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Abstract

Young Adult Literature has often been utilized to explore reader responses especially in attention to how fiction provides space to explore identity and one's place within a larger societal context. In this duoethnography, we explored the importance of children and young adult literature's influence on our own identity development. We share our primary findings that highlight the ways reading stories has provided escape, space for self-discovery and questioning, as well as pathways of learning to cultivate empathy and work towards social justice. We agree with Ellis's (2014) argument that storytellers must share stories in a way that makes lessons or emotional effects apparent—for it is in those effects that we notice our connections to ourselves and others. We therefore share connections between our own experiences and the larger implications of reading young adult fiction as a tool for both individual and collective identity formation.

Keywords

duoethnography, identity, young adult literature, fiction

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Fictional Escapism and Identity Formation: A Duoethnographic Exploration of Stories and Adolescent Development

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Young Adult Literature has often been utilized to explore reader responses especially in attention to how fiction provides space to explore identity and one's place within a larger societal context. In this duoethnography, we explored the importance of children and young adult literature's influence on our own identity development. We share our primary findings that highlight the ways reading stories has provided escape, space for self-discovery and questioning, as well as pathways of learning to cultivate empathy and work towards social justice. We agree with Ellis's (2014) argument that storytellers must share stories in a way that makes lessons or emotional effects apparent—for it is in those effects that we notice our connections to ourselves and others. We therefore share connections between our own experiences and the larger implications of reading young adult fiction as a tool for both individual and collective identity formation.

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Speculative fiction writer Neil Gaiman (2013) discussed the power of storytelling for building our capacities to grow, positing, "Fiction gives us empathy: it puts us inside the minds of other people, gives us the gifts of seeing the world through their eyes. Fiction is a lie that tells us true things, over and over" (p. xvi). This complex process of storytelling, vulnerability, reading, and connection has the possibility to engage each new reader in a process of discovering new truths, ways of thinking, and even different ways to move and act in their worlds. Every book published, whether fiction or nonfiction, provides new opportunities for representation and exploration of identities and stories ready to be told; these representations and stories serve as vehicles for readers to learn more and grow into different people with open perspectives about how to embody the lessons gained from the texts read (Bishop, 1990, 1982; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019; Glenn et al., 2012; Sumara, 1996).

While all literature and storytelling has been noted as a space for imagination that prompts possible empathetic response and transformation (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Djikic et al., 2013; Johnson, 2012; McGinley et al., 2021; Rosenblatt, 1994, 1995; Szecsi et al., 2010), young adult literature (YAL) as a genre is unique because it meets its audience in particularly formative times in life where readers engage with their personal conceptions of identity, agency, moral development, and personhood (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). With this in mind, we examined our own experiences using autoethnographic methods and writing as a form of inquiry (see Richardson & St. Pierre, 2017) to engage in the conversation surrounding how YAL acts on its readers in transformative, emotional ways and has long-term implications for continued identity formation and commitment to social justice. In order to explore this, we organized our inquiry through the following research questions:

- 1) In what ways did reading YAL affect the development and formation of your personal identities?
- 2) How would you describe the ways YAL contributed to your capacity for empathy and commitment to social justice?

We chose to explore these questions through a duoethnographic lens. Duoethnography is a form of autoethnography—or the study of the culturally-situated self (Cain & Coker, 2022; Custer, 2014; Jones et al., 2013)—that is a co-constructed process of reflexive engagement between two scholars. By completing this duoethnographic study, we offer our own stories as a way to understand Ellis’s (2014) argument that “all stories are potentially about more than our own experience” (p. 37), and consider how researchers and practitioners can utilize YAL as a way to affirm, engage, and promote self-exploration and shifts towards long term perspective taking and growth.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

To explore our experiences with YAL, we primarily utilized Rosenblatt’s (1994) Transactional Theory of Reading to situate our intellectual, emotional, and spiritual interactions with texts at formative times in our lives. Rosenblatt argued that readers approach texts with unique backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. Readers engage with texts through lenses crafted by this experiential knowledge, which then influences the interpretations and meanings derived from their reading of the text. This experience is transactional in nature, as the reader consumes the text and sees the meaning inherent in the text shift and change with each subsequent read, creating new understandings of the same material (Rosenblatt, 1994).

Many scholars studying YAL have created metaphors of Rosenblatt’s theory for how readers can respond to and explore their own identities as represented in different texts (e.g., Bishop, 1990; Krishnaswami, 2019; Myers, 2014; Toliver, 2021). Bishop (1990) conceptualized transactional theory through the metaphor of stories as “mirrors, windows, and sliding doors” (para. 1). Through this metaphor, a reader of YAL possesses the power to connect their lived experiences and identities to the characters in the text, which can lead to narrative empathy (Keen, 2007; Koopman, 2015; Mar & Oatley, 2008). Bishop (1990) argued that books function as *mirrors* for readers who see themselves represented in the text, *windows* when readers can see outside their own experience and connect with the experiences of others, and *sliding glass doors* when the reader can step into the world created by the author (Bishop, 1990, pp. ix-xi). Though foundational, many scholars since have challenged the notion of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors, calling for further expansion of the metaphorical explanation for how books can act on their readers beyond these conceptualizations. For example, in exploring how readers can develop identity and imagination through reading, books have since been envisioned as maps (Myers, 2014), prisms (Krishnaswami, 2019), and telescopes (Toliver, 2021) expanding the metaphorical boundaries for readers’ responses.

Rosenblatt’s theory (1994), along with the metaphorical exploration and expansion found throughout these theoretical works provide us with a bridge into empirical and pedagogical studies across various educational settings for researchers, teacher educators, and classroom educators. Within research focused on k-12 classrooms, students report the use of YAL to be an engaging pedagogical practice, one that is impactful in their identity formation, and further, allows them to perspective-take with the characters’ thoughts, feelings, and logics, which enhances social imagination (Alsup, 2010; Ivey & Johnston, 2013, 2015, 2018). These findings within the k-12 realm have prompted further scholarship for teacher educators within higher education spaces who seek to use YAL as a transformative tool engaging with preservice teachers; in so doing, teacher educators hope to allow preservice teachers to perspective take

with their future, potential students (Falter & Kerkhoff, 2018; Glenn, 2014; Neville, 2020; Wender, 2015). Though much of this scholarship is situated within an educational context, we assert that wider audiences can benefit from consideration of their reading lives and how the stories we engage provide spaces for considerable questioning, reflection, vicarious learning, engagement with deeper emotional worlds, and personal growth or change.

While findings from these empirical studies can be helpful, there remains a gap in the literature for the use of autoethnographic methods to explore the unique and specific influences of YAL (with the exception of two dissertations: see Whitworth, 2014; Young, 2013) as well as a gap in studies that consider implications of time for identity development spurred by reading encounters. We aim to address this gap by contributing our own stories via this duoethnography centered on YAL and its power to sustain, grow, and challenge us as readers towards envisioning more inclusive, compassionate futures for ourselves and others in global, social, and individual contexts. We argue that our duoethnography holds global implications as we situate the ways in which we interacted with texts across space and time, how these stories helped us form our personal reading experiences, and how we at times choose to return to texts from our younger years as adults. We share how specific stories, concepts, and ideas worked across texts and time to develop our identities and postures towards stories, our worlds, and ourselves.

Methods

We adopted duoethnography because the method allowed us to “explore an individual’s unique life experiences in relationship to social and cultural institutions” (Custer, 2014, p. 1). To explore our own lived experiences and generate data, we engaged in writing as inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2017). We agree with Richardson and St. Pierre’s (2017) assertion that the process of writing, in and of itself, is a meaningful and productive action that allows the writer to explore their personal views of reality and of the Self. We shared a cloud-based document in which we each wrote episodes of memories we had from our childhood. Under and throughout each story, we asked each other questions and responded in alternating colors. Our questions often probed for deeper meanings, clarifications to thoughts, and connections to our own experiences. This document became a living file, growing in a multitude of directions as micro-conversations grew and expanded across the page. This view allowed us to not only consider those lived experiences in the construction of our identities, but also critically reflect upon how and why we feel, act, and think, both retroactively within those frozen memories and within the present (Cain & Coker, 2022; Jones et al., 2013).

Autoethnographic methods are inherently inter- and transdisciplinary, as the exploration of our own lived experiences and perceptions of those lived experiences can easily be examined by combining diverse disciplinary perspectives (Cain & Coker, 2022; Schmid, 2019). Thus, we engaged with our shared autoethnographic data with two specific lenses: Lawton as a doctoral student studying young adult literature, and Cain as an early career faculty member and methodologist. In producing our vignettes and grappling with their meanings, we hoped to illuminate the creations of our own identities and uncover the ways in which the fictional escapism that we engaged in throughout our child- and adulthood years influenced our shared drive for social justice. Upon completion of providing our vignettes, below, we then explore the implications and links between our thematic findings and existing scholarship. In this vein, Bhattacharya and Keating (2018) argued that autoethnographically exploring our consciousness allows us to “arrive at a place of clearing from where we can generate possibilities for future liberation and justice, while inviting and inspiring others to do the same” (p. 346). To this end, we sought to share our autoethnographic experiences in order to

understand the paths that we traversed throughout our own journeys as readers in hopes that educators can utilize YAL in their own classrooms.

Thematic Analysis

After crafting our stories and written reflective conversation, we met and verbally reviewed and negotiated potential themes that we felt best described the data (Barone, 2007; Reissman, 2008). This process is best described through Thorne et al.'s (2004) process of interpretive description approach to inductive meaning making:

The product of an interpretive description, or the object of the exercise, is a coherent conceptual description that taps thematic patterns and commonalities believed to characterize the phenomenon that is being studied and also accounts for the inevitable individual variations within them. (pp. 3-4)

Thus, we verbally negotiated and constructed themes from our generated data based on the thematic patterns that we felt best described our experiences. After finalizing our negotiated themes, we chose vignettes from our data that we agreed best demonstrated our findings. These vignettes are provided below in our Findings section.

Authenticity

We approached our study with multiple data quality determinants in mind. Primarily, we utilized the notion of authenticity, and sought to both engage in a worthy topic and connect to the larger implications of how the research can benefit society (Cain et al., 2022; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Specifically, we aim to engage in *educative authenticity—with an ultimate goal of increasing reader awareness of the issue* (Cain et al., 2023; Guba & Lincoln, 1989)—hoping that the vignettes provided below, and our later contextualization of those experiences within existing literature, increases reader awareness of the power of YAL in providing a safe escape, assisting us in our own personal identity development, and enhancing our ability to be empathetic and take the perspectives of fictional others. We also seek to provide *catalytic authenticity—or the ability to spark change* (Cain et al., 2023; Guba & Lincoln, 1989)—as the field of literacy studies could greatly benefit from further autoethnographic exploration. Finally, we hope to enact *tactical authenticity by providing direct, explicit, actionable implications for readers* (Cain et al., 2022; Guba & Lincoln, 1989), as we have provided direct implications for pedagogical practice in our discussion in hopes that current teachers, preservice teachers, and teacher educators can utilize our work to create change within their own classrooms (Cain et al., 2023; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Reflexive and Ethical Considerations

We met through a doctoral qualitative methods course, where Cammie was enrolled as a student within her first semester of her doctoral program. Upon completion of the two-course series, taught by Leia, Cammie approached Leia and inquired about further learning opportunities regarding autoethnographic methods. We chose to create a directed readings section for the following semester (e.g., Bhattacharya & Keating, 2018; Custer, 2014; Ellis 2014; Jones et al., 2013; Lapádat, 2017; Whitworth, 2014), where Cammie dove into literature surrounding autoethnographic methods and read extensive autoethnographic work by other scholars. As part of this coursework, she also began writing her own autoethnographic

vignettes, which also connected to many of Leia's personal experiences. As a pair, we decided to explore the emerging themes present between both experiences through this manuscript.

Cammie is a white, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual, disabled woman. Epistemologically, she identifies with an interpretivist stance as she seeks to understand the world through multiple perspectives of reality and truth (Sipe & Constable, 1996). She also appreciates and aligns with critical viewpoints as exploring the world leads her to see systems of power and seek ways to pursue justice and growth towards a more equitable, inclusive community. Reading has been an experiential, formative influence on these stances. She has read anything and everything, but spends most of her reading life with YAL, which she defined in our co-journaling as:

[YAL] is any story (fiction, non-fiction, poetry, graphic novel etc.) that centers the storied life of an adolescent character and their experiences... I also want to acknowledge the importance of not creating boxes or binaries for stories and their readers. Young readers possess the ability, agency, and imagination to grapple with much more complexity than often assumed by adults.

Leia is a white, cisgender, queer woman with a physical disability, who grew up in an impoverished socioeconomic bracket. She primarily identifies as a critical interpretivist—feeling that power and knowledge are intrinsic and inseparable (Cain et al., 2019; Pozzebon et al., 2014)—and considers herself to be a life-long reader of YAL, describing it in our co-journaling as follows:

For me, [YAL] is synonymous with character-driven, dramatic, self-defining intensity. I think it's why I like it so much! It's rare that you find adult fiction that is so intense--it's like young adults (whoever they are) still believe that a single person is powerful enough to change an entire world's fate, whereas adult fiction is like, "oh no, my husband cheated on me, what do I do?" I like the notion of CHANGE. I like how possible it is within [YAL] worlds.

As a team, we did not seek to provide any sort of bias reduction or bracketing, as we agree with other autoethnographic scholars who argue that researching from personal memory is complicated, as we each share imperfect memories shaped and distorted by our own experiences, beliefs, and lenses through which we view the world (Cain & Coker, 2022; Ellis, 2014; Lapadat, 2017). By using autoethnographic methods, we therefore embrace the very experiences, beliefs, and lenses (i.e., biases) through which we understand and conceptualize our memories. However, we also posit that our team dynamic through this process tasked us with asking each other questions both in order to better craft our vignettes and to engage in in-depth analysis of the vignettes through the other's lenses. For example, as we engaged in generating vignettes, there were many instances where each of us would probe the other for further details or clarification within our writings.

Findings

We have organized this section by our three themes: (1) YAL stories have provided us with an escape, (2) YAL provided us with a space for self-discovery and identity formation, and (3) YAL books have served as pathways toward cultivating our empathy for others and solidifying our commitment to social justice issues. As documented in our data analysis section, we have chosen vignettes from our data to illustrate these themes and provide them in this section.

Escaping Through Stories

One of the first themes that we found emerging throughout our data was YAL's ability to provide us with an escape from our daily lives. Though this theme was represented throughout all of our data, it is best demonstrated through two vignettes: Cammie's reflection about using books as a way to imagine herself in other spaces, a practice she continues today, and Leia's reflection upon her use of fiction for escape.

Vignette 1: Leaving the Known World

I'm in the back of my parents' Geo Prizm, cracking open the paperback that had pages already falling out. The gray interior of the teal car had a melted yellow crayon in the middle of the backseat where I sat. I could smell the pages of the book mixed with the spicy air freshener. My brother sat next to me playing with a happy meal toy he had left there. I was beginning to shift roles from childhood to adulthood due to my mom receiving an unexpected chronic illness diagnosis. I was an introspective, oldest child and tried to distract myself from the uncertainty of my home life shifting. My dad had always read YAL fantasy with my brother and I, so I knew I could find a space of safety within the pages that I could still be a child free from the responsibility of becoming an adult before I was ready. I enjoyed magic and the idea of magical worlds because they drew me into the story and allowed me to get lost even if just for a while. They also offered a different reality where illnesses could be healed, and I needed that hope amidst the questions with no answers for what would happen to my mom.

YAL fantasy started me on a path of learning that I could leave the world I knew and create my own path and become my own person. The stories gave me permission to love my family dearly while understanding I, like the characters on their journeys, might need to experience the world outside of my family to discover who I was becoming. Within the genre, I also found strong female characters which gave me permission and acceptance to view being a strong willed, bookworm as a positive identity trait rather than the often negatively or sarcastically associated ways I heard others view my personality. Though this helped me have more self-confidence, I still wanted to adventure out of my reality and into a new one to find the light in the darkness found in my real world.

This escape into fantasy worlds still provides me the opportunity to delve deeper into my childlike self and experience wonder, mystery, and safety in the uncertainty of what will happen next. I dive into YAL fantasy now when I'm reading really heavy academic theory or processing a lot of deep emotions in my current life. The way YAL authors continue to reimagine the world and individual and collective capacity draws me into believing that our world could in fact be a place that can hold both pain and beauty together. These stories provide inspiration for my own ideas of how to enact a different future.

Vignette 2: Fantasies of Escape

As a kid, I always dreamt of waking up one morning to find myself whisked away to rule a kingdom, attend a magical school, or find my real family. I had a difficult childhood due to growing up in a highly impoverished rural

area, so the stories of ordinary people becoming extraordinary and getting out of their situations have always appealed to me. Reading was my safe escape from life anytime life got hard, and fantasy books kept me safe from the real world I was dealing with.

For me, though, YAL gave me hope that I would find somewhere that I felt like I belonged if I just kept doing the right thing. Each time my mother yelled at me or my parents fought, I would imagine that I was living in the cupboard under the stairs, and that I would be able to leave and find a chosen family like Harry had. The YAL books that I read also made me feel like I could do anything--that I could save the world. These books provided me with my first experience with thinking of myself as though I could be a hero, and that I could make a difference in the world, and I remember feeling desperate to do something to make the world a better place because of the books that I was reading.

I primarily pursue reading as escapism these days, so I'm probably more into YAL fantasy than ever before. I read so much for work that I just want a brain break (not-as-complicated-writing) and a reality break--hence the fantasy! Back when I was a young adult, these books were calls to action. As an adult, they are an escape (while perhaps simultaneously being a reminder of those calls to action!).

A Space for Self-Discovery and Identity Formation

The second theme that we found throughout our data was the notion that YAL provides a space for self-discovery and identity formation, as stories centered on adolescent life often involve expressions of self. YAL offers readers the mental space to perspective take with characters on journeys of self-discovery and identity formation. This theme is best demonstrated by Vignette 3, where Cammie reflects on the ways YAL fiction mirrored her own experiences with spiritual questioning and grief. This theme was also strongly reflected in Leia's vignette, below, where she reflects on the connections that she made between a book series and embracing her sexuality.

Vignette 3: Exploring the Labyrinth of Spirituality

The more I read YA the more I felt the pull towards expanding my mindsets about who I could be, what I could believe, and how I could live out those beings and beliefs. At that point in my life, I had had so many different labels and expectations placed on me--oldest daughter, big sister, straight A student, competitive cheerleader, "good" Christian girl--that I was also figuring out how to really live my own life outside of these identities. All the categorization was so limiting to me and didn't match the confusion and searching for possibilities outside my known, expected roles. I found in YAL connections with characters who decided to take an identity like "good girl" and complicate it. Complicated was what being me felt like and these stories explored how friendships, family, faith, and choices between what is "right" and "wrong" could have more nuanced meanings and outcomes.

During this time, I discovered John Green's Looking for Alaska. The story is told from the point of view of Miles, who, though male to my female, finds himself, like me, in a new school environment, making friends, exploring romantic relationships, and trying to figure out who he is apart from his family

and past experiences. Miles sought after answers to the universal questions about who we become and who we allow to shape us and the way spirituality guides us on our path. Miles and I were so intricately tied up through my lived experience and my reading experience. I was struggling to determine who I wanted to be outside of the over functioning student athlete I had been due to my family circumstances up to our move during my sophomore year of high school. Though I grew up in a Christian home, I was questioning my own spiritual beliefs and ways of practicing my faith because I saw the dissonance between the love, care, and acceptance taught by Jesus versus the moralistic practice of purity culture and focus on outward appearances. Miles's experiences with his world religions teacher, Mr. Hyde connected with my experiences with my English teacher. Both asked the questions: what is the nature of being human? And what meaning can be found in the pursuit of understanding human nature? The metaphor of the labyrinth offered by Alaska to Miles as a way to explain human life gave such clarity for the seeking, doubling back, course correcting, and questioning of the spiritual life I was experiencing vs. the straight path and pat answers I had been given.

The way that Alaska delved into the "labyrinth" through books felt so real to me, too. Her and Miles' connection of searching for the Great Perhaps through stories and connection to each other tangibly described the actions in my own life. Through reading YA texts like Looking for Alaska, I was exploring my own labyrinth of self and relationship to God. This became even more true in the exploration of grief covered in the After half of the story. Again my life was in some ways parallel to Miles' experience of losing a friend. I, too, lost a friend in a car accident my junior year. Miles's story demonstrated the way my own grief didn't make sense and caused me to question why, how, what now. YA texts during this time dealt with these topics of identity and questioning in a way that felt like talking with a friend and allowed the reading experience to be more of a conversation of questions: Will I do what this character did? How has something like that changed me? What might be different if I make new choices? How can I discover my own way of living and practicing faith?

Vignette 4: My Sexuality is Divergent

When I read the Divergent series, it really spoke to me because I felt so much pressure to conform to what society wanted from me; at the time, I was still claiming to be straight, even though I had been in relationships with women before and knew that I was attracted to them. My family continued to enforce the importance of marriage and settling down with a family, at times discouraging my pursuit of a collegiate education. Similarly, society enforced the ideals of compulsory heterosexuality, with all other media exposure that I consumed flaunting heterosexual relationships as the only viable option for a happy life.

Tris being divergent, and representing multiple factions, made me start to gravitate toward the label of bisexual--something that, to me, felt divergent. Bisexuality was divergent. My sexuality was divergent. Tris wanted to be allowed to simultaneously be brave, knowledgeable, and selfless; I wanted to be allowed to simultaneously be attracted to men, women, and non-binary folks. My lesbian moms both told me that bisexuality didn't exist--it was a phase--and that I was either gay or straight. In the story, Tris is told to hide her divergence,

and I felt pressured to hide my bisexuality due to it never being presented as a valid sexuality in other spaces in my life. Divergence, for Tris, was a dangerous identity to have. Bisexuality, for me, was also a dangerous identity to have, lest I be stereotyped as a liar, slut, or attention-seeker, as bisexual people often are portrayed.

The series was so impactful for me even beyond Tris's identity as divergent. A major plot point in the story centers on Tobias Eaton, nicknamed Four, a character who has experienced childhood abuse at the hands of a loved one. I related to Four, as I had also, sadly, experienced trauma. Not only was Four also divergent, but he was also universally heralded as a strong, brave, and tough person. This was one of the first experiences that I can recall in which I encountered a story about someone who had not only survived abuse and trauma, but had thrived in spite of it. I felt that, if Four could be strong and face his trauma head-on, then I could, too.

Empathy for Others and Commitment to Social Justice

Our third theme, which was strongly present throughout our vignettes and written discussion, concerns how we reflected on developing empathy for others through reading YAL as teenagers and young adults, and how that empathy led to our shared commitment for various social justice causes. We have chosen to demonstrate this theme through two vignettes, below. Vignette 5 is about Cammie's experience of YAL series pointing her towards both reality and possibility. Our final vignette is a reflection about Leia's memories regarding how her reading of *The Hunger Games* influenced her identity as an activist.

Vignette 5: Embracing the Both/And

So I think that YA has influenced my view of the world by repeatedly reminding me of both reality and possibility. It has the unique ability to center youth voice and self-exploration that simultaneously builds emotional responses. YAL prompts both cognitive and affective empathy for me because I remember vividly how fragile that time of my life was—how much emotion, questioning, experimenting etc. that I was doing—so when characters are experiencing the angst of fitting in, trying to belong or be seen as their whole selves, exploring romantic relationships that are both healthy and unhealthy, trying to express deep questions of existential meaning or just simply trying to figure out who they want to be, I have this immediate “me too” and then “tell me more” stance. I keep turning the pages to find out what they will do and think and believe by the end of the story that might be different than my own experiences. There is a perspective taking that allows me to also engage with those moments of my own life or imagine myself in that perspective/situation. Because of this, I feel like YAL gives me access to deep compassion and self-reflection about my own thinking, experiences and how I treat others.

In this perspective taking and building of empathy for the characters, I grew to not just intake the information from the story and have “good” or “bad” feelings; I also noticed how characters organized themselves whether against the power of evil in a fantasy realm or against authoritarian dictators in dystopian imaginings of the future. I saw how friends stood up for each other and worked to counter bias when their peers slung slurs and prejudicial stereotypes their way. These choices to band together and courageously seek

what is just and true made me want to do the same in my real life. So I joined the chapter of Amnesty International at my school and spent hours writing letters to government officials, attended peace rallies, and started to find my own band of friends who cared about society and the ways we as individuals could organize together to do even a small part in the work towards change.

It is this domino effect that has given me the critical thinking skills now to be able to hold the truth that these series I read shaped me to care about perspective taking and empathy, while also acknowledging the truth that many of them are problematic and flawed in the ways they only center certain voices. However, I have to hold the both/and of this reality because it has led me towards progressively reading more and discovering the voices that were missing from my bookshelves as a child. The love for this genre and its inextricable tie to who I am has given me the gift of texts that challenge and expand my concepts of what social justice is and what it means for readers positioned in my specific identity.

There is something very specific about the commentary on the world that YAL offers—I don't have exact words to explain it, but it calls out injustice, hate, and gaslighting in very explicit ways. At the same time, YAL texts also offer a new vision of moving forward with characters empowered to change things in their world or in YAL fantasy there is a creation of a different world. YAL for me encompasses the tensions of both/and and pushes me as a reader to always be aware and name what's true in reality while directing my gaze at what could be and what part my choices might play in the possibilities of a more just future.

Vignette 6: Districts and Class Divisions

*I remember reading *The Hunger Games* in grad school, and feeling like our society was headed toward something similar in the far out future due to class division within the United States and the way that the super wealthy keep us divided and fighting each other instead of working together to overthrow them. As someone who had grown up in poverty, it hit incredibly close to home. I could easily imagine myself being forced to perform for sustenance, and those feelings were easily reflected in my daily life in which I was living in poverty under my assistantship wages and performing the role of graduate student to an acceptable extent to ensure that I could remain in my program. Was I avoiding being attached to others in my cohort due to the fierce (and, in retrospect, purely assumed) drive for competition amongst my peers?*

Just as Katniss began to notice the signs of those in power maintaining division amongst the districts in order to ensure that they were unable to rise to power and overthrow the capital, I began to notice the ways that those in power within our own society reinforce division to keep those of us who are not in power distracted. For example, here in the U.S., I have always felt that our class divisions mean that we often have more in common with those in our current socioeconomic status (SES) ranking than those who are in other social classes. I'm white, but I have more in common with a person of color who is also in a lower-SES rank than I do with a white person who is in the highest income bracket, but I was taught in schools that race was one of the primary dividing factors of our society.

*That being said, I would be remiss to not also mention how *The Capital's* treatment of the districts throughout the world of *The Hunger Games* varied,*

just as those in power treat those of us in lower SES groups differently based on our identities. Am I more favored as a white person, just as some districts were more favored due to their geographical location or production? Absolutely. Katniss worked with people from other districts, and, as a team, they were able to overthrow President Snow's authoritarian regime. I felt the activist in me awaken—I wanted to work with people from other backgrounds in order to overthrow our own oppressive forces. This drive for justice infiltrated all areas of my life, and I began to seek out ways to unite with others across our differences in order to improve our lives.

Discussion

Though we grew up in different settings, these vignettes demonstrate that our experiences in reading and engaging with YAL share similar undertones and can work across time, space, and contexts; we explored episodes of memory in which we used YAL as an escape, how we embraced the perspectives of fictional characters within our own identity development, and in how we used the perspectives of fictional characters to cultivate empathy and solidify our commitment to justice. As evidenced in these connections across our vignettes, stories exist as more than our own experiences which have implications for both the application of autoethnographic methods, the pedagogical use of YAL in educational settings, and the importance of YAL reading for individuals in various global contexts. As Ellis (2014) posited, “If culture circulates through all of us, then how can autoethnography not connect to a world beyond the self?” (p. 34). It is our hope that our shared vignettes of our experiences allow others to begin exploring the various ways that readers internalize themes within literature and process them through their actions and identities. After all, “readers provide theoretical validation by comparing their lives to ours, by thinking about how our lives are similar and different, and the reasons why” (Ellis, 2014, p. 195).

Based on these findings, we argue that researchers, practitioners, and individuals can utilize YAL to affirm, engage, and promote self-exploration, perspective taking, and growth in the classroom, research settings, and within their own reading lives. Through YAL, characters from diverse and multifaceted identities authentically share their experiences which can effectively connect to students' growing understanding of who they are and who they can become. Readers' critical selection of texts centered on these varied identities can affirm individuals who seek to find their life experiences within the pages of a book as well as promote perspective taking for those who read outside of their own experiences. Through this process, we suggest readers' engagement with YAL allows them to explore their beliefs, personalities, emotions, and ways to act within their worlds.

We have organized this discussion section in order to explore connections between each of our themes, existing literature, and the implications that we see as inherent in those connections.

Using YAL as an Escape

In considering vignettes 1 and 2, we see our separate but similar use of YAL to escape connected to the transactional model (Rosenblatt, 1994) as well as the metaphors for how books effect on their readers as sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990) and telescopes (Toliver, 2021). We described our specific identities (as readers) and how those identities interacted with the authors (through the text). Both of us approached the reading of YAL with particular personal contexts that prompted our exploration into the story world—Cammie spoke of using YAL to escape family illness and the related responsibilities that followed, and Leia reflected upon stepping

out of some of the hardships she faced due to socioeconomic struggles and seeking a space for belonging. These experiences and identity forming incidents created specific, individual transactions with the texts that led to long term emotional attachments to YAL and future reading choices. Cammie's reflection,

I enjoyed magic and the idea of magical worlds because they drew me into the story and allowed me to get lost even if just for a while. They also offered a different reality where illnesses could be healed, and I needed that hope amidst the questions with no answers

demonstrates Bishop's (1990) assertion that, "readers have only to walk through [a sliding glass door] in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created by the author" (para. 1). Similarly, Leia's reflection, "The YAL books that I read also made me feel like I could do anything—that I could save the world. These books provided me with my first experience with thinking of myself as though I could be a hero" further connects to Toliver's (2021) extension of Bishop's (1990) original metaphor as YAL fantasy texts were acting as telescopes helping Leia, "to amplify the unseen by magnifying things that are too far away for us to see on our own" (Toliver, 2021, p. 29). Both of these brief examples point to the experiential reality of how YAL storytelling can create safe, imaginative worlds for readers to explore their needs and hopes as individuals.

Based on these connections, we argue that despite current pushes to ban YAL texts, script curricula, and limit research conducted with diverse YAL as to avoid divisive topics, YAL inclusion in various individual and collective spaces offers the affirmative, imaginative support to readers experiencing new levels of collective and individual traumas. The past few years of living through the continued public health crises of a global pandemic, racial violence, and record mental health struggles call for creative solutions that put our individual and collective needs at the forefront. We echo the calls of Bishop (1990) and Toliver (2021) for more diversity and representation in the types of sliding glass doors and telescopes available to readers in the classroom. Further, we acknowledge that our experiences come from positions of privilege, as characters within YAL are often white, cisgender, and heterosexual; it may be easier for us to see our identities mirrored within YAL texts than other readers from marginalized backgrounds (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2020). Finally, we suggest that though realistic fiction is often prioritized in our current publishing world, researchers, educators, and individual readers would benefit from considering the opportunities and possibilities for speculative fiction, fantasy, and other forms of imaginative storytelling to build skills and knowledge, as well as connect to our individual and collective emotional, mental, and spiritual lives.

YAL's Role in Self-Discovery and Identity Formation

While YAL provided a vehicle for escape, we also connected the YAL stories that we read to our own personal experiences of self-discovery. Illustratively, Cammie's discussion of the influence John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (2005) had on her spiritual and identity formation gives insight into Rosenblatt's (1994) transactions working as Myer's (2014) extended metaphor of books as maps or cartographies offering children places to go with their experiences. For example, Cammie's reflection, "The more I read YA the more I felt the pull towards expanding my mindsets about who I could be, what I could believe, and how I could live out those beings and beliefs" demonstrates Myer's (2014) argument that children and young adults "are indeed searching for their place in the world, but they are also deciding where they want to go" (para. 20). For Cammie, reading YAL helped her process where she wanted

to go with her spiritual beliefs and identities ascribed to her—it expanded her cartography outside of the limits of her original map and prompted questions which formed a new geography of self-discovery. Leia also discussed the importance of YAL reading for expanding the map of sexual identity, reflecting,

Society enforced the ideals of compulsory heterosexuality, with all other media exposure that I consumed flaunting heterosexual relationships as the only viable option for a happy life. Tris being divergent, and representing multiple factions, made me start to gravitate toward the label of bisexual—something that, to me, felt divergent. Bisexuality was divergent. My sexuality was divergent. Tris wanted to be allowed to simultaneously be brave, knowledgeable, and selfless; I wanted to be allowed to simultaneously be attracted to men, women, and non-binary folks.

In this vignette, she also demonstrates Myer's (2014) metaphor in the experiential mapping of new destinations outside of the limitations of society's map.

In our analyses, we illuminate the vital nature of reading during our childhood and adolescence and how stories chart a pathway towards identity for readers. Therefore, reading YAL can be used as a tool across settings to push against dominant narratives offered to children and adolescents by their families, religious communities, and larger worlds. Therefore, researchers, educators, and individuals s have the opportunity to not only center stories of self-discovery for diverse characters, but to further provide more opportunities for “felt tensions” (Wender, 2015, p. 53) and “moments of pause” (Ginsberg, 2019, p. 601). YAL provided space for productive, reflective struggles for us as readers in ways that significantly shaped who we were becoming and who we are today. We, therefore, task others s with considering how they might use YAL to encourage creating new cartographies for themselves and explore how their identity formation connects them to the larger narrative of liberation for themselves and others.

YAL as a Pathway Toward Cultivating Empathy and Solidifying Commitment to Justice

As readers have transactions with texts (Rosenblatt, 1994), our vignettes also point to the ability for narrative empathy (Keen, 2007) to be developed through the reading process. For example, Cammie explored this in her vignette, sharing,

YAL prompts both cognitive and affective empathy for me because I remember vividly how fragile that time of my life was—how much emotion, questioning, experimenting etc. that I was doing—so when characters are experiencing the angst of fitting in, trying to belong or be seen as their whole selves, exploring romantic relationships that are both healthy and unhealthy, trying to express deep questions of existential meaning or just simply trying to figure out who they want to be, I have this immediate “me too” and then “tell me more” stance.

This demonstrates Keen's (2007) assertion that

Character identification often invites empathy, even when the fictional character and reader differ from each other in all sorts of practical and obvious ways, but empathy for fictional characters appears to require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling. (p. xii)

In addition to this, Leia's vignette supports Keen's (2007) observation about the importance of timing and context in invoking empathetic responses from readers; often readers can be situationally affected due to cultural and social experiences. She shared,

I remember reading *The Hunger Games* in grad school and feeling like our society was headed toward something similar in the far out future due to class division within the United States and the way that the super wealthy keep us divided and fighting each other instead of working together to overthrow them... I could easily imagine myself being forced to perform for sustenance, and those feelings were easily reflected in my daily life in which I was living in poverty under my assistantship wages and performing the role of graduate student to an acceptable extent to ensure that I could remain in my program.

These vignettes show YAL fiction's influence on our ability to perspective take and connect to characters in ways that provoke empathetic responses.

Through this reading response, both of our vignettes provided insight into how we connect our empathetic responses to solidified commitments towards social justice issues and prosocial behavior. Cammie specifically discusses how seeing characters organize, prompted her own journey towards understanding her part in collective justice movements. She shared,

I saw how friends stood up for each other and worked to counter bias when their peers slung slurs and prejudicial stereotypes their way. These choices to band together and courageously seek what is just and true made me want to do the same in my real life. So I joined the chapter of Amnesty International at my school and spent hours writing letters to government officials, attended peace rallies, and started to find my own band of friends who cared about society and the ways we as individuals could organize together to do even a small part in the work towards change.

This vignette demonstrates Johnson's (2012) argument that, "reading narrative fiction allows one to learn about our social world and as a result fosters empathic growth and prosocial behavior" (p. 154). Leia's vignette also supports our connection to the literature as she shared,

Katniss worked with people from other districts, and, as a team, they were able to overthrow President Snow's authoritarian regime. I felt the activist in me awaken—I wanted to work with people from other backgrounds in order to overthrow our own oppressive forces. This drive for justice infiltrated all areas of my life, and I began to seek out ways to unite with others across our differences in order to improve our lives.

This vignette demonstrates how YAL fiction enlivens critical thinking and prompts action as Glenn et al. (2012) suggested; "[readers] can use critical literacy to move beyond simple awareness of the presence of social, cultural, racial, and gender-based injustices and transform their thoughts into catalysts of change" (para 19). Our analysis of these vignettes reveals how awareness of justice issues in our society through our reading experiences moved us to explicit actionable steps towards activism.

We argue that readers, researchers, and educators should utilize YAL across contexts and spaces to promote emotional response, perspective taking, and prompt critical literacy practices. Readers who incorporate YAL fiction about current social issues can help themselves and others connect with characters across differences, confront their own biases and

stereotypical thinking, influence identity development, and grow in empathetic response. Further, this theme suggests that awareness to readers' emotional responses within the various settings can foster inquiry into how these responses move readers towards action. Providing exploration and reflective space allows for individuals and communities to work together to build social imagination and moments for interrogating the links between their emotions and embodied decisions in action.

The Power of YAL

By sharing our stories, we hope to demonstrate YAL's ability to open dialogue within researcher, educator, and reader communities about the influence reading possesses on the values, beliefs, identity formation, mutual connection, and choices of readers. We hope that our experiences offer insight into how one might utilize YAL to build connections with themselves and others as well as support overall flourishing by offering reading opportunities that span emotional, social, and intellectual growth. By connecting our personal experiences to established theoretical and metaphorical understandings of the importance of representing different cultures, identities, and beliefs, we aim to create a clearer way to foster a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect for all individuals within our research, learning, and global reading communities. We also acknowledge that this inquiry remains limited by our own positionalities and experiences; however, we use this work to advocate for the expansion and inclusion of more voices, research, and stories to be shared in order to better understand the questions of how books act on their readers and how those readers act in our world. Storytelling remains a powerful tool in the world today, and it is imperative that researchers, teachers, and individual readers consider how the act of reading can be used to open minds and create growth in individuals and systems.

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