrimination. Instead, the conversation reinforces the painful realization that racism persists regardless of social status or personal achievements. Through these reflections, the act of writing becomes a tool that allows Justyce not only to process his own experiences but also to connect them to broader systemic issues. The epistolary narration places the reader in direct contact with Justyce's thoughts and emotions, fostering empathy and encouraging critical awareness. In this way, the novel demonstrates how young adult literature can make complex social issues more tangible for readers, particularly those who may never personally experience racial discrimination. Although the letters recount the fictional experiences of a single character, they echo the realities faced by many young Black people who navigate prejudice, fear, and daily microaggressions. As Mr. Julian suggests in his conversation with Manny and Justyce, these moments of discrimination may still catch them off guard, but they are rarely surprising due to their persistence in society. Ultimately, these reflections resonate with the broader aims of the Black Lives Matter movement, which seeks to expose systemic injustice, challenge harmful narratives, and foster solidarity against the ongoing marginalization and misrepresentation of Black communities.

### **3.2 *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds & Brendan Kiely: Dual Voices and Shared Responsibility**

*All American Boys* is a young adult novel written by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, published by Simon & Schuster in 2015. The collaboration between the two authors emerged from conversations about race and police violence in the United States. Reynolds and Kiely first met during a Simon & Schuster book tour in 2013, where they discussed the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin, an event that sparked a broader debate about racial injustice. Following the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014, the two authors decided to

write *All American Boys* in order to address issues such as police brutality, racial profiling, and the social tensions surrounding these events.<sup>42</sup> The novel revolves around a violent encounter between a white police officer and a Black teenager, Rashad Butler, who is mistakenly accused of shoplifting and brutally beaten. This central event is narrated through the perspectives of two protagonists: Rashad himself, who becomes the victim of police violence, and Quinn Collins, a white classmate who witnesses the incident. Quinn's perspective is particularly complex, as he has a personal connection to the police officer responsible for the beating, creating a conflict between loyalty and moral responsibility. Through this narrative structure, the novel explores how a single act of violence reverberates throughout a community, affecting individuals in different ways depending on their social position, racial identity, and personal relationships. The story alternates between the voices of Rashad and Quinn, creating a dual narrative that allows readers to observe the same event from two distinct perspectives. The novel opens with Rashad's account of the incident, which culminates in the moment he loses consciousness after the beating. This is followed by Quinn's perspective of the same day, recounting how he witnesses the assault and ultimately flees the scene. This alternating structure highlights the contrasting experiences of the two characters: while Rashad embodies the vulnerability of Black youth confronted with systemic injustice, Quinn represents a witness who must confront his own privilege and reconsider his understanding of racism and responsibility. By presenting both perspectives, the novel encourages readers to engage critically with the complexities of racial injustice and the different ways individuals respond to it.

Rashad's narration gives the reader direct access to the experience of racial profiling and police brutality that many young Black men face in the United States. The novel opens with Rashad making a quick stop at a convenience store to buy a bag of chips. While crouching down to retrieve his phone from his backpack, a woman accidentally trips over him, causing both the chips and the beer she is holding to fall to the floor. Although the incident is clearly a misunderstanding, the situation quickly escalates when the store clerk accuses Rashad of attempting to steal the chips. A white police officer, Paul Galluzzo, who's on duty in the shop, immediately intervenes and assumes that Rashad is responsible for harassing the woman. Rashad is confused by the sudden hostility, especially since the woman herself does not accuse him of anything. Despite Rashad's attempts to explain what happened, the officer refuses to listen and calls for backup. When Rashad instinctively reaches into his pocket to take out money to pay for the chips, the officer reacts violently, dragging him out of the store and slamming him onto the

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<sup>42</sup> "Radical honesty leads to friendship that makes writing *All American Boys* together possible," *Second Wave* (interview with Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely), March 10, 2021, <https://secondwavemedia.com/radical-honesty-leads-to-friendship-that-makes-writing-all-american-boys-together-possibl-031021/> accessed March 7, 2026.

pavement. The scene becomes increasingly chaotic from Rashad's perspective as he struggles to understand what is happening while being physically assaulted. His narration becomes fragmented and disoriented, reflecting the dizziness, fear, and pain he experiences during the attack. The chapter ends with Rashad losing consciousness while internally pleading for the officer not to kill him.<sup>43</sup> This moment highlights the extreme power imbalance between the police officer and the unarmed teenager, emphasizing how quickly a minor misunderstanding can escalate into life-threatening violence. Through Rashad's perspective, the novel illustrates both the physical and emotional consequences of police brutality. After the assault, Rashad wakes up in the hospital with a broken nose and cracked ribs, forced to confront the reality of what has happened to him. The presence of a police officer stationed outside his hospital room further reinforces the injustice of the situation, as he is initially treated as a criminal rather than a victim. The incident also creates tension within his family, particularly with his father, who is a police officer and initially reacts with anger after being told that Rashad was arrested for shoplifting. In contrast, Rashad's older brother Spoony immediately recognizes the situation as another instance of police brutality and becomes determined to seek justice. As Rashad recovers in the hospital, he gradually becomes aware that the beating was filmed and shared online, sparking public debate and protests within the community. At first, he feels embarrassed by the sudden attention, but after some convincing from his brother and conversations with Shirley Fitzgerald, an elderly volunteer at the hospital, about the Civil Rights Movement, he understands that the incident is not only about him as an individual. Instead, it reflects a much larger pattern of systemic injustice. Rashad's experience therefore becomes symbolic of the broader issue of police violence against Black communities, transforming his personal trauma into a catalyst for social awareness and collective action.

The second narrative perspective in the novel is represented through Quinn Collins, whose chapters provide the viewpoint of a white witness to Rashad's beating. While Rashad's narration portrays the experience of the victim, Quinn's perspective illustrates the bystander's position and the moral conflict that can arise when confronting injustice. On the same day of the incident, Quinn is also on his way to a party with his friends, who stop at the convenience store to persuade someone to buy them alcohol. This moment already highlights a contrast in privilege between the two narrators. In Rashad's chapters, it is emphasized that he has always tried to avoid any kind of illegal behaviour, partly because his father is a police officer and has raised him to respect authority. In contrast, Quinn and his friends casually engage in minor rule-breaking, such as attempting to buy alcohol while underage, without fearing serious consequences. Quinn's personal background also shapes his perspective throughout the novel. His father, a soldier

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<sup>43</sup> Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, *All American Boys*, pp. 15-20.

who died while serving in Afghanistan, is frequently described as an “All American Boy,” a term that Quinn both references and questions. The phrase represents an idealized image of American masculinity, traditionally associated with white, heterosexual men who embody patriotism and moral integrity. Quinn feels the pressure of living up to this image, especially in the absence of his father, while also recognizing how unrealistic and restrictive this expectation can be. This internal tension becomes even more significant when Quinn witnesses Rashad’s beating and immediately recognizes the police officer as Paul Galluzzo, the older brother of one of his closest friends and a man who had once acted as a father figure to him during his childhood. Seeing Paul violently assault a defenceless teenager deeply unsettles Quinn. He struggles to reconcile the brutality he is witnessing with the image of the supportive and caring man he remembers from his childhood. Despite recognizing that something is wrong, Quinn does not intervene during the assault. Instead, when additional police officers arrive, he quickly leaves the scene and returns to his friends, reluctant to become involved. When he tells them what he saw, they dismiss the incident as Paul simply doing his job, reinforcing Quinn’s initial tendency to rationalize the situation and avoid confronting its implications.<sup>44</sup> Throughout the following chapters, Quinn repeatedly attempts to distance himself from the event. Even as discussions about Rashad’s beating begin to spread throughout the school and the wider community, he tries to remain neutral and suppress his doubts. However, pressure from those around him gradually forces him to reconsider his position. On one side, his friend, Paul’s younger brother, expects him to defend the officer’s actions. On the other, one of Quinn’s basketball teammates, who is also Rashad’s friend, criticizes his silence and refusal to acknowledge the injustice of the situation. These conflicting expectations push Quinn to finally confront the truth when he decides to watch the video of the beating. Watching the footage becomes a turning point in Quinn’s moral development. For the first time, he fully acknowledges that what happened to Rashad was not simply a misunderstanding, but an act of police brutality rooted in racial prejudice. Quinn realizes that his earlier attempts to dismiss or ignore the event had made him complicit in maintaining the injustice. Through this process, Quinn comes to understand his own position of privilege and the responsibility that comes with witnessing discrimination. His character therefore represents individuals who are not directly affected by racism, but who must nevertheless decide whether to remain silent or take a stand against injustice. In this way, Quinn’s narrative arc reinforces the novel’s broader message about shared responsibility in confronting systemic racism.

The alternation between Rashad’s and Quinn’s narration creates a narrative dialogue within the novel. Through this structure, readers are able to observe two

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<sup>44</sup> Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, *All American Boys*, pp. 21-37.

sides of the same event at the same time, even though the two protagonists themselves are unaware of each other's perspectives. Rashad and Quinn do not know each other and only come face to face at the very end of the novel, when they briefly share eye contact in the middle of a protest. Because of this, Rashad has no knowledge of Quinn's presence during the beating or of the moral conflict he experiences afterwards. At the same time, Quinn does not fully understand what Rashad is going through, both because he does not know him personally and because his position as a white teenager allows him a level of distance from the realities of racial injustice. In this way, the reader becomes a mediator between the two perspectives, since they are able to access both narratives and connect the experiences of the two characters. The narrative structure also creates a strong contrast between the protagonists. While Rashad is immobilized in the hospital recovering from the assault, Quinn continues to move through the community and witness the debates and tensions that the incident generates.

Through Quinn's chapters, the reader sees how the event affects not only Rashad's friends and family but also the people connected to the police officer responsible for the violence. This contrast creates a structural opposition between the victim, who experiences isolation and physical recovery, and the witness, who must confront the social consequences of the event and make moral choices about how to respond to it. At the same time, the novel juxtaposes Rashad's physical and emotional trauma with Quinn's internal conflict over his loyalty to a white police officer who has long been a father figure to him. Rashad's perspective highlights the brutality and vulnerability experienced by Black Americans in encounters with the police, while Quinn's narration exposes the privilege that many white individuals have in being able to distance themselves from these realities. However, Quinn's character also demonstrates that this privilege does not necessarily lead to permanent indifference. Instead, his gradual recognition of the injustice reveals how awareness can develop when individuals are willing to question their assumptions and confront uncomfortable truths. The dual narration therefore expands the story from an individual act of violence to a broader social issue. Through Quinn's perspective in particular, readers are able to observe the reactions of the school, the opinions of friends, and the tensions within the wider community. These reactions are filtered through Quinn's internal struggle, showing how witnessing injustice can force individuals to reflect on their own responsibility. The novel's structure reinforces the idea that racial injustice is not only experienced by victims but also witnessed by others who must decide whether to remain silent or take action. By opening the narrative with Rashad's perspective, the novel also ensures that the reader immediately understands his innocence. This choice challenges common narratives that attempt to justify police violence by portraying Black victims as suspicious or criminal. At the same time, the alternating perspectives encourage readers, particularly white readers,

to move from passive observation to a more critical engagement with the issue of racial injustice. The fact that the novel is written by two authors from different racial backgrounds further strengthens this dynamic, as it mirrors the dual perspectives presented within the story. Ultimately, the dual narration transforms the novel from the story of a single act of violence into a broader reflection on privilege, responsibility, and social awareness. By presenting multiple viewpoints, the narrative fosters empathy across racial lines, highlights the divisions that exist within American society, and emphasizes the importance of moving from passive observation to active opposition to injustice.

Another aspect that is strongly portrayed in the novel is the community response and the development of collective awareness. As soon as one of the witnesses records the beating and publishes the video online, the incident shifts from being a private event to a public controversy, sparking debates both online and within the school and the wider community. Rashad's embarrassment is understandable, since what began as a personal injustice quickly becomes the subject of public discussion and a collective social issue. The novel therefore shows how acts of police violence often gain visibility through media circulation and community reaction. The video recording plays a crucial role throughout the story because it prevents the incident from being ignored or dismissed. Due to the outrage it generates, the authorities are forced to address the situation rather than quietly covering it up. At the same time, the recording also forces Quinn to confront what he witnessed, making it more difficult for him to continue denying the injustice of the situation. In this way, the novel reflects real dynamics present in contemporary discussions about police brutality, where recordings shared online often challenge official narratives. The reactions within the community are far from unified, and this division becomes particularly visible within the school. In Quinn's narration, the day after the incident some of Rashad's friends paint the phrase "Rashad Is Absent Today" on the sidewalk in front of the school. This public message forces students to confront the event, even those who would prefer to ignore it. The divide within the school becomes even more evident during lunch, when many Blacks and students of color show their support for Rashad by eating outside near the painted slogan, while most white students, including a reluctant Quinn, remain inside the building.<sup>45</sup> Through Quinn's observations, the reader sees how friendships begin to strain as students choose different sides, demonstrating how racial injustice can create deep divisions within a community.

The novel also shows how activism and protest gradually develop from this initial outrage. Rashad's brother Spoony becomes one of the first characters to react strongly to the incident, immediately beginning to organize and communicate with others during his visit in the hospital. The slogan "Rashad Is Absent Today" soon

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<sup>45</sup> Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, *All American Boys*, pp. 154-158.

evolves into a broader symbol of protest, eventually being repeated during the demonstration in front of the police station. During the protest, many participants lie on the ground while chanting the slogan and invoking the names of other victims of police violence who were not as fortunate as Rashad and whose lives were taken too soon. In this way, Rashad's experience becomes connected to a larger history of racial injustice. The protest represents an important turning point for several characters and serves as the climax of the novel. From Rashad's perspective, there is tension surrounding the possibility of encountering his father, who is a police officer and might be present at the station during the demonstration. However, this tension is resolved when his father ultimately joins the march alongside Rashad and the rest of the family, a gesture that provides a moment of emotional relief and solidarity. During the protest Rashad reflects not only on his own experience but also on the many victims who are absent because they were killed by police violence, emphasizing the broader significance of the demonstration. Quinn's perspective during the protest highlights the moral tensions within his own social circle. His best friend discourages him from attending, arguing that participating would be a direct offense to the police officer involved, while his mother tries to persuade him to stay away by invoking the memory of his father and asking what he would have done in such a situation. Quinn responds that he does not know exactly what his father would have done, but that he believes his father would have "stood up for what he believed in".<sup>46</sup> By choosing to attend the protest, Quinn finally moves from being a passive witness to becoming an active ally. The demonstration therefore illustrates how individual experiences of injustice can inspire collective awareness and resistance, particularly among young people. These events echo the principles of the Black Lives Matter movement, showing that confronting systemic racism requires both personal reflection and public action. By linking personal experience, community engagement, and activism, *All American Boys* illustrates the ways in which youth can recognize injustice and participate in meaningful social change.

### **3.3 *Light It Up* by Kekla Magoon: Multi-Voiced Narratives of Protest and Community Response**

The novel *Light It Up* was written by Kekla Magoon and published by Henry Holt and Co. in 2019. It is a contemporary YA novel and a companion to her acclaimed book *How It Went Down*. The narrative focuses on racial injustice, police violence, and youth activism, drawing inspiration from real-life events and systemic issues in the United States. The story explores the aftermath of a police officer's shooting and killing of a thirteen-year-old girl named Shae Tatum, and the reactions of the community that follow. These reactions are shown through multiple perspectives, giving testimony to the wide range of individuals affected by the event. The novel is

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<sup>46</sup> Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, *All American Boys*, pp. 248

told through fifteen different narrators, alongside non-fictional elements such as Twitter threads and news reports, each providing a distinct viewpoint on the shooting and its consequences. Among the most prominent voices are Tina, Shae's friend who lives in the same group home and represents the immediate grief and confusion experienced by those closest to the victim; Kimberly and Zeke, local activists working with the protest group SCORE, who offer insight into the organization of community protests and the dynamics of grassroots activism; and Robb, a white college student who believes he understands the issues but struggles to truly empathize, highlighting the limits of superficial allyship. Other perspectives include Tyrell, a Black college student whose friend was shot years before, representing the lasting impact of community trauma; Will, a high school student who uses graffiti and street art as a form of protest and resistance; and Brick, the leader of a local gang, whose voice expresses anger, frustration, and loyalty to the community. The narrative also includes perspectives from figures connected to institutions, such as Officer Young, a police officer present during the protests, Eva, the officer's daughter who must confront the personal consequences of her father's actions, and Steve, a Black professional working in police public relations, whose role reveals the complexities faced by individuals operating within systems that may harm their own communities. Through these diverse voices, the novel does more than recount the circumstances surrounding Shae's death. Instead, it constructs a collective portrait of a community struggling to process injustice, grief, anger, and the desire for change. For the reader, this multiplicity of perspectives creates a broader understanding of the social and emotional repercussions of police violence, emphasizing that such events affect not only the victim but also families, friends, witnesses, and entire communities. By presenting a wide range of reactions, from activism and solidarity to denial and confusion, *Light It Up* encourages readers to reflect on how individuals respond differently to injustice depending on their experiences, social positions, and personal histories. In this way, the novel invites young readers to engage critically with the issue of systemic racism, while also highlighting the importance of listening to multiple voices when attempting to understand complex social realities.

The opening scene of *Light It Up* immediately confronts the reader with the violence that will shape the rest of the narrative. The novel begins with the shooting of thirteen-year-old Shae Tatum by a white police officer while she is walking home, placing the reader directly in front of the fatal encounter from the very first pages. This choice establishes the emotional and ethical stakes of the story without offering any narrative distance or gradual introduction to the conflict. By presenting the moment of violence at the beginning of the novel, the text forces the reader to engage immediately with the injustice of the situation and to recognize the vulnerability of the victim. Shae is described as tall for her age and wearing a thick coat while running home with headphones on, small details that

emphasise her ordinary daily routine and make her appear as a normal teenager rather than an abstract symbol of violence. These elements contribute to humanise the victim, allowing readers to imagine her as a real person with a life that extends beyond the moment of the shooting. In this way, the narrative challenges the tendency often present in media coverage of police violence, where victims can be reduced to simplified or criminalised representations that obscure their humanity. The scene also places the reader in a position of critical awareness by revealing the contradictions that emerge immediately after the shooting. When the perspective shifts briefly to the police officer, he realises the gravity of what has happened and begins to panic, while at the same time attempting to justify his actions. When a witness approaches the scene and asks what happened, the officer claims that Shae had a gun, even though the reader already knows this is not true. This moment creates a form of dramatic irony that exposes how official explanations can conflict with the reality of the event. For the reader, this contradiction highlights the fragility of institutional narratives and encourages a more critical attitude toward the justifications often given in cases of police violence. The presence of the witness also reinforces the importance of observation and testimony, as the event is no longer limited to the interaction between the officer and the victim but becomes something that others must interpret and respond to. As the scene unfolds and additional police officers arrive, the situation quickly becomes chaotic, and the witness is eventually arrested after challenging the officer's explanation. This escalation further emphasises the imbalance of power between individuals and institutions, showing how attempts to question authority can lead to additional forms of control and intimidation. For the reader, this moment reinforces the sense that the injustice does not end with the shooting itself but continues through the reactions of the authorities who attempt to manage the situation. The narrative then expands beyond the immediate encounter and begins to present the reactions of various members of the community, showing what they were doing at the moment of the shooting or how they later learn about the event. Through this expansion, the death of Shae Tatum becomes more than an isolated tragedy and instead develops into a shared experience that spreads through the social fabric of the community. In this way, the opening scene not only introduces the central act of violence but also establishes the broader social impact that will shape the rest of the novel, encouraging readers to reflect on how individual acts of injustice resonate far beyond the moment in which they occur.<sup>47</sup>

Following the initial shooting, the novel quickly expands from the individual tragedy to the reaction of the surrounding community, showing how the death of Shae Tatum becomes a visible and shared experience for everyone in the neighbourhood. One of the most striking elements of this moment is the fact that

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<sup>47</sup> Kekla Magoon, *Light It Up*, pp. 1-5.

Shae's body remains on the street for several hours while the police conduct their investigation. During this time the area is sealed off with police tape and surrounded by multiple officers standing guard, many of them with their guns ready in case the situation escalates. As people from the neighbourhood and media begin to gather, the presence of the body behind the tape becomes an unavoidable reminder of the violence that has just taken place. Residents passing by are forced to confront the reality of the event directly, transforming the street into a space of collective mourning and shock. For the reader, this prolonged exposure of the body emphasises the lack of dignity often afforded to victims of police violence, as the body of a young girl becomes part of a public spectacle rather than being immediately treated with care and respect. The tension in the crowd eventually intensifies with the arrival of Shae's father, whose reaction introduces one of the most emotionally powerful moments of the novel. Overwhelmed by grief and disbelief, he attempts to reach the body of his daughter, pushing toward the police line in desperation. At this point the officers respond by raising their weapons and shouting at him to keep his hands where they can see them, treating a grieving father as if he were a potential threat. The scene becomes particularly heartbreaking because the reader witnesses a parent's immediate and instinctive reaction to loss while the authorities respond with suspicion and hostility. In the middle of this escalating tension, an unexpected figure intervenes: the leader of the local 8-5 Kings gang, Brick. Instead of contributing to the conflict, he tries to restrain Shae's father and prevent the situation from becoming more dangerous. This moment reveals a more complex side of a character who might otherwise be seen only through stereotypes associated with gang membership. His actions show loyalty to the community and a desire to protect the grieving father from provoking a violent response from the police. At the same time, a doctor from the neighbourhood, described as a Mexican-looking man steps forward, after some encouragement from Brick, since the police were asking him to step back, in an attempt to calm the situation and help Shae's father.

The text highlights a powerful moment of solidarity through the phrase "brown man to Black man", suggesting a shared understanding between members of different marginalized communities who are witnessing the same injustice. The doctor eventually administers a sedative to help calm the father, allowing him to regain control while the gang members assist in bringing him safely back home.<sup>48</sup> This interaction contrasts sharply with the behaviour of the police officers, who remain focused on maintaining authority and control rather than offering compassion. Later, the narrative briefly shifts to the perspective of one of the officers, who expresses frustration and anger at the crowd for supposedly interfering with their work. When the doctor criticizes the officers for pointing their guns at a grieving father, he is simply told to stay in his place, reinforcing the

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<sup>48</sup> Kekla Magoon, *Light It Up*, pp. 39-42.

institutional refusal to acknowledge the emotional and moral consequences of their actions.<sup>49</sup> Through these contrasting reactions, the novel illustrates how the community processes grief collectively while institutional power continues to prioritize control over empathy. In this way, the scene highlights the deep divide between the authorities and the community, while also revealing the solidarity and resilience that emerge among those directly affected by injustice.

In *Light It Up*, Kekla Magoon uses the perspectives of young girls to show how systemic violence and racial injustice ripple through a community, shaping the understanding and emotional development of children. Tina, Shae's friend, offers one of the most heartbreaking viewpoints, and her grief is conveyed almost entirely through the poems she writes. In one particularly devastating poem, she reflects on Shae being "gone now," paralleling her grief with that of Tariq, a close friend to both Tina and Shae and someone she considered a brother. Tariq was first introduced in Magoon's previous novel, *How It Went Down*, and his story continues to shape the world and characters of *Light It Up*. The repetition of grief in such a short life highlights how even at thirteen, Tina has already experienced profound loss, leaving her to struggle with the reality of death. Her use of the word "gone" instead of "dead" is deliberate, reflecting both the difficulty of articulating such trauma and the need to soften the enormity of her loss.<sup>50</sup> Through Tina's poetic voice, the reader gains a deeply intimate understanding of personal sorrow and the lasting emotional imprint of violence on young people. Her reflections are constantly contrasted with Eva's perspective, a younger girl in the story and the daughter of the police officer who killed Shae, highlighting how age and personal experience shape responses to trauma. From Eva's viewpoint, the reader sees a family grappling with the shooting in real time. On the night of the incident, she does not fully understand why her father comes home crying, but later, through conversations at school and gossip among peers, she begins to grasp the societal implications of her father's actions.<sup>51</sup> At home, her mother attempts to rationalize the shooting, insisting that her father did his job and genuinely believed Shae was a threat with a gun. Eva internalizes these explanations, showing how children's perceptions are shaped to accept institutional authority, even when confronted with the senseless death of a peer.<sup>52</sup>

The narrative also explores the ethical and emotional dilemmas within Eva's family. The Ku Klux Klan sends fifty thousand dollars to their household, intending to manipulate and intimidate them. Her mother urges her father to use the money for legal defence, but he is consumed by guilt and refuses, emphasizing the moral

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<sup>49</sup> Kekla Magoon, *Light It Up*, pp. 44.

<sup>50</sup> Kekla Magoon, *Light It Up*, p. 109.

<sup>51</sup> Kekla Magoon, *Light It Up*, pp. 43 and 67.

<sup>52</sup> Kekla Magoon, *Light It Up*, p. 97.

complexity of responding to systemic injustice while personally affected by it.<sup>53</sup> This incident, alongside the poems and perspectives of Tina and Eva, situates the personal tragedy within a broader societal context. The novel also incorporates scattered Twitter posts, which amplify the multiplicity of community reactions. White supremacists post under hashtags like #BlueLivesMatter, insisting the police were justified and dismissing protesters as irrational, while extremists incite violence against Black protesters. On the other hand, social media becomes a platform for protest and solidarity, with posts using #RiseUp and #StandUpSpeakOut to denounce the killing, highlight the injustice of Shae's death, and demand accountability. By juxtaposing Tina's intimate poetry with Eva's evolving understanding and the public outcry online, the novel demonstrates how trauma is experienced differently across ages and roles. It also shows that the personal grief of young people is inseparable from social and political responses, and it encourages readers to confront how systemic injustice impacts the most vulnerable members of a community.

The narrative complexity of *Light It Up* is one of its most striking features, and it reflects the multifaceted reality of trauma and injustice. By constantly shifting between perspectives and narrative forms, Kekla Magoon captures how a single act of violence can ripple across an entire community, affecting everyone differently. The novel moves seamlessly from prose to poetry, from intimate first-person reflections to the clipped format of news dialogues or Twitter posts marked simply with a name and the words spoken. This constant variation mirrors the confusion and fragmentation experienced by the characters themselves as they confront the death of thirteen-year-old Shae Tatum. Tina's poems express raw, personal grief; Eva's perspective shows a younger mind struggling to understand a world in which adults justify violence; news reports and social media posts present the broader societal debate, from white supremacist commentary to protestor outrage; and police officers' viewpoints offer insight into institutional responses and the justification of authority. Through this narrative structure, the novel emphasizes that no single viewpoint can fully encompass the complexity of such an event. The effect on the reader is strong. Unlike any individual character, the reader has access to every perspective, becoming the mediator of a community in crisis. They witness the intimate heartbreak of friends and family, the moral and emotional struggles of activists and bystanders, and the stark, often inflexible viewpoint of law enforcement. At the same time, readers are confronted with the extremes of public discourse: social media posts that range from calls for justice to expressions of hatred or denial. This comprehensive access forces the reader to hold multiple truths simultaneously, to see how grief, anger, fear and complicity interact and collide. In this way, the narrative does not provide easy answers or moral certainty, but instead positions the reader as an active

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<sup>53</sup> Kekla Magoon, *Light It Up*, pp. 167-168.

participant, making ethical and emotional judgments based on the full spectrum of evidence. Ultimately, the novel demonstrates that the consequences of a single violent act are both deeply personal and broadly social. By presenting these events through a constantly shifting lens of narrative voices and styles, Magoon highlights the interconnectedness of individual trauma, community response, and systemic injustice. The reader's unique position, having access to all perspectives, underscores the responsibility to understand, reflect, and respond thoughtfully, much as the characters must navigate their own ethical choices. The complexity of the narrative mirrors the complexity of real life, reinforcing the idea that understanding injustice requires both empathy and critical engagement.

# Conclusion

When I started working on this thesis, I wanted to better understand the relationship between Young Adult literature and the Black Lives Matter movement. In particular, I was interested in how contemporary YA novels represent issues such as racism, police brutality and social injustice, and how these themes are communicated to young readers. The Black Lives Matter movement has had a strong impact on cultural production in the United States, and literature aimed at young audiences has become one of the spaces where these conversations take place. Because of this, I wanted to explore how fiction written for teenagers can engage with such complex and politically charged topics.

Through the first chapter, I examined the origins and core values of the Black Lives Matter movement and the ways in which YA literature can function as a form of activism. These narratives often go beyond simple entertainment, offering young readers tools to understand social realities and encouraging them to reflect on injustice and inequality. At the same time, YA literature also plays an important role in shaping how race and identity are represented, especially for readers who may be encountering these discussions for the first time.

In the second chapter, I focused more closely on the themes and narrative strategies used in YA novels that engage with these issues. The recurring themes of racism, police violence, and the search for justice show how literature can mirror real social tensions while also creating space for empathy and understanding. I also explored how different narrative forms, such as letters, dual perspectives, and testimonial or multi-voiced narration, allow authors to represent complex experiences and give voice to characters whose perspectives are often marginalized. These strategies are particularly effective because they invite readers to engage with the story in a more active way, encouraging them to consider multiple viewpoints and develop their own opinion, rather than accepting a single, dominant narrative.

The third chapter applied these ideas to three specific novels: *Dear Martin*, *All American Boys*, and *Light It Up*. Each of these works approaches racial injustice from a different angle, but all of them show how narrative structure can shape the reader's understanding of the events being described. The letters in *Dear Martin* highlight the protagonist's internal struggle and his attempt to make sense of racism in contemporary America. The dual narration in *All American Boys* contrasts the experiences of a Black victim of police brutality with those of a white witness who must confront his own privilege. Finally, the multi-voiced structure of *Light It Up* expands the narrative to include an entire community, showing how a single act of violence can affect many different lives and generate a wide range of responses.

One of the most important things that emerged from this analysis is that these novels do not present injustice as something distant or abstract. Instead, they place readers very close to the experiences of the characters, allowing them to see how racism and violence operate on both a personal and social level. At the same time, the use of multiple perspectives often leaves space for moral complexity and reflection, making the reader responsible for interpreting the events and forming their own opinion.

Ultimately, YA literature that engages with the Black Lives Matter movement demonstrates how storytelling can contribute to broader social conversations. While novels alone cannot solve systemic problems such as racism or police violence, they can help readers develop empathy, question dominant narratives, and become more aware of the realities experienced by others. In this sense, these texts show that literature for young people can play an important role in encouraging dialogue and critical thinking about issues that continue to shape contemporary society.

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# Riassunto in Italiano

Questa tesi si propone di esplorare il ruolo della letteratura Young Adult (YA) nella rappresentazione delle tematiche del movimento Black Lives Matter (BLM) e nella costruzione di narrazioni di protesta, resistenza e consapevolezza sociale.

L'obiettivo principale è analizzare come i romanzi YA contemporanei offrano ai lettori adolescenti strumenti per comprendere il razzismo, la brutalità della polizia e le esperienze della comunità afroamericana, contribuendo al tempo stesso alla formazione di un pensiero critico e a una riflessione sulle ingiustizie sociali.

Il primo capitolo introduce il contesto storico e sociale del movimento Black Lives Matter, esaminandone le origini, gli eventi chiave e i valori fondamentali che ne hanno definito l'identità politica e culturale. Viene inoltre discusso il ruolo della letteratura YA come strumento di attivismo, sottolineando come racconti e narrazioni possano agire da forma di protesta e veicolare messaggi di resistenza. Si analizza, infine, il modo in cui la letteratura per giovani adulti rappresenta la questione razziale, contribuendo a dare voce alle esperienze dei personaggi neri e offrendo ai lettori strumenti di empatia e consapevolezza critica.

Il secondo capitolo si concentra sui temi ricorrenti e sulle strategie narrative adottate nei testi YA legati al BLM. Tra i temi principali emergono il razzismo strutturale, la brutalità della polizia e la lotta per la giustizia, accanto alla rappresentazione dell'identità nera, delle esperienze vissute dai giovani afroamericani e dei processi di formazione personale in contesti di discriminazione. Una sezione rilevante è dedicata alle forme narrative, tra cui lettere, prospettive multiple e testimonianze, che consentono agli autori di approfondire la complessità emotiva dei personaggi e di rappresentare la molteplicità di voci all'interno della comunità. Queste strategie narrative permettono anche di mostrare come le esperienze personali si intreccino con dinamiche sociali più ampie, evidenziando l'impatto collettivo di eventi traumatici.

Il terzo capitolo analizza tre romanzi emblematici in dialogo con il movimento Black Lives Matter: *Dear Martin* di Nic Stone, *All American Boys* di Jason Reynolds e Brendan Kiely, e *Light It Up* di Kekla Magoon. In *Dear Martin*, la struttura epistolare e il percorso di ricerca dell'identità personale del protagonista evidenziano le difficoltà e le tensioni vissute da un giovane afroamericano di fronte al razzismo sistemico, mettendo in luce la riflessione interiore e il desiderio di giustizia. *All American Boys* utilizza un punto di vista duale per raccontare la stessa vicenda da prospettive diverse, sottolineando la responsabilità condivisa e l'impatto di eventi traumatici sulle relazioni interpersonali e sulla comunità. Infine, *Light It Up* adotta una narrazione polifonica che intreccia le voci di più personaggi, mostrando le risposte della comunità e le forme di protesta collettiva di fronte alle ingiustizie. Il romanzo si colloca come seguito spirituale del precedente lavoro

dell'autrice, *How It Went Down*, riprendendo personaggi e contesti e approfondendo la dimensione comunitaria e sociale della narrazione.

In conclusione, questa tesi dimostra come la letteratura Young Adult non sia solo intrattenimento, ma rappresenti uno strumento educativo e sociale fondamentale. I romanzi analizzati mostrano come le storie rivolte agli adolescenti possano sensibilizzare sul razzismo, la brutalità della polizia e le questioni di giustizia sociale, stimolando empatia, consapevolezza critica e partecipazione civica. Attraverso temi forti, strategie narrative innovative e la rappresentazione realistica della vita dei giovani afroamericani, la letteratura YA si conferma uno spazio privilegiato di dialogo tra realtà sociale e narrazione, in stretta connessione con il movimento Black Lives Matter.