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The South in Young Adult Lit: Behind Southern Stereotypes

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of Honors Studies in English

By

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English

Fulbright College of Arts & Sciences

The University of Arkansas

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Chapter 1: An Introduction Into How YA Lit and the South Function Together

Literature as a form of self-expression has been cultivated for centuries, as individuals seek to write about their own life experiences or the worldly occurrences that surround them in modes of poetry, short stories, epistles, novels etc. In the 20th century, a new genre emerged: Young Adult literature. Young Adult literature, otherwise known as YA lit, is a genre that differentiates itself from children and adult literature, as the content within the text and the age demographic for whom it is written for is representative of what young adults are experiencing during their day-to-day lives. Kickstarting the YA genre was the publication of S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967). Examining the issues relating to mortality and sexuality, this coming-of-age novel was quickly regarded by many readers as a text that was not suitable for young adults. Individuals, mainly adults, believed that the content present within *The Outsiders* (and the YA novels that came afterwards) was too mature for young audiences; therefore, book censorship for YA audiences has become a major topic of discussion, especially in education.

Delving into the dilemma of censorship, Maia Pank Mertz highlights its role in the article "The New Realism: Traditional Cultural Values in Recent Young-Adult Fiction" by showcasing that censorship of the YA genre has been an ongoing phenomenon since the genre's creation. Mertz looks closely at what she calls "New Realism" as it relates to individuals' concern of the allegedly overly mature themes illustrated in YA novels. Mertz writes that these novels "reflect the public's concern that some books used in schools are attacking the moral foundation" of society (Mertz 101). At the core of this concern, she notes, is fear, as adults often fear that what their children, or youth in general, are reading is too mature and complex for them to fully understand. However, overtime as adults have become familiarized with the content in *The Outsiders*, critics and librarians alike have now classified the novel as a classic, and it has been

incorporated into classrooms across the United States. This transformation is important to highlight, as *The Outsiders* is proof of society taking a meaningful novel and originally deeming it inappropriate, yet later admiring it once they have had the chance to grow accustomed to its content. This leads to the discussion of what novels are considered to be classified as YA and what themes YA lit engages with today.

What is YA Lit?

The issue regarding what ages the YA lit genre is marketed towards has been an ongoing conversation since Hinton's publication of *The Outsiders*, as opinions range from tween years up through college age. The genre is consistently read across age groups, as it has become a genre that individuals at any age can find enjoyable and meaningful. Despite the genre being marketed to young adults, there is a large portion of adults' who show reluctance to exposing these novels to younger audiences. This has contributed to a wider age range for YA lit, as some adults believe the age range that YA lit can include has expanded to ages "as old as 25" because of what is often called the "MTV demographic" (Cart 95). However, with this project aiming to highlight YA literature's influences in Secondary Education, I will set the YA age range from 12 to 18 years old (Cart 95). My selected age range does not suggest that only readers aged 12 to 18 are the ones reading these texts, but rather that the novels themselves are geared and marketed towards this age range.

Since the publication of *The Outsiders*, YA literature has developed and progressed in style, subject, and market share, which has prompted the increasing production and marketing of YA literature. Kickstarting in 1967 and spanning to today, the genre has taken on a vast array of cultural issues. This is in part due to the decisions that editors and publishing companies have made when deciding what will sell, or rather what they will choose to publish. Recently, there

has been a push for increasing diversity in staffing and making editorship more inclusive to best represent readers across the globe. What contributed to this push was online publishing creating avenues for minority writers to “[critique] works, [share] knowledge and [draw] attention to themselves” because online publishing is considerably more affordable than traditional publishing houses (Moreno-Garcia). However, through writers of color gaining popularity with their publications, traditional publishing houses began to take notice, which further led to the creation of a mainstream agenda that showcases the importance of equal representation and inclusivity within publishing.

While equal representation in YA lit is a focal point within editorship and publication, there is still inequality with the authors that are being published; the individuals who possess power within the industry are still predominately white. Penguin Random House, a major publishing house based in New York City, conducted a study showing that “white contributors accounted for 76 percent of their books released in the 2019-2021 period” (Moreno-Garcia). In order to create meaningful change with readers’ experiences with texts, there needs to be a continuous push to further diversify the editors and authors that traditional publishing houses chose to work with and publish for. Through this push, readers will have a better chance to engage with a YA text that connects with their identity. Diversity can also extend to regional identity, and through this project, I argue that there needs to be greater representation of the US South and its multiculturalism. In the next section, I will delve into how the US South is perceived in YA lit and in society as a whole.

The South in YA Lit

As editors are beginning to select authors that are members of diverse communities, discussions of personal and cultural identity have emerged that regard skin color, sexual identity,

and gender identity. However, another form of identity that is often forgotten is place. Sense of place has the capability to contribute to an individual's identity, and I argue for individuals to reflect on how they see themselves within the region they live. For southerners, there has not always been a proper space given for them to reflect upon the region being diverse because its multiculturalism is not often broadcasted to its people or the rest of the nation. Instead, the area is labeled as a place where racism, backwardness, high poverty, and incest run rampant.

The South is traditionally seen as a highly conservative region where states are predominately conservative, Christian, and Republican. However, through recent elections, there has been a trend that shows how some states, specifically Georgia, are turning more purple, as Democratic officials are getting elected into public office. According to *National Public Radio*, Georgia is quickly becoming a political battleground, as in the 2022 election, "Republicans swept every statewide race except for the Senate, where Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock prevailed" in a run-off election (Gringlas). While conservatism is still predominate within the region, Georgia proves that liberalism and progression can be found within the South. The 2022 election emphasizes how the South is much more ambiguous than what individuals believe it to be, even in the realm of politics.

The debate over the states that make up the South are just as ambiguous. There are several ways to distinguish which states ought to be included or excluded in the US South. Oftentimes, individuals from states that are not in the Deep South, otherwise known as the "Peripheral South," see themselves as residing in a state that borders the South instead of identifying as a southerner. This will be further delved into in Chapter 4, as it concerns regionalism as seen in the state of Arkansas. For this project, I will consider the US South as the states below the imaginary Mason-Dixon line for my frame of reference when discussing the

region. Because of this, the four novels, which will be introduced in the chapter's next section, that are delved through the project are based out of Georgia, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Alabama.

The southern stereotypes that are manifested in the region are due to the retelling of the same story of the region told by "the white man's" perspective and leaving out diverse southern voices. With the South's multiculturalism being kept hidden by white men, the voices of the minority groups within the region have been disregarded and forgotten throughout the majority of the US South's history. With more diverse authors beginning to be included in the publication arena, there has been an emergence of YA novels set in the South that highlight both its multiculturalism and the issues that exist within the region. Due to the complexity of YA lit and the US South being embedded together, it is critical to examine how regionalism plays a role in the progressive YA novels set in the US South. The texts that I will examine in regards to their representation of regionalism include Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* (2017) in Chapter 2, Julie Murphy's *Ramona Blue* (2017) in Chapter 3, Kate Hart's *After the Fall* (2017) in Chapter 4, and Marieke Nijkamp's *This Is Where It Ends* (2016) in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2 examines Nic Stone's *Dear Martin*, as a YA novel that illustrates contemporary racial injustice in Atlanta, Georgia. Stone works to provide a new perspective to YA lit, as the main character is a young Black male, Justyce. With readers going on a journey with Justyce, he experiences several instances of racial discrimination. While experiencing these situations, Justyce writes letters to the late Martin Luther King Jr. as a way to reflect on how he can mirror MLK's nonviolent actions to promote activism for racial equality. Chapter 2 will then provide a brief historical background to the movements in United States history which have fought for racial justice. A section will follow that will highlight the public's responses to the

text. As mentioned previously, adults have strong opinions regarding what young adults should be exposed to, so by examining the text's reviews that were published, one can see how the public is grappling with the novel. Lastly, the chapter argues for conversations to emerge in Secondary classrooms that center around the issues that are present within *Dear Martin*, as the novel seeks to both reflect a contemporary US South while also provide a space for students to reflect upon their experiences concerning the issues present within the novel.

Chapter 3 explores Julie Murphy's *Ramona Blue* as a YA novel that accurately explores modes of intersectionality, as it relates to the fluidity of sexual identity, womanhood, race, and class. With these modes of intersectionality placed in the South, Murphy showcases how the region still creates a hierarchy of power where Ramona is placed in an inferior position, as opposed to other individuals within her community. Chapter 3 explains how the intersectionalities within the text coexist and function together through a novel synopsis, and then a brief history is provided regarding LGBTQ+ histories in the South and in the nation. A section follows that examines reviews which provide a response from readers and how they perceived the novel, which was overwhelmingly positive. The last section of Chapter 3 provides a background of previous novels that have been published that represent members of the LGBTQ+ community. However, *Ramona Blue*, as was published most recently, represents the LGBTQ+ community in a more accurate and less stereotypical manner, which is critical for readers to be made aware of the common discrimination that is cast onto these communities. Through this awareness, individuals can educate themselves on how they can be better allies to minority groups.

Chapter 4 discusses how sexual violence, ideas of consent, and class play a role in Kate Hart's *After the Fall*. Situating the novel in Northwest Arkansas (NWA), readers begin to

understand how the region is a liminal space in comparison to the Deep South. The ambiguity in labeling NWA as a portion of the South comes with the globalized community that exists within the region of the state. Hart distinguishes NWA from the rest of the state, as she explains that Fortune 500 companies and a R1 university are located within NWA. Sexual violence and ideas of consent are delved into within the novel, as these are issues that exist across school campuses throughout the nation. Reviewers find that *After the Fall* is portrayed in an accurate way that describes old Southern constructs, like good-old boy networks, that delve into who maintains power within the community are still evident in the contemporary South. I argue for educators to provide spaces for conversations centered around sexual violence to occur in the classroom, so the conversation can be normalized in an effort to educate students on what sexual assault looks like and what consent is. Chapter 4 concludes with a personal interview with Kate Hart, which provides background for the reasons why she wrote the novel especially as it concerns her relationship with the South.

Chapter 5 delves into issues of gun violence in public schools in Marieke Nijkamp's *This Is Where It Ends*. Through the incorporation of several perspectives of students, Nijkamp provides a detailed narrative that plays out the events of a school shooting in Alabama minute-by-minute. Readers see through the perspectives of multiple students and understand how their individual trauma unfolds. This jarring novel serves as a political testament for the importance of ending gun violence through the formation of gun reform. A historical context is provided regarding school shootings in United States history, including the Columbine school shooting and a school shooting that occurred in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Reviews are included within the chapter that showcase how the novel works to be beneficial for its readers, as *This Is Where It Ends* reminds readers that gun violence can occur anywhere, which highlights the need for gun

legislation to be created to help stop this violence. Lastly, Chapter 5 illustrates a need for educators to elicit conversations centered around gun violence so that students are given a space to reflect in an environment that is controlled by an adult.

Critical Lens on Regionalism in Secondary Classrooms

After delving into each selected YA novel, I will highlight in Chapter 6 the necessity of the US South being framed in secondary classrooms that allow students to understand the complexity and nuance of the region. While these conversations will not take away from the other conversations that occur in the classroom, this framework can foster an environment for these new types of conversations to emerge for students to gain more of an understanding of how contemporary issues are being dealt with in the South. Students can also learn more about their peers, as classroom discussions create a more accepting environment through the efforts of learning about minority groups and their experiences within the South. Through educators prompting and leading discussions of diversity, identity, and representation in their classrooms, I argue that students will be more likely to interact with literature in a way that promotes youth activism. This will enhance their awareness of the multiculturalism of the region, thus will promote an equitable classroom built on allyship and acceptance among students and teachers.

To gain insight into how these conversations can be fostered in classrooms, I interviewed three 10th grade English teachers across the state of Arkansas in the towns of Cabot, Genoa, and Greenland. I asked each of these educators their perspectives on how they see their students interacting with the chosen texts in the classroom, specifically as it deals with regional representation. Through these conversations, I unpack teachers' opinions of how they try to teach regionalism in their classroom, as it pertains to the novels they are reading with their students. Furthermore, I highlight the overall importance of representation within the classroom and how

sparkling conversations regarding regionalism will contribute to allow students feeling seen and heard.

This project aims to showcase how the US South and YA lit are intertwined, which elicits a need for educators to teach critical regionalism when incorporating background and context for the texts that they read in the classroom. With the contemporary YA novels beginning to illustrate more diverse perspectives of what the South is, readers have the opportunity to be represented within the texts they are reading. Educators can do this by incorporating Reader-Response Theory, a theory that seeks to focus on the reader's experience when reading a text, in their classes. When students' responses to texts are reflected on, they "will learn about cultures and societies...and the other significant issues of human experience" (Probst 40). I argue that this reflection will encourage students to unravel issues present within the contemporary South. More specifically, when educators prompt students to read texts concerning the issues that are present within the YA novels presented within this project –racial discrimination in Chapter 2, sexual identity discrimination in Chapter 3, sexual assault in Chapter 4, and gun violence in Chapter 5– are conversations that need to be explored among the youth, students will have a space reflect on how they can see themselves being activists of change for these issues.

Chapter 2: Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* and Racial Discrimination in Georgia

The illustration of race discrimination in YA lit has been prevalent over the past decade, specifically the last five years, as movements like Black Lives Matter have sought to shed light on the discrimination that still exists today. Due to the popularization of this movement, it has manifested the notion of inclusivity and diversity in publication. Texts such as Angie Thomas's *The Hate You Give* (2017) and Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* (2017) both center around police brutality in the contemporary United States and concentrate on main characters from Black communities who are sent to predominantly white private schools. With both novels published in 2017 during the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, the authors work to illustrate the extremities of what police brutality looks like, as death is a focal point in both novels. Although they write from two different locales, Thomas creates a fictionalized city, Green Heights, which critics have seen as a version of the Georgetown neighborhood of Jackson, Mississippi, and Stone sets *Dear Martin* in Atlanta, Georgia—their work emphasizes themes such as racial profiling, youth activism, and systemic racism. *The Hate You Give* has been regarded as a novel that provides a “new hope for a better tomorrow” by illustrating a main character realizing the change she can create in her community, as she has the mobility of being active in both the Black and white communities in her neighborhood (Pattnaik 84). Thomas creates a narrative where the main character “was ashamed” of where she came from and “everything in it,” but this changed when she realized that she could help change the community for the better (Thomas 441). *The Hate You Give* works to provide young adults with a reading experience that showcases what race discrimination looks like in the United States, as race equality movements have sparked across the nation. With YA novels embedding their narratives in a Black Lives Matter society,

young readers can humanize the personal experiences related to racial discrimination, as opposed to having an “out of sight-out of mind” mentality over racially discriminatory experiences.

Paralleling Thomas’s engagement of police brutality in *The Hate You Give*, Nic Stone’s *Dear Martin* is a YA novel set in contemporary Atlanta, Georgia with the main plot drawing on a Black male’s experiences in the urban US South and a subplot revealing letters being written to Martin Luther King Jr. In the novel, which is set in the present day, the main character, Justyce McAllister, writes letters to the late Martin Luther King Jr. in his journal. The main character is aware that MLK passed away many years ago, but he feels that his personal letters to MLK, whom he calls “Martin,” will help him understand the life that surrounds him, while also giving him an outlet to express his experiences being a Black young adult male in the US South. This chapter first will unpack the novel’s synopsis, which features significant themes of racial discrimination and racial activism that are present within the novel, as it parallels the Black Lives Matter movement. A historical context will follow that showcases the political climate of racial injustice in the nation, specifically throughout the past 50 years. The next section of the chapter will highlight the reviews the novel has received from the public. A section will then follow that showcases how *Dear Martin* is working to illustrate a new type of United States South, one that highlights a diverse region with multiple perspectives.

Novel Synopsis: Racial Inequality in a Black Lives Matter Society

Before the narrative begins within the novel, *Dear Martin* opens with a quotation from Martin Luther King Jr.’s Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech in 1964. The epigraph states: “I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality” (Stone). King’s 1964 speech encompassed the nonviolence that surrounded the Civil Rights Movement, as he also stated in his speech that the movement “has not yet won the very peace and

brotherhood which is the essence of the Nobel Prize,” which further promotes his desire to create a harmonious society centered around equality that was created through nonviolent demonstrations (“MLK’s Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech”). Furthermore, this speech highlights the dichotomy between the state of the nation –marked by racist inequality– and what the Nobel Peace Prize represents, as President Lyndon B. Johnson awarded Martin Luther King the ultimate award for his ongoing fight towards true equality, despite the inequalities and violence that came his way. This tug-of-war has continued through the contemporary United States, as these movements have continually faced opposition, which is immediately seen as the narrative begins.

Once the novel begins, Justyce McAllister, a Black youth in Atlanta, interacts with a police officer who is biased about the situation he sees between Justyce and his white ex-girlfriend, Melo Taylor. This situation entails Justyce making sure his ex-girlfriend gets home safely, as she had been drinking heavily. Justyce’s goal was to keep “his drunken disaster of an ex from driving” when the police officer came over to him in the cop car (Stone 4). Even though Justyce was trying to help Melo, who was severely intoxicated, the police officer saw the interaction and immediately acted in a biased way towards Justyce. The police officer got in front of Justyce’s face and stated ““I know your kind: punks like you wander the streets of nice neighborhoods searching for prey. Just couldn’t resist the pretty white girl who’d locked her keys in her car, could ya?”” (Stone 8). Rather than asking Justyce and Melo what had happened, he acted in a discriminatory way that ended with Justyce in handcuffs –despite Justyce’s efforts to explain himself in a cordial and respectful way. By Stone opening her narrative with the focus of police brutality, readers can see an accurate illustration of how brutality exists in contemporary America. According to a study published in 2018, “the risk of being killed by police, relative to

White men, is between 3.2 and 3.5 times higher for Black men” (Edwards et al. 1241). This statistic showcases how Black men are discriminated against systemically, which highlights how people of color are pressured to believe that they have to either change their identity altogether or go unnoticed to be treated fairly by police officers.

With this opening scene, it is clear that the narrative is centered around Justyce McAllister and his battles with overcoming discrimination. He begins this journey, which includes his own writing to MLK, after having this interaction with the police officer in the opening pages of the text. In his first entry, he tells Martin that he needs to pay more attention and “start really seeing stuff and writing it down,” as a way to try and live like Martin Luther King Jr. (Stone 13). Stone’s use of a story within a story allows readers to peer directly into Justyce’s mind, as he addresses journal entries to MLK that describe his experiences as living as a Black male in the urban South. By situating the memory of a civil rights icon –through the journal entries themselves, which provide a first-person testimony and focus on lived experiences– into a contemporary society where the Black Lives Matter Movement has emerged, Stone showcases the prevalence and continuation of fighting for equality and nonviolence. The impact Martin Luther King made over the span of 50 years highlights how contemporary movements are being spearheaded by individuals fighting for equality in a way that mirrors MLK’s fight: through nonviolent, yet impactful actions. While Justyce is never given advice from MLK in return, Justyce still creates a space of honesty and vulnerability for himself, which encourages him to face his life with MLK’s wisdom in mind while readers see into Justyce’s life, as it relates to his identity and the influence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Paralleling Justyce’s name with justice itself, Stone showcases how Justyce’s name reflects a broader scope

of hardships of equality in the contemporary justice system and the advocacy for racial justice that has occurred through movements like Black Lives Matter.

Justyce interacts with several different forms of racism throughout the novel. First and foremost, he spends the novel navigating conversations that his classmates have in front of him, as he attends –on a full scholarship– a predominantly white private school: Braselton Preparatory Academy. With the students who surround him, there are few diverse perspectives, as some students believe that racism and discrimination do not exist anymore. One student, Jared, even broadcasts to Justyce and his friends that the United States “is a color-blind society... [where] people are judged by the content of their character instead of the color of their skin” (Stone 32). Jared, while not noticing the brevity of his words in the moment, is representative of white citizens who consider the nation to be a country who should not look at skin color as an integral part of one’s identity. As Stone’s novel illustrates, this colorblind viewpoint is incredibly problematic, as it promotes the idea that individuals should ignore significant aspects of another individual in order to consider them as equal to themselves. This in turn creates an inequitable environment “because it (a) falsely perpetuates the myth of equal access and opportunity, (b) blames people of color for their lot in life, and (c) allows Whites to live in ignorance, naivete, and innocence” (Neville et al. 8-9). Jared’s opinion clashes with other students at the school, as others possess more progressive opinions by trying to support Justyce and the challenges that minority populations have had to overcome. For example, one of Justyce’s classmates, SJ, becomes a public voice for him in their Societal Evolution class, as she is vocal about disproving her classmates’ assertion that “affirmative action discriminates against members of the majority” (Stone 59). By SJ not giving Justyce the space to speak for himself, the novel showcases how allyship can easily teeter towards dominance, further highlighting the stereotypical idea that

whites can be a savior figure for the Black population. SJ, and students like her, are trying to be allies to Justyce, but ultimately they still have the same lived experiences as Jared who stated that we live in a color-blind society, as they too do not fully understand the hardships that Justyce and people of color experience in regards to being discriminated against. Even with students like SJ attempting to support him, Justyce is still left voiceless to his own story in this scene. Without educating themselves over the discrimination that still exists towards people of color, white students cannot be as informed about how to support people of color and be an ally to them. This in turn perpetuates color-blind ideology.

She addresses the problem of systemic racism towards the end of the novel. Here, Justyce experiences an extreme form of racial violence, as he witnesses his best friend, Manny, be murdered by a white man after Manny refused to turn down the volume of his music in his own vehicle. After this traumatic event, Justyce has to heal from losing his best friend and bear witness to the court trial that follows, while navigating how to live with society that is victim blaming Manny for the cause of his death. What occurs in this novel is prevalent in today's society, as people of color are still being targeted on a consistent basis. Stone helps bring to light the common, yet significantly challenging, experiences that minority groups live through daily in *Dear Martin*. By writing and publishing novels, specifically YA novels, that illustrate race discrimination in the United States, a new ethos of activism and awareness is being written for young adults no matter where they live: a history that recognizes and continues to uncover the longstanding fight for racial equality across the country, which in turn promotes a new perspective of equality, unification, and understanding. For Justyce, his story promotes this activism, as he fights for justice against police brutality and seeks to unite white and Black communities. By Justyce being a uniting force between these two communities, his classmates

are better educated about the racial discrimination that is prevalent today and are more aware of how they can be allies to the Black community, as they have an understanding of the systemic racism that exists within the country.

Historical Context of Racial Discrimination in the US and US South

With Stone's *Dear Martin* delving into the implications of race discrimination in the US South, it is vital to examine the historical and social contexts that led to this novel being written. With Stone setting the narrative in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement, the plot works to showcase how racial discrimination exists in contemporary society through the lens of Justyce's experiences. In the United States today, discrimination still exists, as police brutality and voter disenfranchisement engulf the entire nation, not just in urban centers or in the southern region. Through social media and news coverage, this issue has been on the forefront of United States citizens' minds for the past decade. This contributed to a new movement of racial unrest in 2014 with the murder of Michael Brown in the Ferguson shooting and continuing through 2020 with the murder of George Floyd. While these two murders are not the only violence to occur from a white police officer to a Black man, they do form political testaments that created outspoken mobilization from the public. Spearheading the movement is the digital hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, which has become emblematic of individuals around the globe promoting awareness of racial inequalities and showcasing the importance of Black lives. Through this period of police brutality, especially after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, there is evidence that suggests that "Black parents were even more likely to have such conversations with their children and to prepare their children to experience racial bias than they were before Floyd's death" (Sullivan et al. 1). This is significant, as it illustrates on a familial level how racial

inequalities that exist in the U.S. affect what is being discussed within the home and within youth culture.

On the other hand, once the #BlackLivesMatter movement was sparked, some individuals began to be on the defensive and created the #BlueLivesMatter movement in response. Blue Lives Matter “represents the reactionary demand for the repression of social unrest and a further entrenchment of a white supremacist status quo” (Shanahan & Wall 71). This counter-movement has served as a focal point for the conservative party in the nation, as they have used Blue Lives Matter as a way to fight back against the Black Lives Matter movement. The tension between the two movements continues to polarize the nation through the conservative and liberal factions growing more at odds with one another. This results in individuals feeling the need to pick sides, which ultimately just hurts the cause of what the Black Lives Matter movement sought to do: promote awareness about the police brutality that affects people of color and to fight for equality among all races.

Throughout *Dear Martin*, Nic Stone looks back to the Civil Rights Movement for inspiration and perspective, as Justyce writes to Martin Luther King. This is significant because the Black Lives Matter movement mirrors the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th century. The Civil Rights Movement, which peaked in the middle of the 20th century with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was a key period in which the Black population fought for equality. Icons of the movement such as Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and John Lewis promoted the Civil Rights Movement through encouraging the public to act through nonviolent protests and boycotts. Through these actions, minority populations banded together in ways that did not cause hysteria but rather showed a reflection of the racial discrimination in the US South and the nation more broadly. Through their efforts to highlight the disparities in the United States, the

USSC passed two landmark cases in the mid-20th century related to race discrimination. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) overruled *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) which had established the constitutionality of “separate but equal.” *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was passed to constitutionalize how being separate can in no way be equal, which was seen as a major triumph for the civil rights leaders fighting for equality. The second case that was passed in favor of civil rights was *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), which legalized interracial marriages across the United States. Prior to this Supreme Court case, the legality of interracial marriages were left to the state governments. Both of these cases provided avenues for populations of color to gain equality within United States society while showcasing that legalized racial discrimination does nothing but worsen and complicate race relations throughout the country.

Another major political gain that the US government obtained during the Civil Rights Movement was the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which “sought to improve access to voting, public accommodations, and employment as well as improve the overall status of individuals discriminated against on the basis of race, color, religion, sex and national origin” (Couch et al. 425). This act showed that the nation was changing, as it was not only the justices on the Supreme Court who wished to progress the nation, but also the legislature. The legislature is representative of the people of the United States, so by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passing, it highlights how the nation was working to rectify the racism that was present within the US. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was another bill that passed by the federal government that “outlawed the discriminatory voting practices adopted in many southern states after the civil war” (“Voting Rights Act (1965)”). With this act, the nation became a more unified front for political and voter equality –no matter an individual’s race. The passage of these two bills was a great success, but as wars were progressing in Vietnam, the political climate of the nation was intensifying.

Towards the end of the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Panther Party was formed. The Black Panther Party was an organization that fought for Black equality, power, and liberation. While the Black Panther Party had the greatest success in large cities across the nation, the organization and its leadership are rooted in the US South and its culture. Those who were a part of the core leadership in the organization “consisted of first- and second-generation migrants whose families traveled north and west to escape the southern racial regime” (Murch 57). Despite this migration, they were faced with new obstacles of discrimination which led to the creation of the organization. When founding the Black Panther Party, the leaders “drew its inspiration from a rural movement in Lowndes County, Alabama” due to The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee using the panther image “to mobilize an independent political party among rural sharecroppers in the summer of 1965” (Murch 58). The Black Panther Party was more outspoken, assertive, and aggressive than the previous equality leaders which prided itself on nonviolence. This organization quickly became a national icon, as Bobby Seale—a co-founder of the Black Panthers—notes in his book *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey Newton*. The book ended with the recounting of the Conspiracy Trial of the Chicago 8, of which he was a part. Writing about his experiences within the courtroom, Seale explained how he was “bound and gagged on the judge’s orders” (Rhodes 235). Due to these actions, the Black Panther Party highlighted how the ultimate form of discrimination and abuse could occur in a United States court room in the 20th century. This trial became a focal point of the Black Panther movement, as it prompted the organization to fight further for justice in the United States.

The political movements that have occurred over the last century are indicative of the widespread desire to live in a nation where race discrimination does not exist, yet they also

highlight the inherent difficulty to cement racial change in the US. With imprisonment and police brutality a focal point of both the Civil Rights Movement and especially the Black Lives Matter movement, one can look back and realize that these issues are not so quick to solve. These issues have encapsulated the United States, especially in the US South, both through its plantation history and through the emergence of the convict lease system, which comes to form the prison-industrial system in the US.

After the South's loss in the Civil War, there was a desire to restore an environment where white racial supremacy still existed. Trying their hardest to restore the racial hierarchy, southern whites implemented Jim Crow laws and various state codes, which made it impossible for the Black population to be equal, despite the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments that constitutionally required racial equality on the political level. These laws and codes were impossible to uphold, as they were easily broken, which ultimately created the convict lease system. The convict lease system was created a loophole in the 13th Amendment established a new form of slavery: slavery in the confines of imprisonment. While slavery became unconstitutional, the work that needed to be done on the plantation remained. With the loophole, arrests spiked and the prisoners were put to work on plantations in the form of free labor. Through the manifestation of the convict lease system, there was an overwhelming disproportionate number of Black individuals who were imprisoned. This made it so that "prison work camps and stockades" were around 90% African American (Pruitt 50). This statistic is in direct contrast to how the prisons looked prior to the Civil War, as the "southern prisons were filled overwhelmingly with white bodies" (Stoddard 3). Through the sharp demographic shift that occurred over the course of the Civil War in prisons across the US South, there was a new

outlook on how racial prejudice and discrimination could be applied legally to ensure that the Black population –and people of color– stayed in a subordinate role.

With race discrimination still defining contemporary US society, despite the long history of fighting against it, it is vital to note the progression of racial activist movements and how they have been successful. While the US South still remains a region where individuals look towards when defining how discrimination and racism looks, I argue individuals should consider how this discrimination exists throughout the nation. By focusing the conversation to the US South, Southerners who are experiencing this discrimination will have more of a voice to share their stories. Continuing conversations surrounding discrimination, specifically police brutality, there can be a growing awareness to highlight the individual who is experiencing the discrimination, rather than solely just the system who is fighting against them. By providing awareness to both the individual and the systemic discrimination, readers will be more cognizant of how the deep structures in US society contribute to inequality.

With the help of YA authors, like Nic Stone, rewriting how the US South is perceived through the inclusion of first-person narration from a Black perspective narrator and incorporating epistles addressed to Martin Luther King, readers across the nation can understand the extremities of these issues in a way that sparks a desire for change and reform. Through the publication of YA texts related to racial discrimination and police brutality and how that appears in a Black Lives Matter America, Black youth have the opportunity to feel represented in novels. With Black readers feeling represented in these types of texts and white individuals educating themselves about their role in how discrimination occurs in US society, there is the potential for both communities to better understand each other.

Reviews and Perspectives of *Dear Martin*

While Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* and other YA novels that include race discrimination are educating the audiences who are reading them, one must note how audiences are perceiving and reacting to these texts. Across the country there are different organizations that strive to influence and even censor YA novels altogether. For example, Moms For Liberty is making strides towards limiting the texts that students have access to through creating lists of banned books, or rather books that should be banned in public schools. The organization publicly advocates for "classroom censorship and bans on teaching about slavery, race, racism and LGBTQ people and history" ("Moms For Liberty"). Moms For Liberty was founded in Florida and has continued to grow across the country. Because its founding chapter is in the US South, it is important to highlight that the organization's roots are tied to the region. With the organization's success, chapters are emerging throughout the nation, yet these chapters are still gravitating to the conservative ideals and traditions that encompass the US South and its heritage. This highlights that individuals around the country continue to believe the content of texts like *Dear Martin* are too mature for their children to read—even those who live in more liberal-leaning states—despite the growing national support of a publishing industry that is working to be more representative.

Despite the charges against books that showcase race and racism in the United States, there have been plenty of positive reviews of these novels and what they are working to do for their readers. *Dear Martin* works to provide representation and a voice for Black individuals who live in the urban South in the form of YA lit, which showcases how individuals across all age ranges are desiring to hear this story. Deborah Stevenson, an editor of the *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, highlights how the novel's "focus on event and its compactness will make it accessible to reluctant as well as avid readers, and it will elicit plenty of discussion"

(Stevenson 93). The accessibility of this novel is important to point out, as it illustrates complicated issues of society today while making these issues intelligible for younger readers to understand and learn from. With race and racism a significant part of the nation's history and of society today, *Dear Martin* seeks to make this story available to all young adults through its ability to easily be understood while creating meaningful messages regarding Blackness in America.

The accessibility of the text has led to the novel being read by students across the country, not just in the South where the narrative takes place. A student from Iowa City West High School, a high school in the town of Iowa City, IA, wrote and published a review for his school paper's website, *West Side Story*, that describes the novel as showcasing "an accurate portrayal of the life of a black teenager in this day and age" (Keen). With the student's positive review of the novel, students at his school are apt to read the novel: further promoting the book to be read. By students across the country relating to *Dear Martin* in a meaningful way, young adults can have a better understanding of what life is like as a Black male in 21st century America.

Since *Dear Martin* is a recent publication, there are few critical works that delve into the significance of how society perceived the novel. However, the reviews of the novel that have been written are overwhelmingly in support of what Stone published, as it relates to race in the US South today, yet there are critiques for how the work could have been more influential. A piece from *The Atlantic* highlights that the novel "effectively dismantles" how success can protect someone from racism, yet this review also draws attention to Stone failure to "engage how King's lessons hold up for people without those opportunities or motivation" (Green). By Stone writing about a character who had the access to opportunities and resources rather than

writing about a character who lacks access, there is a chance for readers to not feel as though Justyce completely overcame the odds. However, Stone still works to provide new perspectives of the US South by creating Justyce as the main character in a progressive way: a way that highlights the disparities and discrimination that lies between majority and minority groups. Through this depiction, readers can see into Justyce's personal experience as a Black male, highlighting these experiences on a subjective –rather than objective– level. This creates a more intimate relationship between the reader and the novel itself, since it allows for individuals to peer into Justyce's interiority as a representation of Black manhood.

A Call For Change: *Dear Martin* in Secondary Education

Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* is working to provide a new perspective of the United States South, as she creates her narrative centered around a Black boy's relationship to racial discrimination told through the lens of a first-person perspective. Since there has been an influx of contemporary young adult novels, like *Dear Martin*, that showcase more of a diverse perspective of the South, readers can more easily read stories that delve into life as someone from the Black community. With these novels being easily accessible, young adult readers are more apt to read these texts and feel represented, as the narratives are written in a way that delves into the contemporary challenges of being a person of color while framing it in a way that is easier to comprehend when reading, as opposed to canonical literature that often includes archaic language that is not as easily accessible.

Recent studies have pointed out that young adults should read texts that include “a wider variety of settings, character, and situations that more accurately represent a large range of racial/ethnic realities” (Bickmore et al. 50). With young adults reading texts that illustrate a complexity of identities and cultures, they ought “to learn to navigate these difficulties with the

[aid] of culturally competent teachers” (Bickmore et al. 50). It is important for students to educate themselves, but more importantly it is vital that educators continue to learn so that they can foster a supportive classroom environment that is a safe space for students to learn from one another. A supportive classroom environment is essential for dynamic conversations where both students and teachers can learn from one another, especially as it relates to one’s identity and lived experiences.

The history of race and racial discrimination in the United States has an extensive and complicated past and deserves to be included in Secondary English classes, as children are learning about the nation in which they are growing up and in which they will soon vote. By incorporating conversations into high school classrooms, specifically in southern classrooms, students will have a better understanding of how to live in a more inclusive way, as they will reflect on how region and racial discrimination have existed with one another throughout U.S. history. Students will also have more of a drive to understand the novels that they read, as they will be more apt to feel represented in these novels, which will be further delved into in Chapter 6.

Chapter 3: Sexual Identity, Femininity, Class, and Race in Julie Murphy's *Ramona Blue*

Today, stories that showcase LGBTQ+ relationships in a more representative and less stereotypical way are part of the YA lit genre. Julie Murphy's *Ramona Blue* (2017) is emblematic of this change, as Murphy centers her narrative around a young woman navigating her sexual identity, as the novel tells the story of Ramona, who is a member of the LGBTQ+ community, falls in love with a male neighborhood friend, Freddie. Sexual fluidity is rarely written about, especially in YA lit, and Murphy writes this novel to rework binary ideas as well as regional ideas. Importantly, she sets her work in Mississippi, a state that is stereotyped for being incredibly conservative and unwelcoming of the LGBTQ+ community. *Ramona Blue* is not the first YA novel that has a leading character who is a part of the LGBTQ+ community; however, Murphy uniquely situates the plot in an environment that is indicative of a more inclusive and diverse US South.

Novel Synopsis

Ramona Blue positions sexual identity, femininity, class, and race inside the US South, which complicates how the region is seen, especially in the contemporary South. While portions of the narrative are refreshing and progressive, Murphy does an incredible job creating a plot that accurately illustrates the complexities of the region. Through readers learning about the South in a way that both showcases its traditionality and its progression, they will be more apt to understand the region on a more nuanced scale, as compared to traditional stereotypes.

Sexual Orientation

Murphy begins the narrative with Ramona having a relationship with a girl who is still figuring out her own sexuality. Ramona remains certain about her sexuality throughout the novel, until her childhood friend and neighbor makes her second guess her sexual identity

altogether. The importance of this plot twist is that it highlights a young person's inner thoughts of learning about themselves, while also showcasing the realities of sexual fluidity, despite the prevalence of binary understandings of sexuality identity as gay/straight, male/female, etc.

Murphy is working to recreate the mold that society forces upon people in terms of being defined by one personality trait, one sexual identity, or one community and towards non-binary identity conceptions. Through the reader seeing Ramona's inner-thoughts about her own sexuality and her thought process of navigating this confusion, Murphy helps establish a sense of belonging for those who find themselves identifying as such while also normalizing the process of navigating one's sexual identity in general.

Ambiguity and nuance is a leading focal point for *Ramona Blue*, as Murphy works to describe sexual identity as fluid, or not fitting into a certain category. Murphy sets up the narrative in a way that portrays a loving relationship between two girls: Ramona and Grace. While Grace is still questioning her sexual identity, Ramona tells readers that she "never tried very hard to push her. It felt like a violation" (Murphy 20). Grace explains to Ramona during an argument that she felt like Ramona was trying to make her into a specific person that she was not. She goes on to claim that Ramona talks about Grace "being in the closet like it's some sin to not know who [she is] yet" (Murphy 126). This confusion further highlights the nuance that comes with sexual identity, as individuals are more often than not pressured to conform into certain categories that are clear and distinctive. Referred to as "compulsory heterosexuality" by Adrienne Rich, the pressure to conform into heteronormative relationships is manifested from the patriarchy. Rich writes that "women's choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, tribe, has been crushed," as the patriarchy forces women to take comfort in men (Rich 632). This compulsory heterosexuality is seen with Grace, as she is navigating

whether or not to stick to what the patriarchy is forcing her to do: to cling to her boyfriend as opposed to furthering her relationship with Ramona.

This version of Ramona directly contrasts who she is at the end of the novel, as Ramona experiences significant character development by learning more about herself and how her sexuality too does not fit a certain category. After realizing this about herself, she tells the reader directly: “I don’t know if I’ll ever want to be with another boy again. But what I’m not confused about is this: I want to be with Freddie, and that is the only thing I know in this moment” (Murphy 253). By Ramona claiming her sexual identity as such, readers see the growth of Ramona throughout the novel’s plot. With the help of those around her, Ramona ends up being a character who grows into the person she truly is: someone who is content with not fitting into a specific category of self-identity.

Feminine Identity and Womanhood

Feminine identity, and what it ought to look like, has been influenced by culture and society for all of the country’s history. This has created a very narrow scope of what women should act like, dress like, and be perceived as, which makes it very difficult for women to truly be themselves. With the Deep South being a region that prides itself on tradition, it is incredibly important to note how women are taught to portray themselves. Ramona, for example, notes that by growing up in Mississippi, she “found it easy to assume that [her] feelings for girls made [her] less of one” (Murphy 235). Within an idealized version of a woman that southern women are supposed to look like, it is very easy for women to not reflect this “model” version of themselves. The difficulty in fitting into an idealized version of a woman is showcased in the novel, as Ramona works to recreate womanhood and how it can be portrayed. With her blue hair that could range from “royal blue to turquoise,” Ramona seeks to individualize herself despite

society forcing her to conform (Murphy 11). The pressure for women to conform, especially in the South, is incredibly prevalent through the stereotypes and social structure that has been set in place for over 150 years. However, Ramona seeks to combat conformity with nuance and ambiguity, as she redefines what behaviors can be accepted as feminine.

With womanhood being prevalent within the novel, Murphy also works to showcase how womanhood is facing obstacles within the region today. Situating the narrative of *Ramona Blue* in Eulogy, Mississippi showcases how women are limited, especially as it relates to women's healthcare. With the recent US Supreme Court case, *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022) overturning *Roe v. Wade* (1973), women's rights continue to be an important and relevant topic to delve into and to include in *Ramona Blue*, despite the novel being published five years before *Roe* was overturned. In between the *Roe* and *Dobbs* decisions, the US South was faced with the hardship of incredible rurality in relation to what was offered to them. With limited access to healthcare in the rural South, it made it extraordinarily difficult for individuals to obtain basic healthcare and have access to go to clinics.

This is seen within *Ramona Blue* when her sister gets pregnant. In the narrative, Ramona explains that her sister Hattie "was insistent that she was keeping this baby," yet even if Hattie wanted an abortion they would have to travel to Jackson because they "only have one clinic in the whole state" (Murphy 142). This one licensed abortion clinic in the entire state was the same clinic that decided the *Dobbs* decision, which is ironic in itself, because as of 2023 the clinic has closed due to the *Dobbs* decision. Had this novel been written just five years later, Ramona and Hattie's behavior toward abortions would have changed dramatically, as they would not have any access whatsoever to abortion clinics within the state of Mississippi. Hattie's situation is emblematic of southern women and their identity surrounding pregnancy and abortion, especially

in the states that had trigger laws set in place related to women not having the right to an abortion once *Dobbs* was decided. The lack of access to healthcare in the US South, especially for women, is a pertinent issue in the 21st century. By Murphy addressing this in *Ramona Blue*, younger generations can understand the obstacles that are against them as they come-of-age in a region that is readily taking their access to healthcare away from them. Yet by knowing the obstacles that stand in their way, they can become better equipped to fight for the fundamental rights.

Class

Julie Murphy's *Ramona Blue* brings to life a story of a high school girl navigating her sexuality in a poverty-stricken town in the US South: Eulogy, Mississippi. Focusing on Ramona's relationships with her family and friends, readers quickly understand that living in the South as someone who is poor greatly influences the amount of attention one receives, compared to growing up wealthy in the region. Ramona even recognizes early in the novel that when she came out, an act that she describes as "a blip," as it was "the type of news that flashes across the bottom ticker of the screen and then is quickly forgotten" (Murphy 23). With Ramona recognizing to the reader that she understands socioeconomic statuses and how those statuses play a role in daily life, readers understand how disposable the citizens of Eulogy think Ramona and her family are. Naming the town "Eulogy" illustrates how quickly the lower-class individuals within the region are passed on and discarded from the community without a second thought. This disposability of the lower and working classes occurs frequently in the US South, as the region prides itself on elitist tendencies. Here we see how a hierarchy based on race and class, once an intricate part of Southern heritage, remain present in contemporary life.

By Murphy positioning the narrative in a way that illustrates Ramona's experience in the US South as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, while also placing it side-by-side with common stereotypes regarding class, readers can quickly place themselves within the story and see Ramona as a narrator trying to navigate growing up in a town that refuses to allow her to belong. The disparity between the family of Grace, Ramona's summer girlfriend, and Ramona's family highlights how different socioeconomic backgrounds impact how individuals' experience identifying with the LGBTQ+ community publicly. Ramona even recognizes this difference, as she describes how Grace's parents will be allies to their daughter and "probably join some kind of club for parents of gay kids and march in pride parades" or create their own pride parade in Picayune, Mississippi (Murphy 21). By Ramona recognizing this acceptance in comparison to how the community treated her story reflects how marginalized groups –like the lower and working classes– are often left voiceless to their own stories. Through drawing on the differences of potential "coming-out" experiences between the two girls, readers can understand that there is not just one way that people come out, and with that, there is not one way that society acts towards those who identify in the LGBTQ+ community, as class and race intersect with sexual identity formation and acceptance.

Murphy also tells a story that supercedes Ramona's individual experiences and expands to the US South as a region and what it is like living in a statistically poorer region. A common stereotype of the US South is that it is full of poverty, and *Ramona Blue* refutes this stereotype. Ramona explains that her town "isn't all potholes and trailer parks" and that there are parts of Eulogy that make people "think they could live here and that small-town life can be quaint and cozy" (Murphy 23). While the region is stereotypically believed to be only inhabited by those who live in poverty, Murphy works to promote the town of Eulogy in a more representative way

that combats traditional stereotypes of the region. She showcases a more holistic version of what the region is, as she highlights all of the socioeconomic classes in the town. By writing *Eulogy* in this way, readers can understand that the South is not just rural farmland, but instead that it is a region filled with small towns that have their own stories to tell.

Race

Combining multiple aspects of identity, Murphy creates a rich version of intersectionality within the novel by including race as a fundamental contribution to the characterization of her characters, specifically Freddie. Freddie, Ramona's neighborhood friend and eventual boyfriend, delves into his race in a conversation with Ramona. He states to Ramona that:

You can't pretend to be color-blind or some shit when it's convenient for you, okay? I'm black. This is my skin I wear every damn day. You're my best friend. You can't tell me that you don't see that my black life is not the same as your white life...But you need to understand that my life in this skin is different from yours. (Murphy 160)

Even with Ramona being an ally to Freddie, there are still conversations that occur that showcase the necessity of having honest discussions with those who do not share the same identity as yourself. By Murphy creating a narrative where even Ramona, who is in a minority group herself, is learning to become a better ally to her friend, readers can see the importance of everyone being willing to educate themselves about groups who are different from themselves. This interaction between Ramona and Freddie illustrates the importance of knowing personal biases one might have and educating oneself on how to be a better ally to those around you. These conversations are difficult, yet through these discussions, individuals can become more aware of their complicity in a biased society.

Murphy also draws on race in the form of interracial relationships as well, specifically between Freddie and Ramona. In the heart of Mississippi, race plays a pivotal role in how outsiders perceive interracial relationships. While these consensual relationships have existed for

a significant portion of American history, interracial marriages have not been legal throughout the nation since 1967. Over the past 50 years, interracial relationships have been included more in young adult novels, which has contributed to novels reflecting the South as a region that is more representative of all of its inhabitants. With Murphy including a relationship that is both interracial and queer within her text, she is working to further nuance how youth sexuality can be perceived and categorized.

Historical Context of Sexual Identity in the US and US South

The LGBTQ+ community has maintained a presence in the US South for the entirety of the nation's history, even when individuals had to hide their identity out of fear of being a victim of hate crimes. With the US South's long history of maintaining a discriminatory presence for those in marginalized groups, there was significant retribution shown against those who were publicly identifying with the LGBTQ+ community. However, these hate crimes occur throughout the nation, not just in the US South, which illustrates the prevalence of hatred towards marginalized groups around the country. By knowing this, there can be an increased awareness of all hate crimes, rather than just the brutality that exists within the South. This awareness promotes a push for equality among populations across the United States, especially in the US South where minority groups are often left voiceless to their story.

Prior to *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the US Supreme Court case in 2015 that legalized same-sex marriage, one can note how the region largely remained the same with the legality of identifying with the LGBTQ+ community, as the southern region of the nation had constitutional bans against these marriages. Same-sex marriage was a focal point of US politics in the early 21st century, as the nation began to shift to fight for this right on a national level. Based on *Pew*

Research, in 2014, all southern states –besides North and South Carolina– had constitutional bans on same-sex marriage.



Examining this map, one can see the regionalization of state policies banning same-sex marriages all the way up until 2014, indicating the US South as a region that has a deterrence to create and pass progressive legislation related to same-sex marriage (“State Policies on Same-Sex Marriage Over Time”).

In 2015, the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of same-sex marriage in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. However, state-level politicians are trying to refute the federal mandates by drafting discriminatory bills and passing trigger laws that counteract the laws on the federal level that support members of the LGBTQ+ community. For example, as of February 2023, the state of Arkansas is now advancing four bills that show harm towards the LGBTQ+ community: SB 199, SB 125, SB 43, and HB 1156. These four bills discriminate on the grounds of healthcare, education, and free speech and expression (“Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in U.S. State Legislatures”). Four bills in the state of Arkansas alone highlight the tension between

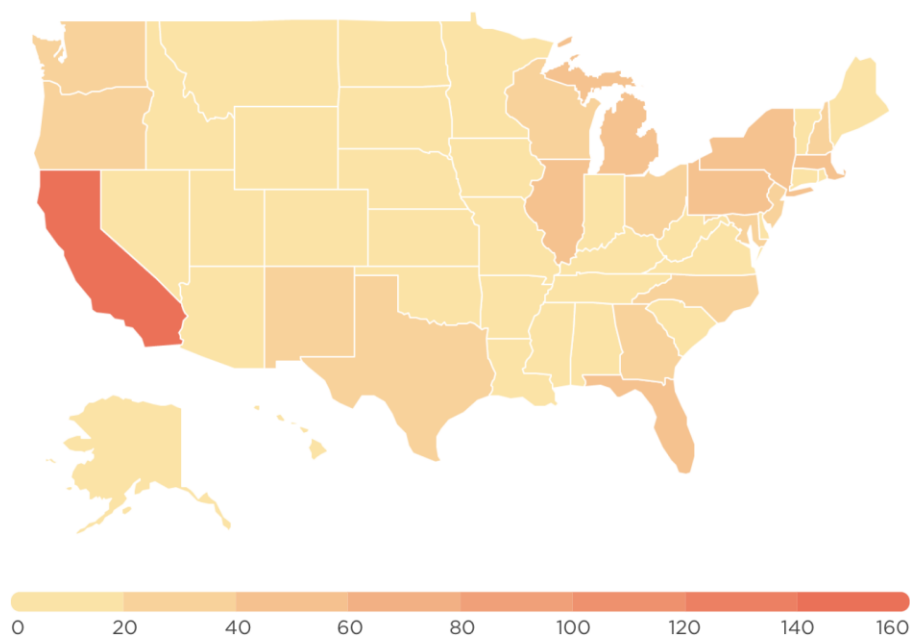
conservative states and the federal government, as they are seeking to combat progressive federal legislation.

While there have been agendas on the state level that seek to further conserve their traditional laws, there have been actions that showcase how the region is working to rectify the discriminatory bills. A notable state to emphasize this progress is Virginia, as in 2020, their state legislature “passed multiple LGBTQ-related bills into law” which included “the first LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination law in the South” (Movement Advancement Project 13). This acceptance highlights how the LGBTQ+ community recognizes itself and their place in the US South, despite the tug-of-war that is occurring at state-level politics.

In 2016, the *Invisible Histories Project* was founded, which is a nonprofit organization that is working to gather “information about the hidden history of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people and others in the Southern United States” (Associated Press). With Southerners historically not being welcoming and accepting of the LGBTQ+ community, there is an entire history of this community that has been lost and/or forgotten. Through this organization’s work, a history that has been left out is now working to be included in United States history for all citizens to learn from. While the *Invisible Histories Project* is working to preserve these materials, the organization is also highlighting how the LGBTQ+ community and the US South can coexist with one person’s identity, rather than being a separate phenomenon (Associated Press). Contributor for the *New York Times*, Karen L. Cox, regards the myth of metronormativity in her article “We’re Here, We’re Queer, Y’all” by delving into the idea that queer communities cannot coexist with the South due to the region’s traditional discriminatory heritage. However, Cox notes that while hate crimes do occur in the region “they are less common than in large urban centers” where targeting individuals based on their differences is

much easier (Cox). This highlights how LGBTQ+ communities across the nation experience discrimination, which debunks the conclusion that individuals must leave the South in order to come-out. By showcasing this kind of identity, individuals can understand that metronormativity is a constructed myth that seeks to erase the identities of LGBTQ+ in the South, which further progresses the region and recorrects the discriminatory stereotype that has been inflicted on the region.

Within the last few years, the nation at large has begun electing members from the LGBTQ+ community to represent them within state politics. Within the map below, each state is color-coordinated dependent upon the number of elected LGBTQ+ individuals within the state government:



Through this 2022 chart, it is vital to note how the US South is appearing to mirror other states outside of the region. In essence, we see that it is not just the South but the entire nation that has difficulty electing individuals who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community. However,

southern states, such as North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida have elected 29 or more LGBTQ+ individuals into their state governments, which mirror states on the East and West coast that have been considered blue states for the past several election cycles (“LGBTQ Elected Officials By State”). Through the South mirroring the rest of the nation in this capacity, one can see how it LGBTQ+ representation is not just a southern issue but a national issue, which diminishes the idea that the South is the only region that is discriminatory towards marginalized groups.

The US South has had a longstanding history of discriminating against marginalized groups who reside in the region. With YA novels promoting this version of the US South, Murphy –and authors like her– are allowing readers to see this progress in the region. While discrimination has not fully exited the South, these stories deserve to be published and shared so that individuals in the region feel seen and represented, while individuals outside of the region can educate themselves about the progressing region in ways that promote allyship and empathy.

Reviews and Perspectives of *Ramona Blue*

Julie Murphy’s *Ramona Blue* is an arguably progressive novel that works to rewrite stereotyped ideals of the US South. With the novel set in a contemporary society, it allows readers to question if the region has begun to change in a more progressive way. Through this lens of a contemporary US South, the novel “explores issues of race (Freddie is black, Ramona is white), social class, and family responsibility” (Smith 99). I argue that this is an essential component of the novel, as Murphy strives to create an environment that is realistic of today’s society with the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community to rework traditional stereotypes of the US South.

A common stereotype that is reworked in the novel is the inclusion of the bisexual representation within the novel. According to Maggie Reagan, an author from *The Booklist*,

reviewed the novel and spoke about its work with representation that does not solely include the gay and lesbian communities, but the communities who are fluid with their sexuality. Reagan examines how sexual fluidity erasure occurs in the media, especially in novels. Through Murphy's inclusion of a character finding her identity, Reagan notes how Ramona's "discovery that being attracted to a boy doesn't make her straight is an important one, and she faces pushback from all sides" (Reagan 61). By showcasing a portrayal of the erasure of individuals who are sexually fluid, this novel works to provide a way for individuals to have an avenue of self-expression and representation.

Ramona Blue is a revolutionary book for its time, as contemporary society is working towards a more accepting view of inclusion, diversity, and representation. *Kirkus Reviews* regards Murphy's work as a work that "beautifully incorporates conversations about identity and diversity--including the policing of Freddie's black body, heteronormative expectations, and diverse sexualities (Ramona's white friend Ruth identifies herself explicitly as homoromantic demisexual)--with nuance and care" ("Murphy, Julie: *Ramona Blue*"). Despite the fact that sexual identity is a main focal point in the novel, race dynamics and socioeconomic relationships are intertwined within the plot to highlight the challenges individuals face when growing up in a region that is thought to be traditionally conservative and readily discriminatory.

Due to the novel's inclusion of topics relating to identity, there are pertinent conservative arguments that go against novels including this kind of material. There are traditional organizations that believe that including members of the LGBTQ+ community into novels go too far and will in turn make their child have thoughts that go against heteronormative ideals. One organization, *One Million Moms*, speaks out against publications --both novels and television-- that showcases LGBTQ+ representation, specifically in Disney's *Firebuds* movie that includes a

lesbian couple who are the parents of a child named Violet. Their argument includes that “discussion of such controversial topics should be left up to parents” (“Disney’s ‘Firebuds’ Targets Preschoolers”). Their belief is that representing members of this community highlights a sinful lifestyle that they do not want their children being exposed to. However, I argue that representation is vital to promoting an accepting society where all individuals feel represented – not just a select few– and truly supported so that we, as a society, can stand up and speak out against actions that are causing suicides and the infliction of self-harm in queer communities. Through incorporating the LGBTQ+ in YA novels, tv shows, and film, individuals will be more understanding of individuals who are not exactly like them. Rather than stopping the inclusion of equal representation in media, I argue that *One Million Moms*, their supporters, and organizations like them regulate their child’s exposure to media on a domestic sphere instead of promoting the censorship of all media that represents this community.

Julie Murphy’s *Ramona Blue* is a novel that seeks to intertwine contemporary issues alongside placing it in a region that normally would be stereotyped as incredibly discriminatory. Through her inclusion of different communities inside this region, readers see a more realistic US South rather than a stereotyped version of the region that only represents specific groups of individuals. By portraying Ramona as a representation of a community that is often erased, young adult readers are more apt to see themselves within Ramona, which highlights the important work that Murphy and others like her are contributing to the realm of YA publication.

A Call For Change: *Ramona Blue* in Secondary Education

Ramona Blue showcases a new era of YA literature, as a member of the LGBTQ+ community is the narrator of her own story. Prior to the past decade, members of this community were often left in the dark or when they were written about, it was written stereotypically. By

Murphy placing Ramona as the narrator, new conversations can emerge regarding what sexuality can look like. Because Ramona is someone from the working class, individuals can further relate to her, as she has to fight both poverty and her sexuality in Mississippi.

Prior to Murphy working with the ambiguousness of sexuality, there were a few YA novels that were written in the late 20th century that featured the LGBTQ+ community. John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It'll Be Worth the Trip* (1969) and Isabelle Holland's *The Man Without A Face* (1972) were the first few YA novels that delved into homosexuality. However, despite the inclusion of homosexuality in these texts, it is clear that there has been a "persistent twinning of homosexuality and hopelessness" (Mason 3). This is problematic for readers who identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, as the only stories they are being told about themselves in literature are ones of gloom and despondency. With the turn of the century, David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) contributed to a new form of queer YA texts: ones that had a more hopeful ending. This version of queer YA showcases "a community where sexuality is not a source of conflict" ("Boy Meets Boy" 85). With this transition of storytelling regarding the LGBTQ+ community, readers have now been exposed to texts that delve into a more accurate and hopeful portrayal of queer identity.

Queer YA lit has developed significantly since 1969 with the publication of John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It'll Be Worth the Trip*. This text set the stage for novels like *Ramona Blue* to incorporate modes of intersectionality –sexual identity, race, class, etc– in a way that is representative of the US South. Julie Murphy's *Ramona Blue* seeks to complicate sexual identity, womanhood, class, and race into a singular YA text. Due to the rising number of novels being published that accurately represent members of this community, it is vital to incorporate conversations regarding these issues in Secondary English classrooms. With students reading

novels that involve regionalism, discussions need to occur that delve into issues of identity and how that can look within a novel. By manifesting open and honest discussions, students will feel both accepted and represented in the classroom and in the diverse society that surrounds them, which will prompt them to be activists of accepting individuals as who they are.

Chapter 4: Kate Hart's *After the Fall* and Sexual Assault in Arkansas

Kate Hart's *After the Fall* (2017) is a novel that examines sexual abuse, consent, and class and its effects on young adults. Providing two different first-person perspectives, *After the Fall* recounts a coming-of-age tale for a high school girl and boy, as they navigate friendship and an eventual relationship. Hart embeds the differences between socioeconomic statuses and access to opportunity within the narrative to showcase how the narrative highlights the discrepancy between "who has what" in their town. The novel is set in Northwest Arkansas, or NWA, a liminal space that allows readers to question what exactly is included when individuals reference "the South." With some of the characters refusing to acknowledge the Northwest region of Arkansas as the South, there is a new sense of ambiguity among what determines the borders of the region –and with it a questioning of one's refusal to be labeled as a southerner. By *After the Fall* fixating on the question of what determines an individual's sense of place while drawing on the potential hardships –particularly that of sexual violence– that might impact an individual as they mature. For this reason, readers can get a better sense of teen identity, as it relates to growing up in an environment where portions of the youth population are yearning to escape.

While readers can question if the Northwest region of Arkansas is included when referencing the South, it is important to highlight the ambiguity that comes with identification of the "Peripheral South." This ambiguity arises from a nuance of regionality where one can identify as an inhabitant of a specific region as opposed to another. In such liminal spaces, people who are deterred from identifying as a southerner could identify as a midwesterner or southwesterner, as they perceive the South's stereotypes to be true. By refusing the label of "southerner," individuals refuse the stereotypes that come with the region because if they were to accept the region as their own, they would be labeled with those negative stereotypes. With

young adults in Arkansas, representation is all but few and far between –as the Peripheral South is often misconstrued with other regions of the nation. With YA novels like *After the Fall* set in Arkansas, readers can think critically about the role of region in a contemporary and globalized society, especially with NWA priding itself for its sense of locality within the community in a global sphere of business networks.

Overarching Themes and Concepts within *After the Fall*

Multiculturalism in State Regionalism

Through the depiction of northwest Arkansas as a promised land of sorts for the state, Kate Hart works to showcase a New South, and with it, a new Arkansas. While the US South is stereotypically composed of multiple states that embody the same virtues and ideals, Hart seeks to highlight how each state –and even regions within each state– has its own identity and culture. NWA separates itself from the rest of Arkansas with a growing hub of business and capital; Hart illustrates how the region has created a new culture that combats the stereotypical notions of what Arkansas is and who Arkansans are. Since the turn of the 21st century, NWA has expanded dramatically both in capital and in diversity. The Northwest Arkansas Council published in their Diversity Report of 2022 that “the number in new foreign-born residents grew by nearly 33% between 2010 and 2019” which highlights the influx of diversity in the region over the 21st century (“Engage the Future” 19). The council recently signed the leadership pledge to promote diversity and inclusion in the area. The leadership pledge states:

Diversity and inclusion are vital to the well-being and success of our employees, communities, and businesses. We stand committed to fostering and expanding a more just, equitable and inclusive region for all by purposefully addressing systemic racism in the communities in which we operate. (“Engage the Future” 23)

Hart seeks to illustrate NWA as separate from the other regions of Arkansas by setting a dichotomy between NWA and the Delta region. She describes the town of Dumas, a small town

in the Arkansas-Delta that borders Mississippi, as being “totally different” from NWA with their poor economy and Raychel’s mom living “in a rusted-out trailer” (Hart 293). Raychel explains to readers that her mom escaped Dumas and the Delta to find a promising job in Northwest Arkansas. Northwest Arkansas, specifically the town of Big Springs, is idealized as a Promised Land that seeks to provide economic ventures and educational opportunities, like housing Fortune 500 companies and a R1 university. Hart distinguishes NWA from the rest of the state through the characters in the novel understanding that the region has a much different atmosphere and environment than the rest of Arkansas. This makes readers question if NWA is included in one’s understanding of the South. Contrasting the rest of the state, NWA is a community that consists predominantly of white-collar occupations and a community where a portion of the government funding goes towards the arts. While there is much less ruralness in NWA as opposed to the Delta, NWA is still considered to be in the Peripheral South. Due to this, it disproves the stereotype that the South only consists of rural spaces with minimal opportunities. Rather, it reveals that the South includes both rural and urban spaces and has created diverse environments where individuals can have more of a chance to live prosperous lives outside of the realms of farming.

Socioeconomics and The Possession of Power

With NWA being a space where there is a dichotomy between the region and the rest of the state, there is a clear hierarchy of power within the community due to the prominent members leading the Fortune 500 companies. Hart describes Big Springs as a unique town “where you can take university classes at fourteen. Where a National Book Award winner lives down the street. Where an internationally known pianist [gives] lessons, and a president went to school” (Hart 178-179). Through listing these advantages, readers can understand that Northwest

Arkansas resembles other prosperous cities across the country, rather than mirroring the rest of Arkansas through the recent emergence of cultural capital present within NWA. While this is problematic because it has the potential to further separate NWA from the US South, Hart does seek to acknowledge how regions in the South are not fully emblematic of their traditional stereotypes. By showing this version of what the South is, readers can understand that the region is much more than a rural space with limited economic opportunity and no access to culture. Rather, it is a region that seeks to provide opportunities that Arkansans have missed out on and encourages individuals from across the country to migrate to this corner of the state.

Further highlighting the region's culture, Hart describes how "the university's influence keeps Big Springs from being a Southern stereotype" while also mentioning the various groups of individuals that comprise Northwest Arkansas: the academics, the "hippies," the "yuppies," and the "church conservative good 'ole boys" who mirror the rest of the state (Hart 98). With the diversity of different groups making up the region, there is much more culture than individuals outside the region believe there to be. Through the ways that Big Springs breaks traditional Southern stereotypes, Hart offers a version of the US South that is not monolithic, but a complex region that separates itself from cultural bereftness that has been drawn on in literature and criticism across centuries: most notably in HL Mencken's 1917 essay "The Sahara of the Bozart" which claimed that the South does not have any culture at all. From being a region that has been regarded as a desert to being one that portrays itself as culturally diverse, Hart showcases how NWA is actively working to redefine what it means to be Southern, and more specifically an Arkansan.

With Big Springs having Fortune 500 companies in their area, Hart notes how there is much more discrepancy amongst those with power and how they are treated under the law. Hart

highlights how someone in the town “got a DUI after Music on the Mulberry” but since his dad was “a big-wig at Walmart corporate,” he would not get into much trouble (Hart 50). This is in direct contrast with individuals who are not as economically prosperous who would receive a harsher punishment. This showcases that discrimination still exists amongst the socioeconomic classes with overwhelming financial success and opportunity being kept within a small community of people, which mirrors the Old South’s mentality of those who have power will remain in power by using their name when needed. Individuals in the community look up to the prominent families, which allows for the community to treat them differently by putting them on a pedestal. This makes these families bypass and escape any sort of punishment by breaking laws and establishes a sense of entitlement in the community for those who possess this amount of power. This entitlement is maintained within the community through the network of those who have power, otherwise known as the “good old boy network.” As defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, the old-boy network is “the informal system in which men who went to the same school or university help each other to find good jobs or get other social advantages” (“The Old-Boy Network,” def). In other words, this network consists of the powerful men within the community helping one another to maintain their image in a self-serving manner. Those who are in the network can bypass the justice system through the patriarchal power that rests within the network itself, which in turn is manifested within the community. While the individuals who possess power within the region have changed since the Antebellum era, from plantation owners to corporate leaders, those in power still continue to utilize their authority and use it for their benefit in times where their name might be tarnished. This possession of authority is easily seen within the region where powerful individuals remain on top of the social hierarchy. It is even more essential to point out that this power can be seen within the realm of sexual violence as

well, where statistics point to women overwhelmingly being forced into an inferior role. Hart works to critique the functions of power and who possesses this power within the narrative by grappling with events where unwarranted force is clearly evident.

Sexual Abuse and Ideas of Consent

Aside from the regionality of NWA compared to the rest of Arkansas, Hart writes about a woman's experience with living in a region with a history of misogyny and patriarchy. This has manifested itself into the formation of rape culture, sexual shaming, and sexual abuse in contemporary society, especially for high school girls. Hart writes about how Raychel experiences bullying from her peers, as "someone [coughed] 'Slut!' as [she walked] down a crowded staircase" due to rumors of her getting with a guy she went to highschool with, Carson (Hart 17). Sexual assault is very prevalent in this novel, as it takes a stronghold in Raychel's life. She acknowledges to the reader that "body parts are just parts –you use them or they use you" and explains how "a guy grabbed [her] ass while [she] was dancing and he didn't even ask first" (Hart 41). She brushes guys' actions off, as it relates to the way they treat women, which highlights how Raychel has grown up in an environment where this is normal behavior.

Later in the novel, Raychel experiences sexual abuse, as she was forced into giving oral sex to Carson. She notes how he "wasn't violent" but she "couldn't get away" and that she "didn't know what else to do" (Hart 64). She rationalizes with herself and the readers after he abused her, as she explains how this experience was different from other sexual interactions she has had before. She tells readers that others would not consider it a big deal or that they would ask her why she "didn't scream or bite him" (Hart 65). This assault showcases how individuals respond differently to trauma and also allows others to realize that Carson's behavior was sexual assault. During young adulthood, many women experience different forms of assault and abuse,

and Hart highlights how such traumatic experiences might look in the eyes of a woman who is placed in an uncomfortable or potentially traumatic situation that she did not ask for. Overall, Hart explains how it is easy for women to write off men's actions by looking at themselves and how they responded to the men's actions, which is the heart of why victims blame themselves. However, by Raychel coming to terms with the abuse that happened to her, readers can better understand that continuous verbal consent is the only viable form of consent.

With the sexual assault conversations that take place in the novel being so intense, it requires a level of maturity that some YA novels do not necessitate. However, it is vital for these conversations to happen among teens with trusted adults, as this violence occurs throughout the nation, especially on school campuses. Sexual abuse occurs across school campuses, as the AAWU notes how "nearly half of students in grades 7-12 report facing sexual harassment" in the 2010-2011 Crossing the Line Report ("Crossing the Line: Sexual Harassment at School"). With such a large number of the population experiencing sexual assault and violence, it is vital for young adults to have conversations regarding sexual assault in a classroom setting with a trusted adult. Learning more about what sexual assault can look like can help individuals understand how they can help themselves and help others if someone they know were to experience this form of abuse. Continuing conversations regarding this will help individuals to speak up about their own experiences so that more awareness can be raised regarding this endemic violence. Due to not all sexual assaults being reported to law enforcement agencies, educators might be the first adult to know about the event if "students disclose an assault to [the educator]" during these conversations (Valanzola 14). However, Dr. Ashley Valanzola, a history professor at The George Washington University, reminds teachers that if this disclosure does occur, they must direct the student to "the campus or local sexual assault center" (Valanzola 15). Through this, students can

make informed decisions about how to handle their sexual assault with a guardian and a trained advocate. Because educators do not have the proper training to help students with these situations, it is vital for educators to direct their students to trained professionals. While handling these situations may be challenging, educators can foster “the best learning environment for students” by creating an inviting space for individuals to reflect on and process their sexual assault (Valanzola 17).

Delving into the narrative, Hart illustrates the growing awareness of sexual violence. This is depicted with the inclusion of victim survivor support groups that is presented to Raychel as a way to help with her experiences. The survivor support group flier that Raychel reads shares vital information regarding sexual activity: “no means no is not enough! Yes means yes - no consent, no contact” (Hart 276). Through this information being on a flyer for others to see, Hart illustrates in a realistic way how awareness concerning sexual violence has grown to be much more of a grassroots effort to help individuals on a personal level. This highlights the novel’s participation in the #MeToo movement, as young adults are participating in a national movement to help bring awareness to systemic violence. This showcases that while *After the Fall* was published in 2017, the novel continues to stay relevant, as Hart draws upon sexual violence and the awareness that surrounds it –especially as it relates to one’s access to abortion– in a realistic manner where young adults can actively reflect on how this issue appears in their own lives.

Hart further describes the harsh reality of living as a woman who has experienced sexual violence, as it relates to pregnancy being an outcome of the violence. She describes this experience as one where women “can do everything right, be careful, become a nun and intend to die a goddamn virgin, but at any moment, some dickhead could not just hurt you, but create another life to ruin at the same time, and you get held responsible for both” (Hart 161). Hart

elicits this conversation between Raychel and Matt in a classroom setting, as Raychel describes the importance of women's equality. Raychel centers her discussion, as quoted above, with Matt around sexual violence –and the legality of abortion. The narrative accurately illustrates the difficulty women experience after they were abused: it is their responsibility to deal with the repercussions that someone else inflicted upon them. With southern states, especially Arkansas, currently limiting the access to legalized abortions, conversations like these are beginning to occur more frequently between individuals regarding the legality of abortions altogether, despite the reasoning for the abortion. This is a prevalent conversation for Arkansas today, as of 2022, Arkansas implemented a trigger ban on all abortions due to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* (1973) from the United States Supreme Court. The trigger ban restricts women from seeking abortions within the state and forces them to go across state lines if they were to seek one, even if the abortion was due to rape. With these recent bans on abortions at the state level, more conversations are occurring regarding the legality of abortions and how it affects women's rights.

Historical Context of Sexual Assault in the US and US South

Because *After the Fall* highlights sexual assault within the narrative, it is necessary to delve into the importance of acknowledging how much of an issue this is in the nation. Sexual assault occurs throughout all demographics, especially for teenagers and children. According to Darkness to Light, a nonprofit organization that seeks to prevent child sexual abuse, approximately “70% of all reported sexual assaults (including assaults on adults) occur to children aged 17 and under” (“Child Sexual Abuse Statistics: The Magnitude of the Problem”). Teenagers, especially women, are at a significant risk to be a victim of sexual violence. Since *After the Fall* provides an example of this statistic, it allows for readers to understand the gravity

of the violence and how the violence is much more of a statistic but something that is real and affects many young people.

In a study examining sexual violence and its societal effects, especially in young girls, evidence shows that “girls were consistently positioned as the gatekeeper of sexual activity; they were disbelieved and policed by their peers, and their words were reconstructed and their actions deemed false” (Hlavka 351). Through this silencing actively being a part of those who are victims of sexual violence, it is essential to continue the discussion surrounding this silencing. By continuing this conversation in YA novels, readers –especially young adults– will become more comfortable discussing the effects of sexual violence. In order for women to be believed and heard, they need to feel comfortable enough telling their stories to an accepting community. While society has made efforts to promote awareness to sexual violence inflicted upon women through the #MeToo movement, there is still significant work to be done, as society is still working towards being a community that welcomes vulnerability and honesty, while also being a community that stands up to victim blaming.

Reviews and Perspectives of *After the Fall*

With Kate Hart’s *After the Fall* including difficult material for all audiences to gravitate towards, there is reason to look at the brevity of what content is included and what age group is mature enough to read the novel. Because Hart includes material that features sexual consent and abuse and situates her story in an environment that also grapples with the possession of power, the narrative is one that deserves great care when reading. While the issues that engulf this narrative are mature, I argue that these issues are necessary to read about, as it reflects accurate problems that surround teenagers and their lives today. By reading these issues in a narrative that is representative of the Peripheral South, individuals can understand that these challenges occur

throughout the nation. Through this, I argue that YA readers will be more apt to normalize conversations centered around sexual violence and ideas of consent in their lives.

Reviewers believe *After the Fall* to be a novel that has “thought-provoking moments regarding such issues as female sexuality, racial microaggressions, and class differences” which adds a new and unique depth to the text that is not seen in other YA novels (Colson 49). Through the complex narrative, readers can immerse themselves in situations that occur everyday around the country. While difficult to read in some areas of the text, young adults have an opportunity to read a text that relieves the shame that comes with being assaulted. *After the Fall* is a narrative that delves into sexual assault and offers a unique approach to helping young adults reflect and process their traumas with sexual assault.

Intertwining the desire to leave sites of trauma with the need of escaping the South, the narrative allows readers to see a complex version of what it means to escape and start over. Hart situates Raychel in an environment where she “is dying to leave her small Southern hometown,” which showcases that even in an area of the state that is considered the most desirable, there is still a need to escape from the South entirely (MacDonald 130). The need to escape the South in order to seek a better lifestyle is an idea that has been prevalent within the region, especially for young adults who have the access to do so. Hart creates an environment where her characters are wishing to escape, even in a place that has more opportunities than other regions of the South, which allows readers to be more likely to yearn for escaping the region themselves. This could potentially be problematic, yet I believe that including Northwest Arkansas as the setting of the text, readers will also see that while there is a yearning to escape, there is also a yearning to stay and utilize the resources and opportunities that are available to them there. With NWA growing rapidly over the past several decades, the region has begun to combat traditional Southern

stereotypes that cast the region as only consisting of backward, rural spaces. With NWA as a prosperous region to live in Arkansas, individuals from across the country are seeking to live in this space. This creates a complex dynamic between young adults, especially the characters in the book, as they grow up wishing to travel outside of the region, yet eventually coming to terms with the access of opportunities that are available to them there. Through this complexity, the novel works to create a space for individuals in the Peripheral South to be more accurately represented as a region that offers both southern culture and economic opportunities.

Kara Babcock, a trans-woman and reviewer of fiction, writes about the text in a way that highlights the faults of the text and where it draws short, especially as it relates to sexual abuse. Babcock writes that while Raychel confides to a family friend's mother about her personal experiences with sexual assault, and the mother notes how the abuser "will never face ramifications in court" (Babcock). Hart illustrates how the "old boy networks," as discussed earlier within the chapter, still take a stronghold in NWA, especially in the criminal justice system. Even in the contemporary South, individuals who are associated within these networks seemingly go without punishment for their crimes. While this is a seemingly negative approach for the adult to take, it is unfortunately a realistic take on how men's stories are often believed more than those of women. The he-said-she-said take on sexual violence and assault creates problematic situations in court that oftentimes leads to victims not obtaining the justice they deserve. This honest conversation showcases how adults can truly be there for a child when they experience sexual assault just by offering their support to the victim. Through the decision to write this conversation in the way Hart did, Babcock applauds "Hart for the way she sets up the subplot," as it is indicative of a true experience of living as a woman who has experienced sexual assault (Babcock). Through writing in a way that normalizes conversations and experiences

surrounding sexual assault, Hart explores a narrative that delves into coping with abuse, as Raychel is navigating if the abuse that she experienced is a “big deal” or not (Hart 65). The narrative offers readers an avenue of understanding for how sexual assault can occur across school campuses.

The novel also showcases a new type of US South in a way that includes a multitude of issues and challenges. *Kirkus Reviews*, a prominent book review outlet, notes this about *After the Fall*:

Over the course of the novel, Raychel's interactions with Carson raise important questions about what it means to consent to sexual activity, though the provided answers lack nuance. In similar fashion, the exploration of race posed by Indian-American friend Asha's romance with African-American Spencer doesn't go as far as it could. Eventually a buildup of communication breakdowns leads to tragedy. The novel introduces many complicated topics--from sexual assault to issues of class and race--but fails to address them thoroughly. (“Kate Hart: *After the Fall*”)

By including a vast array of issues within the text, there is a question of “how much is too much” that leads critics to wonder if the amount of substance in the text contributes to there not being a deep dive into a singular issue within the plot. However, through Hart incorporating a multitude of issues surrounding highschoolers in Arkansas, a more realistic, intersectional narrative is set in place. This allows readers, especially young adult readers who are from the Peripheral South, to see themselves and their complicated lifestyles in a YA text. Hart’s illustration of Northwest Arkansas, readers across the country can see the South as an area that is not just farmland, but also artistry, education, and economic prosperity too. Amidst the complexity, Hart diligently works to reconstruct the US South through a contemporary perspective that highlights the growing prosperity that portions of the South are experiencing, such as northwest Arkansas.

Critiques on YAL that feature the South and Sexual Violence

Kate Hart's *After the Fall* portrays a new and inventive story of Arkansas and what the region represents. While there are issues that require a certain level of maturity to understand, the novel works to be representative of those who have not had their stories shared in the form of novels. Regionality is a significant component in this novel, and Hart seeks to represent those who are a part of regions that are often not written about. Arkansas, just like any other state in the nation, is unique in its own right with different regions of the state showcasing its versatility and diversity. Jon Smith delves into this southern discrepancy in the book *Finding Purple America: The South and the Future of American Cultural Studies*. Smith highlights how there are notable cultural differences within the South, even on a micro-level. Smith explains the difficulty of registering "the colossal differences between Charlottesville and the Deep South where [he] taught for twelve years, the differences between Mississippi and Alabama, Birmingham and Atlanta, even the differences between adjacent Alabama counties, adjacent Birmingham suburbs" (Smith 18). All in all, it is easy to place all of the South in the same box, especially if those who are creating stereotypes of the South are outsiders to the region altogether. Through Hart's description and accurate representation of Arkansas, readers can better understand how southern cultures can differ between Arkansas and the rest of the South, but also how NWA can differ from the rest of the state of Arkansas.

After the Fall is also a progressive novel that seeks to expose the challenges that come with sexual assault and violence. Sexual assault occurs on school campuses throughout the nation. By Hart situating these challenges in a state like Arkansas, it highlights that sexual violence can occur anywhere, yet Hart also seeks to recognize that resources for dealing with this violence is unequally available across southern spaces. Setting the narrative in a region that highlights how sexual violence can occur anywhere, Hart helps readers understand that the US

South is deserving of resources just like any other region in the nation. It also showcases how individuals are prone to experience traumatic events like those evident within the novel no matter what region you live in. Hart also helps readers come to understand the meaning of consent and how consistent and verbal consent is always necessary in sexual interactions. Writing the narrative in a way that highlights how women feel in uncomfortable sexual interactions showcases how sexual assaults can appear, even when there is not extreme violence that leaves victims hospitalized. Uncovering how sexual violence can look differently for everyone teaches readers how sexual violence can include any interaction that is not consensual, which is necessary to reflect on for both parties involved in sexual activity. Both men and women ought to fully understand what consent is and how to adhere to this behavior.

Continuing conversations centered around difficult subject matters might be considered too graphic for young adults. However, *After the Fall* discusses these issues in a way that younger audiences can understand and relate to, as Hart writes through the first-person perspective of a young woman who has dealt with sexual violence. This helps to promote awareness to sexual assault and provides a safe space for individuals to feel comfortable discussing any experiences they might have relating to violence and abuse. Overall, the narrative showcases multiple aspects of life in a realistic way that allows readers to truly peer into the lives of highschoolers in Arkansas. While mature in content, *After the Fall* provides readers with an avenue to normalize conversations regarding violence in their own lives so that they can work to recognize what sexual violence looks like, rather than continue to silence victims. Through such inclusive representation, individuals will be more equipped to combat sexual assault and violence.

Interview with Author

After the Fall has made significant contributions to the state of Arkansas, as Arkansans are accurately being represented in a YA novel. After being published in 2017, *After the Fall* made it on the Arkansas Gem List, which seeks to promote new texts about Arkansas (“Arkansas Gems”). Due to the novel’s significance and prevalence in the state, Hart has been outspoken in the community about her writing, as it relates to Arkansas and sexual violence, with visits to local schools and even sitting down with me for an interview.

I had the opportunity to conduct an interview with Kate Hart to delve into the reasoning behind why she wrote the novel and the southern ties that are associated with the narrative. When describing the reasoning behind centering her novel around themes of sexual violence, she tells me that when she was originally writing *After the Fall*, it was not supposed to be “about slut shaming and rape culture” but through personal experiences dealing with previous trauma in her life growing up that “it was just what came out of it” (Hart). Delving further into sexual violence, she explains that by growing up in NWA, she understood that “there is a big element of rape culture in all campuses... so [she] felt like there was a trickle down of that culture” into her local high school (Hart). She writes about this in *After the Fall* when describing the trickle down culture of NWA college campuses into the high school. Hart highlights how the university is “so close to our building that we call it BS High School Thirteenth Grade” and because of its close proximity, there were always aspects of college life invading the high school environment (Hart 12). With rape culture being so close to the high school campus, Hart explains how sexual violence easily made its way into their campus. Keeping this in mind, Hart wrote the novel for all young adults, as school campuses –both high school and college– heavily deal with this violence on an everyday basis.

In the interview, Hart also explained her personal relationship with the South, and Arkansas specifically. When I asked her about this relationship, she emphasized how when “anything came out about Arkansas...it just felt like completely off and stereotyped” (Hart). This inaccurate portrayal of Arkansas inevitably encouraged her to promote the South as a southerner would see it. Meaning, she began to be exhausted of others creating a story of the region without actually traveling there to see it for what it is. She goes on to explain how she “had a chip on [her] shoulder” and was “tired of reading books that are set in New York or LA,” which contributed to her wanting to write about NWA for how she saw it (Hart). For Hart, writing about Arkansas, as an Arkansan, provided her an avenue to tell others how Arkansas really is: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Lastly, towards the end of the interview Hart explained how she desires to show students when she makes school visits how she is a “positive representation of someone who is open minded” but also “still live on 11 acres with a beat up truck” (Hart). This emphasizes that one does not have to be either open minded or a southerner, but an individual can be both. She hopes to teach students to “love the good parts” of the South and to take those good parts “wherever you go” (Hart).

Hart’s interview inspired me to reflect on how I can be proud of where I come from, while also prioritizing questioning the actions of my community. To live in a region where there is a culture separate from the rest of the nation, stereotypes are quick to be labeled onto the region and onto its inhabitants. Through working to combat these stereotypes with forms of acceptance and inclusivity, Arkansans can be more like Kate Hart: a person devoted to loving her heritage while also desiring to continually change her community for the better.

Chapter 5: Marieke Nijkamp's *This Is Where It Ends* and Gun Violence in Alabama

Marieke Nijkamp's *This Is Where It Ends* (2016) is a novel that sparks conversations amongst young adults concerning school shootings and the backstory of what leads to these horrific events. Selecting the word "where" in the title is a deliberate attempt to showcase how gun violence in schools has remained a prevalent issue into the 21st century. Situating this novel in the midst of a school shooting in Alabama, Nijkamp seeks to uncover the thoughts and feelings of individuals as they experience violence being inflicted upon them. Nijkamp writes in this way as a promotion to end gun violence altogether: per her title, this is where gun violence ends.

As a recently published novel, Nijkamp illustrates one of the ways school shootings occur in a contemporary environment, as a student is the active shooter. The novel delves into the ramifications of living through a school shooting from the perspectives of several students and provides a clear picture of what events surround such a traumatic event. Through illustrating events that are complicated and jarring, Nijkamp's work seeks to do the unthinkable: illustrating students' responses of coping with and handling a high intensity environment for the sake of survival. In a spotlight story on Nijkamp herself, she tells *Publishers Weekly* that she wrote the novel "after having a conversation with a friend about high school experiences and school safety after a high-profile school shooting," which made her believe that she could understand the personal circumstances of the individuals involved in the shooting ("Spotlight On Marieke Nijkamp"). Through writing in four different first-person perspectives, Nijkamp explores the potential thoughts and actions individuals might experience during a school shooting. While difficult to write, Nijkamp can illustrate deep and intimate stories by captivating the reader through first person perspectives. Nijkamp successfully composes *This Is Where It Ends* in a way

that is incredibly intense. Readers have personal experiences with the text through the first-person perspectives that are included within the text, as they follow along the morning of the school shooting. Through this experience with the text, readers themselves go through the school shooting by following along the four characters.

Novel Synopsis

Illustrating the events of a school shooting from multiple perspectives, readers understand how a traumatic event can impact and influence the decisions students make when they are placed in this environment. *This Is Where It Ends* walks through the day of a school shooting, minute by minute, from several perspectives of different high school students. The novel opens with a normal school day, as a pep-rally begins in the school's gymnasium. As the perspectives begin to alternate, readers grow to understand how the students featured within the text are all in different areas of the school grounds, which leads to extremely different circumstances regarding their personal experiences with the shooting itself. By Nijkamp writing in a style that is anxiety-driven –recounting events minute-by-minute– readers can see into the minds of four students and their thoughts as this shooting was taking place. The four students are connected to one another through past and current relationships and familial ties. Two of the characters that provide first-person accounts, Autumn and Sylvia, are in a relationship together. Tomás, Sylvia's brother, and Sylvia are from the Hispanic community. By including the LGBTQ+ community and the Hispanic community, more readers are represented, so they can place themselves in this environment. Readers also have the chance to see Opportunity, Alabama as any other town in the nation, which further creates a narrative where readers can see themselves. Opportunity, Alabama is grounded in its southern culture, but the inclusion of various communities coming

together who go to school at Opportunity High School establishes a student body reflective of high schools across the country.

An important aspect of the novel is the location of the school shooting itself. By Nijkamp placing this story in a small town in the Deep South, readers can understand that gun violence occurs anywhere. Even the students within the novel believed this, as they recount that “this is Opportunity. Nothing ever happens here” (Nijkamp 39). With Nijkamp creating this story in a small town set in the South –especially in a town named Opportunity– it allows for readers to understand that there is always a chance for traumatic events to occur. Prior to the school shooting, individuals in the community focused on their values that include “hometown, family, God, country: that’s the opportunity creed. It’s preached by the mayor who can trace his lineage back to the Civil War and the elderly farmers, like Abuelo, who linger outside church to discuss the crops and the weather. That’s what makes our community strong, gives us purpose” (Nijkamp 75). Through the region’s heritage and values being so evident in a small southern town, students growing up in this environment clearly understand what encapsulates southern identity. The transformation of what individuals believed their community to be changed throughout the course of the novel, as it began with community members believing Opportunity, Alabama to be a utopian-like small town and watched it change into a more realistic town that showcases the nation’s challenges of dealing with mental health and gun violence. Rather than attempting to strike fear for young adult readers, Nijkamp is looking to inform and educate others about the trauma young students experience when gun violence takes place in a school environment that should be a safe environment for students to learn. By doing so, it helps to prompt conversations regarding gun violence and school shootings amongst peers and adults, especially in classroom environments where these events could potentially occur. Nijkamp also

uses this narrative as a platform to showcase the necessity of gun reform, so students and educators will not have to be faced with the trauma and violence of a school shooting.

While the novel seeks to provide a recounting of a school shooting, Nijkamp does not leave out the cultural implications of having this story set in the South. By situating the plot in a small town in Alabama, readers can see the contrast of the diversity that exists within the region and the lack of highlighting this diversity in southern culture. While the novel embeds characters of different races and backgrounds who come to school in Opportunity, main characters like Autumn, a white girl, still cast these characters as outsiders. She does this by telling readers that Asha, one of the minor characters, “isn’t Opportunity, where everyone knows everything about Mom and me. She isn’t part of our home turf of familiar street names, churches, or shared secrets” (Nijkamp 16). The basic premise of Autumn casting Asha as an outsider is clear, as Opportunity High School is a county high school, which showcases that even within one school there are outsiders. While the narrative is more representative in terms of the characters that are included, Nijkamp still draws on the insider/outsider mentality that is evident within the South. Showcasing both representation and the outsider mentality, the region is better illustrated in terms of what life is like living there, especially for the groups who are considered outsiders amongst the majority.

History of School Shootings in US and the US South

School shootings in the United States have been occurring since the late 20th century with the infamous Columbine shooting in Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999, which was led by two students on a high school campus. This event, while shocking to the nation, was the first of many shootings that would occur on school campuses, ultimately becoming “a cultural script for many subsequent rampage shooters” (Larkin 1312). This is due to the shooting being one of

the deadliest school shooting in the country's history, as 15 individuals were killed and 20 were wounded (History.com Editors). The shooting was televised throughout the country, making the conversation regarding gun control and the media representation of school violence a pertinent issue in the nation.

While the Columbine shooting was one of the most deadly school shootings US history, it is vital to mention that school shootings occurred before this and throughout the country, not just in a specific region. For example, in 1998, there was a school shooting at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Like in *This Is Where It Ends*, the Westside school shooters were current students at the middle school. Killing 5 and wounding 11, these middle school aged shooters (aged 11 and 13) shocked the state of Arkansas and the nation, which led to individuals questioning how the young students obtained the guns and how they executed such a horrific plan (History.com Editors). Because Arkansas is a state that prides itself on Second Amendment rights, it was not too difficult for the students to break into one of their grandparents' homes and steal "the guns hanging on the display wall" ("Where'd They Get Their Guns?"). With the weapons being easily available to the students, one must question the overall awareness that adults have towards the safe keeping of their weapons. It is also important to mention the state's response from the trial. The court's response toward the two students was one that was fairly lax, as "under Arkansas law the two boys had only limited responsibility for their actions" due to being tried as children under the law ("Jonesboro, Arkansas, School Shooting"). Their punishment left them to be in reform institutes and in custody facilities until they turned 21. One of the students returned to prison shortly following his release date, while the other student passed away in 2019 (History.com Editors). Because of this, it causes concern about the reform institutes in the state of Arkansas and their success with helping individuals involved in criminal

cases like these. However, the state of Arkansas focused on reforming gun laws after this event, which would make punishments more severe for minors who elicited violent actions like these two students: changing the law to allow the state to imprison minors past the age of 21 (History.com Editors). Through the state's response to this shooting, it has laid precedence for judges to choose harsher punishments over rehabilitation for minors involved in crimes.

Another school shooting that drastically highlighted the need for gun reform on a federal level was the Sandy Hook School shooting that occurred in 2012. This shooting shocked the nation, as it was an attack on an elementary school campus. This attack prompted a significant push on gun reform and legislation, as press coverage highlighted the brutality of the Sandy Hook shooting. As press coverage continued, the nation continued to highlight the growing necessity of gun legislation on the federal level. From this point up through today, there have been efforts to combat the gun violence that has made its way into United States classrooms. This has unfortunately led to gun reform being seen as a partisan issue, with the Republican party and National Rifle Association showing strong commitment to Second Amendment rights. Through their actions and the opposing actions of the Democratic party, tension has emerged regarding how much gun control is too much control. This has led to a back-and-forth between national and state offices drafting gun reform bills and pro-gun rights bills, which has led to the country being unable to pass lasting gun legislation. With this instability, there have been several failures to pass legislation written to minimize which guns individuals have access to, even directly after the Sandy Hook shooting. The Assault Weapons Ban of 2013 was a significant piece of drafted legislation that was written directly following the Sandy Hook shooting. This bill sought to “ban criminal code to ban the import, sale, manufacture, transfer, or possession of a semiautomatic assault weapon,” but was ultimately defeated in the Senate (S.150 - 113th

Congress (2013-2014)). Even with a deadly elementary school shooting, it was still not enough to progress gun reform in the nation. The necessity of continuing conversations centered around gun violence and gun reform must continue due to the limited progress in gun reform. It takes significant social change for legislation to pass and be effective, so by fostering conversations like these will leave individuals better equipped to live in a society where gun violence remains an ongoing threat.

With gun violence and school shootings still a major concern in the United States in 2023, it is vital that young adults have the ability to access stories like those that appear in *This Is Where It Ends*. Continuing difficult conversations centered around this issue will contribute to individuals coming up with new ways of how to prevent gun violence. Sara Ahmed, an author who specializes in writing about intersectionality, notes how hate is circulated “between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement” (Ahmed 119). It is easy for individuals, especially young adult students who are learning about themselves, to fixate on how other people are different from themselves. This creates a mentality of divergence and opposition, especially if the difference is contrasted between minority and majority populations. However, by reading stories like *This Is Where It Ends* where all characters are experiencing the same trauma, readers undergo similar experiences with one another. With the intense narrative, strong emotions are elicited, and these emotions “align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments” (Ahmed 119). Through the emotions elicited within the novel, readers can better understand how community can be built between individuals who appear to not have any commonalities. The safe spaces that can emerge from the readers can help further discussion regarding the specific trauma that is evident within the book, specifically in a classroom setting where discussions can be mediated by an educator.

The discussions that can emerge in a classroom will encourage students to feel comfortable talking with an adult about their opinions regarding gun control, which can leave them feeling empowered to change gun legislation to be more preventative when they become adults.

Reviews and Other Perspectives

This is Where It Ends is a YA novel that seeks to do the unthinkable by writing a story that vividly illustrates educators and parents' worst fear. There are several reviewers who remark that the novel includes too mature content and is too traumatic for young adults to read. However, despite the novel revolving around gun violence, Nijkamp illustrates the events in a very compelling way that highlights southern culture while providing readers with a complicated story of gun violence. *Kirkus Reviews* believes that the novel is "grounded in the present," which makes the story effective "that lay bare the pain and deception that have led up to the day's horror" ("Nijkamp, Marieke: *This Is Where It Ends*"). With the narrative taking place in the present day, providing minute by minute accounts from several perspectives of students, readers learn about the backstory of the shooting from the detailed accounts of individuals told through first-person perspectives.

By Nijkamp herself being an active proponent in WeNeedDiverseBooks -a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that promotes "literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people," she situates the novel to provide a more diverse perspective of the South ("We Need Diverse Books"). A reviewer from the *Washington Independent Review of Books*, Shannon Lee Alexander, recognizes this in her review by mentioning that "the use of voices from a variety of races, ethnicities, disabilities, and sexual identities shows readers the untold effects of school violence" (Alexander). With Opportunity High School being written as a southern school where students are diverse, more readers will be apt to see themselves through this text. This is

incredibly important, as the text delves into gun violence and school shootings in a rural space that showcases that gun violence can occur across the country. By creating a text that both showcases how gun violence can occur anywhere, while including characters who are more reflective of the nation at large, readers can better understand that gun violence affects everyone, not just a select few.

Lastly, reviewers recognize that the novel is unique because Nijkamp provides several perspectives that give background for the school shooting. Reviewer April Spisak regards this style of narrative as one that showcases the “multiple voices that humanize Tyler [the shooter], even while it is clear that whatever brought him to this single day, he is now monstrous” (Spisak 265). Through this humanization, readers are left to see Tyler as a person who actively thought through the decision of hurting those around him. The intensity of the narrative brings to light how troubled students can seek to inflict violence on other students. Through this humanization, readers can see a contrast between Tyler prior to this day and Tyler on the day of the shooting. This in turn mirrors reality and how students see students who inflict violence on their peers in a contemporary school setting.

Spisak also remarks that through the narrative including several perspectives, it reveals how characters are trying “to understand what is happening, where they are in relation to the emergency, and what they can do to save those they love” (Spisak 265). By creating a narrative where multiple individuals can share their stories, the plot can explore various ways of experiencing a traumatic event, which can elicit a more complete story in terms of what the students at the school are encountering.

A Call For Change: *This Is Where It Ends* in Secondary Education

This Is Where It Ends provides an opportunity for new perspectives to be present within its novel. Set in Opportunity, Alabama, this novel is one where students are left alarmed at how gun violence can occur anywhere, even in their small southern town. By combatting the stereotype that gun violence only occurs in urban areas, more awareness will be brought to gun violence that occurs in red states and rural spaces. Through this, individuals will not be ignorant about when and where violence occurs, allowing them to be better prepared to face it, if they are ever placed in the situation. More importantly, the novel also seeks to do more radical work of changing gun laws in the United States, as readers can read about the horrors that exist from a school shooting. Reading YA narratives that delve into the horrors of what has become a normal part of growing up attending schools in the US, individuals are more likely to continue conversations centered around the need to change gun legislation in the country. *This Is Where It Ends* provides an avenue for these conversations to expand amongst publishers, young adult readers, and adults as well, which expands past those who have grown numb to watching these stories play out on a television screen.

The students that are featured within the novel are more diverse than in previously written novels set in the US South, which allows for more southerners to be represented. By including characters that are not solely white males, readers can see that Opportunity, Alabama is just like their own town. Creating a town that embodies a more representative small-town America, readers can see parallels between their lives and the lives of the characters within *This Is Where It Ends*.

Gun violence and its implications surround this novel which creates a text that showcases how traumatic events impact students in the midst of the trauma taking place. While the text invokes readers to have difficult conversations regarding its content, it is necessary for young

adults to have these conversations, especially in a classroom environment. Unfortunately, school shootings occur more frequently today which makes having these conversations vital. By an educator leading these discussions, students can be better equipped to handle unforeseen situations involving gun violence.

For young adults, it is essential for them to read novels that pertain to contemporary issues like gun violence. While these books have the potential to be more mature than individuals are expecting, the novels “provide an opportunity for adolescents to work through problems and find alternative avenues for self-expression, and they may serve to bring a teen back from the edge” (VanSlyke-Briggs et al.). The narratives “can serve as a tool to explore the fears and realities of gun violence in our schools” (VanSlyke-Briggs et al.). Another way that these novels provide information to students is through the understanding of “what the ultimate refusal of socialization processes means for adolescents” and how it looks like in a school setting (Brasemann 149). For students to see the signs of the refusal of socialization, they are more likely to understand how this looks in their lives. This will help with individuals being more equipped to tell adults when they see potentially violent behavior in a classmate.

Since there is significant importance, especially in today’s climate, to discuss gun control and reform to younger generations, it is vital that adolescents are given an option to engage “in meaning conversation...about their fears of school violence” (VanSlyke-Briggs et al.). In order to engage in these conversations, educators and librarians must provide novels that deal with these issues to their students. According to *The Fictional Dimension of the School Shooting Discourse: Approaching the Inexplicable*, school shooting novels “can be seen as attempts to consider and relate to teenagers’ reality, as they provide insight into adolescent ways of communicating, processing and coping with these events” (Brasemann 149). While educators

and librarians may feel hesitant to make these novels available to their students, I argue for students to read about relevant and current issues in a classroom setting so that they can discuss them with adults and peers. In the contemporary education system where educators are left with an immense amount of anxiety and hesitation in regard to what to include in their classrooms or what to discuss to their students, educators must keep in mind the benefits that come with their students reading relevant material like this. By encouraging students to learn about issues that they have the capability to make better one day, educators and students can both learn how to be activists in their society through discussions regarding pertinent issues, like gun violence and reform.

Chapter 6: A Change in Education - Arkansas Teachers Speak Out

YA lit has undergone a significant transformation by expanding the perspectives being published in an effort to better diversify narratives. After examining four contemporary YA texts that delve into the complexity of intersectionality, I argue that the movement to highlight diversity in literature be extended to Secondary Education to create an equitable classroom for all students to feel seen and represented. This chapter will delve into the necessity of teaching regionalism critically in a Secondary English classroom and offer new ways to incorporate regionalism within critical theory and literary study. An analysis of interviews with teachers across the state of Arkansas will follow, which will include responses from teachers that examine how they perceive representation to occur in their classrooms. These interviews seek to explain how high school students engage with texts within Secondary English classrooms and to account for how, if at all, students feel represented within the texts that they read. Through the interactions students have when reading texts in their English classroom, conversations can emerge regarding how they experience living in the South –and if they identify as southern.

While recognizing that experiences are unique for each student, and while stressing that educators should recognize all voices within their classroom, this project argues that educators must engage in conversations concerning regionalism, as an important form of identity. However, these conversations need to advance new contemporary perspectives of identity as it relates to a globalized and multicultural South. By looking critically at the South as a facet of identity, individuals can reflect on their experiences as southerners and bring a light to the experiences of minority groups which have largely been kept in the dark. This chapter will aim to provide context to what critical theory is, how regionalism plays a role in critical theory, and how educators are teaching regionalism in their classrooms today.

Critical Theory: A Modern Form of Teaching

Critical theory is a teaching concept that emerged from the Frankfort School in the 1920's that "seeks to explain, understand, and interpret society" through encouraging individuals to liberate themselves away from "the circumstances that enslave them" (McKernan 424-425). The Frankfort School, among other literary groups, was interested in overcoming opposition in one's life in order to lead a more fulfilled, self-aware life. Through this development, there has been an expansion of critical theory used in different approaches in education. This approach includes, among many others, "feminism, eco theory, and queer theory, as means of explaining society and culture" (McKernan 425).

A theory that contrasts critical theory significantly is New Criticism, a teaching theory that emerged in the 1940s by the Southern Agrarians. This criticism made teachers focus on solely the text itself, as it relates to theme, meter, etc., rather than the historical context of the text too. Two of the Southern Agrarians, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, published an historical textbook, *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology For College Students*, that delves into what poetry is and how it should be taught. The "Letter to the Teacher" found within the prefatory of the textbook reads that "even if the interest is in the poem as a historical or ethical document, there is a prior consideration: one must grasp the poem as a literary construct before it can offer any real illumination as a document" (Brooks & Warren). Including this in the textbook highlights the desire for teachers to stick solely to the elements within the poem and not teach students the historical background of the text and author. I argue that New Criticism takes away from students' understanding of the text altogether, as its context and historical background are critical for readers to know in order for them to form their own interpretations of the text. For

this reason, I promote educators to adopt critical theory, specifically critical regionalism, into their classrooms so that students can understand both the context and elements of a given text.

Using critical theory as a model of guiding discussions in a classroom has grown to be controversial, as conservative, reactionary Republicans have taken a stronghold over the general public. Leaders within the Republican party have taken the term “critical theory” and have used it as an all-encompassing concept to describe how schools are seeking to indoctrinate students to perceive the world as actively trying to make students feel guilty for the nation’s history. For example, Byron Donalds, a Republican congressman from Florida, believes “that the approach just further divides Americans” (Sprunt). However, while critical theory, specifically critical race theory in this case, has been perceived by Republican party leaders to be an all-encompassing term, I use the term “critical theory” as a lens through which educators can prompt students to think differently about contemporary issues in classroom settings.

Critical theory allows educators to pose questions to their students, which allows their students to think critically about history, culture, and society. Through educators framing questions in critical ways, students can reflect and reconsider their own experiences. For example, when examining race critically in a classroom, students will be more apt to process their own racial experiences, which will encourage students to reexamine contemporary issues that exist within the nation today. Students then can engage in meaningful conversations with their classmates, which will create a more accepting classroom environment that not only promotes diversity and inclusivity, but also inspires students to work together to address the challenges that may stand in their way. Through examining literature via a critical lens, I argue that it is necessary for critical regionalism to play a role in how students in Secondary English classrooms learn about the texts that delve into different modes of intersectionality.

Regionalism As a Form of Teaching

There have been several different lenses of critical theory that have been used by educators in classrooms, predominantly lenses of race, sexuality, and feminism. However, it is also vital to include critical regionalism as a necessary mode of pedagogy. Critical regionalism seeks to provide students with an opportunity “to draw their own regional maps connecting their experience to that of others near and far, both like and unlike themselves” by learning about place through relative culture, politics, and history (Powell 8). As seen from Nic Stone’s *Dear Martin*, Julie Murphy’s *Ramona Blue*, Kate Hart’s *After the Fall*, and Marieke Nijkamp’s *This Is Where It Ends*, regionalism influences the main characters’ identity within the narrative. When reading any of these four novels, individuals are left impacted, as they can reflect on how regionalism, via the characters’ self-identification as southern, contributes to the overall meaning of the narrative. Through such reading experiences, young adults have the opportunity to reflect upon how southerners interact with the region itself, which will promote activism to fix the issues that engulf the region today.

While ideally the inclusion of contemporary YA novels would be extremely beneficial for students to read, as discussed in Chapters 2-5, it may be incredibly difficult for educators to implement contemporary YA novels into their curriculum successfully without opposition from administrators, parents, or the state, which was discussed in Chapter 1, as adults possess a strong fear of YA novels containing content that is too mature for young adults. Since canonical literature is typically used more in classroom settings rather than contemporary YA literature, it is essential for educators to include teaching critical regionalism. When educators teach regionalism through a critical lens, students can understand region as a form of identity. This will allow students to look at canonical and noncanonical texts in a new way.

Incorporating regionalism through a critical lens is essential for southern educators to initiate conversations with their students regarding their perceptions of the South and how they identify with the South. Initiating these conversations will prompt students to discuss contemporary issues alongside relevant classroom materials and texts. This can be done through canonical texts regularly taught in the classroom, such as Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960) and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), as regionalism is a major component in the narratives. By providing a space for regionalism to be included when referencing texts that students are engaging with in class, students can better understand the background of the setting in the texts and how setting functions within them. By educators teaching regionalism in this capacity, students are given a space to reflect on their region specifically. Regionalism has the capability of being a major part of one's identity, so it is vital that students understand how their identity can be connected to the region where they live.

Arkansas Educators and Their Opinions

In an effort to see if critical regionalism is being taught in high schools around the state of Arkansas, I conducted interviews with Arkansas teachers to hear how they taught a text's setting in a classroom setting. I had the pleasure of sitting down with three 10th grade English teachers, who will remain anonymous in this thesis. The teachers I spoke to reside and work across the state of Arkansas, representing Cabot High School, Genoa Central High School, and Greenland High School, and I interviewed them about their opinions regarding how they see their students interacting with regional literature. The three school districts that were chosen differ in size and location to highlight any discrepancies in opinion that the educators might have with one another. Cabot School District was selected as a school from central Arkansas with their district total student enrollment being 10,597 in the 2021-2022 school year ("Search for

Public School Districts - District Detail for Cabot School District”). Genoa Central School District was selected as a school from southwest Arkansas with their district total student enrollment being 1,208 in the 2021-2022 school year (“Search for Public School Districts - District Detail for Genoa Central School District”). Lastly, Greenland High School was selected as a school from Northwest Arkansas with their district total student enrollment being 712 in the 2021-2022 school year (“Search for Public School Districts - District Detail for Greenland School District”). These three districts, while ranging in size and location, provide valuable insight into how teachers lead classroom discussions and interact with their students, especially as it concerns teaching regionalism in the texts that they read as a class.

The questions that were asked within the interviews range between how they, the teacher, see regionalism play a role in the way their students interact with selected texts to how the educators teach regionalism in their class specifically. I also asked an essential question regarding if students interact more with texts where they feel represented. With a large portion of Arkansas being rural, it is essential for students to read texts that showcase a rural southern landscape. The teacher at Genoa Central emphasized this by saying:

With our district being pretty rural, they don’t have a concept of larger cities, most of them. Even if it is living in an apartment. Like if the characters live in an apartment and talk about hearing noises or seeing their neighbors. Most of our students don’t even have neighbors. So they don’t understand those concepts. (“Genoa Central High School Interview”)

Since it is difficult for some students to understand what urban life is like in towns like Genoa, it is critical that students get to have the opportunity to read a text that represents them regionally, while also having educators provide context to the region. The students in Greenland have similar challenges, as the teacher at Greenland pointed out “may be very difficult for students who do not understand this area or understand small town life or big city life or living on islands

in the Caribbean” (“Greenland High School Interview”). Such comments highlight that Arkansas teachers must frame texts in a way that provide necessary background for the texts that are introduced within the classroom. When teachers do this, students have the capability to grasp the concepts being taught in the classroom and further discuss these concepts with their peers. The 10th grade English teacher at Greenland High School stated within the interview that “some students naturally can just latch on” on the characters within the texts where they are represented (“Greenland High School Interview”). By teachers recognizing their contribution to having students both understand the material and relate to, they enable critical learning in the classroom. All students have different life experiences, and teachers must recognize these differences by meeting the students where they are. Teachers are trained to educate students on what life is like outside of where they are from, but it is also important for students to have the opportunity to read about their region and their heritage. Given this chance, students can learn more about their relationship with the South and, they can engage in thoughtful discussion around a region they are already immersed in.

Another important factor relating to students and their experiences in the classroom is how teachers ensure that their students feel represented. By specifically delving into the importance of region while teaching texts, Arkansas teachers have the capability of their students understanding the region where they live and where they grew up. Rather than just giving a background of what the South is and a short history behind how the region came to be what it is today, educators need to provide a space for conversations to emerge regarding the histories that center around the discrimination that existed within the region. These histories play a critical role in a formation of a text, and by students recognizing this, they will understand how all southerners are fundamental to the narrative, not just the southerners who have a voice in the

novel. The educator at Cabot High School said that through their approach, they discuss to their students “why certain characters are given more or less of a voice” in hopes to “facilitate nuanced conversations about why certain characters are treated the way they are” (“Cabot High School Interview”). These conversations work to shed light on the reasons for why the texts were written, but it will also lead to new perspectives of the text entirely. Each generation of students interacts with texts differently; through prompting unique discussions concerning how students see the South, awareness of the importance of progression, diversity, and inclusivity can be fostered.

Concerning regional identity, the classroom is an excellent way to delve into how students see themselves, as they are individuals who live in the region. The educator at Cabot highlighted this in the interview when discussing the importance of reading texts through a critical regional lens. They shared with me:

The values we hold come from our experiences and our experiences are tied to the many factors that surround us. Our regional identity is just a part of that lens, but a very important one. The world is increasingly globalized, and to have empathy for ourselves and others, we must be able to consider how regional identity impacts our development. Just like we must consider that with the characters whose lives are unfolding in the text we are reading. (“Cabot High School Interview”)

Teachers play a critical role in how students examine texts, and as we see through the educator at Cabot recognizing the importance of regional identity in texts, students can be given the space to reflect on how region and characters interact with one another in texts. The educator at Genoa High School takes a similar approach when teaching region, as they wish to provide students with different perspectives and experiences of the South in hopes that the students “are willing to personalize and take on and learn more about” (“Genoa Central High School Interview”). While the South has a complicated history with a multitude of perspectives that have been disregarded,

it is necessary for educators to point out when discussing region with their students that “we are our own people and that we make our choices” (“Greenland High School Interview”). Through this reminder, students learn from the mistakes of the past and grow an awareness of how to make their region more inclusive of all of its inhabitants.

These three educators care significantly about their students, which is reflective of Arkansas educators as a whole. However, I argue for educators to understand how they play an active role in a student’s experience with a text. By understanding the need “to not overgeneralize someone’s experience with the collective,” educators can continually make sure that they are fostering a classroom environment that is equitable and accepting to all students (“Cabot High School Interview”). In regards to how teachers can create these equitable environments for their students, it is critical for teachers “to go on those journeys [with their students] as much as they can” (“Greenland High School Interview”). By educators fostering discussions delving into critical regionalism’s role in a text, both students and teachers can go on a personal journey of learning more about themselves. This reflection will help promote an awareness of other individuals’ experiences within the South, as well as spark activism to highlight a region that is representative of all southerners.

Chapter 7: Continuing Critical Conversations on YAL in the South

The South's presence in young adult literature has continued conversations centered around what life is like in the region and how individuals personally experience it. With contemporary YA lit combatting the traditional stereotypes of the South by incorporating more diverse perspectives into its texts, readers across the country are beginning to see a new version of what the region is and the diversity that resides within it. While discrimination and injustices still exist in the South today, the region contains much more culture and diversity than what has been thought of historically. With publishers promoting the diversity that is within the South, students have a better chance to read texts where they can reflect upon contemporary issues that are surrounding the region today. This reflection connects with Reader-Response Theory, students have the opportunity to engage with texts that “may trigger responses, evoke memories, awaken emotions and thoughts that could not have been predicted by the writer” in the classroom (Probst 38). Having educators focus on the student's response after reading a text can lead to interesting classroom conversations where students can reflect on their experience engaging with the text. With contemporary YA lit also highlighting more of the ongoing societal issues that exist within the United States today, young adult readers can be better mobilized to become activists for the issues they care about. Once readers begin to communicate with their peers regarding how they can make a difference within their community, specifically how they can contribute to bringing awareness to the issues discussed in YA novels. By reflecting on their experiences living in a region where its multiculturalism has been kept in the dark, young adults can learn how to create inclusive spaces within their region.

By examining four contemporary texts, Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* in Chapter 2, Julie Murphy's *Ramona Blue* in Chapter 3, Kate Hart's *After the Fall* in Chapter 4, and Marieke

Nijkamp's *This Is Where It Ends* in Chapter 5, we have seen how the publication industry, especially for YA literature, is changing to better represent young adults across the US South through publishing stories written by diverse authors consisting of diverse characters. These characters better reflect southerners who come from diverse backgrounds, as now the characters are written by individuals who identify with them.

As seen in Chapter 2, Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* seeks to promote a new form of justice centered in Georgia, as the narrative acknowledges racial equality movements over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries. By situating the text to have a first-person perspective of a young southern Black male, readers see how racial injustice affects youth across the nation. I also argue within the chapter about the systemic racism that is present within the novel, claiming that the discrimination that Justyce experiences on the opening pages to the injustice of his friend getting murdered towards the end of the novel, brutality and injustice is evident throughout the text. However, it is presented in a way that is realistic of the racial discrimination that exists in the contemporary United States. This realistic depiction allows for people of color to read the text and feel seen, and it also allows for white readers to become more aware of the systemic discrimination that exists within the nation today. By situating *Dear Martin* in the urban South, a wide range of southern readers can see themselves within the text and gain more of an understanding of how this discrimination occurs in their region as well. I argue that representation in YA lit is important, as it affects how others see groups of people, but it affects how the groups see themselves (Elbaba). By Stone writing a novel that features a Black youth as the main character, readers of color will better likely have an experience where they see Justyce as a person who is mobilized to fight for his fundamental rights.

Discussed in Chapter 3, Julie Murphy's *Ramona Blue* highlights the complexity centered around one's sexual identity and the importance of resisting labels concerning sexual identity. Murphy writes a narrative set in Eulogy, Mississippi to illustrate how complex issues of identity interact with historically conservative regions like the South. Specifically, *Ramona Blue* emphasizes the fluidity of identity, as it relates to sexual identity and womanhood, while also showcasing how this identity paired next to one's socioeconomic status dictates how southern societies see individuals. As discussed in Chapter 4, Ramona is not a prominent member in her community, as her coming-out experience is described as "a blip" due to her low socioeconomic status (Murphy 23). Eulogy, Mississippi prides itself on elitist tendencies and the disposability of some of its lower-class community members. While there are hard truths present within the narrative that showcases systemic discrimination and the small-town southern society's deterrence against accepting everyone as they are, *Ramona Blue* seeks to provide a space for readers to better see themselves, especially for southern readers who identify with at least one of the characters within *Ramona Blue*, if not Ramona herself. The novel promotes the fluidity of identity, as Ramona's experience is unique in her own right. Readers across the US South, and around the entire nation have the capability of seeing themselves within this text, as Ramona navigates finding herself in an environment that overwhelmingly seeks to hide her. *Ramona Blue* provides a space of reflection for readers, but also a space for empowerment for individuals to not be afraid to show the world who they really are.

Kate Hart's *After the Fall* is delved into in Chapter 4 with topics centered around regionalism, sexual assault, and ideas of consent. Setting her novel in Northwest Arkansas, Hart showcases how the South is not one just one monolithic culture, but a multitude of cultures. Redefining what it means to be southern is a major theme within the novel, as Hart illustrates

how NWA mirrors other globalized cities across the nation while also still possessing a local community atmosphere. The contrast between NWA and the rest of Arkansas, and in turn the rest of the South, demonstrates the multiculturalism that is present across the southern region of the nation. Hart's novel thus debunks HL Mencken's "Sahara of the Bozart" and its claim that the region contains no culture at all. By bringing to light the diversity that is present within NWA, readers will be more apt to see NWA not as a diverse enigma of the South but an example of the multiculturalism that is present all across it. Sexual assault and ideas of consent are focal points of the novel, as Hart seeks to illustrate a young woman's perspective of growing up in an environment where sexual violence is prominent. With this type of violence prevalent on school campuses across the nation, I argue for these stories to continue to be written so that conversations can keep emerging regarding how to bring awareness to this violence. In *After the Fall*, Hart brings awareness to sexual violence and educates readers about what consent looks like. For high school students specifically, reading texts like these might be the only way for them to unpack certain traumas associated with sexual assault and violence. Because of this, it is vital that educators provide a guided, reflected space for discussions like these to emerge.

Lastly, Chapter 5 features Marieke Nijkamp's *This Is Where It Ends*, which is a narrative that elicits a gut-wrenching response from readers. The novel unpacks the events of a school shooting in Opportunity, Alabama through the perspective of multiple students from different backgrounds. Recounting these events on a minute-by-minute basis allows readers to see the inner thoughts of the students at the school, while also prompting readers to reflect on the nation's current standing on gun legislation and gun reform. Conversations concerning gun violence and school shootings need to be had in Secondary classrooms, especially as this is an issue that has become more prevalent over the last several decades. By fostering a space for

students to process these traumatic events, young adults will be encouraged to reflect on how they can create safer communities through potential gun reform.

Chapter 6 reveals the importance of educators promoting an awareness of the local environments from which students come from. Beginning this process, I contacted several districts across the state of Arkansas for the opportunity to conduct interviews with a 10th grade English teacher from each district, but for unknown reasons only three educators agreed to an interview. If given more time, I would have conducted interviews with librarians and curriculum specialists concerning how they see regionalism play a role in a student's identity and engagement in reading. Through conducting interviews with the three 10th grade English teachers across the state of Arkansas, I was able to see how regionalism is regarded as a significant contribution to students' identity formation. The educators discussed in depth about how their students interacted more with texts that represented them regionally as opposed to texts that did not. While these English teachers did not state that they included YA lit in their curriculum, they all shared that there are texts read in their classes which are set in the South. All three teachers discussed the need for educators to teach regionalism through a critical lens by focusing on new perspectives and viewpoints that have historically been taught, as they seek to showcase characters in the story that do not have a voice and provide historical background for this as well. Secondary English classrooms have the capability to direct conversations in a way that allows for students to reflect on their identity and the identities of their classmates. By educators understanding their role in the classroom, they can contribute to vital conversations concerning pertinent issues in a controlled setting. Through these efforts, students can have a better understanding of their role in the intersectionality of region and identity.

With students feeling more represented within the texts that they read, teachers need to look at texts that promote equal representation and inclusion. Since incorporating new texts into curriculums may be difficult in some school districts around the state of Arkansas, it is also necessary for educators to look towards a new form of teaching. This form of teaching offers students a new way to look at texts already embedded within the curriculum by taking an approach to understand the nuances of region and how representation fits into that region. Through educators learning how to incorporate new ways of posing questions where students can reflect on texts in a progressive way that acknowledges the complexity of both region and identity. Once this learning environment is created, students will grow an awareness of the discrimination and issues that exists within the US South and the nation today, which will lead to students becoming better equipped to fight for the fundamental rights that are guaranteed to themselves and their peers.

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