

“WE CANNOT BE FREE UNTIL THEY ARE FREE”:
REWRITING THE NARRATIVE OF IMMERSION
IN *ALL-AMERICAN BOYS* AND *MONSTER*

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in English

Middle Tennessee State University
May 2019

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DEDICATION

To

My Students

Past, Present, and Future

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank the professor that sparked my interest in the scholarship of young adult literature and helped me realize my vision of this thesis: Dr. Ellen Donovan. Thank you for introducing me to *Monster* in my first graduate seminar. Reading *Monster* came at a pivotal time in my career as a teacher and, obviously, has stuck with me in the three years since that course. Thank you for agreeing to mentor me through this journey; for reading long, convoluted drafts; for talking through ideas; for believing in my work; and for helping me strengthen my skills in my writing and my teaching.

Secondly, I would like to thank Dr. Laura Dubek, my second reader and my first to run to for anything related to African American literature and alliterative leanings. Thank you for schooling me in African American literature and for sending me in the correct direction to create the connections between the books I was interested in writing about and the theory necessary for a solid argument. Thank you for always being willing to discuss ideas, answer questions, and suggest further reading. Your class and your mentorship has informed my writing, my teaching, and the way that I perceive the world. I hope to live in yours and Dr. Donovan's example as educators and thinkers.

I would also like to extend a thank you to the other graduate faculty and students who have helped facilitate my thinking for this project: Dr. Rhonda McDaniel, for the rigor of her Research and Bibliography course that aided in my research of Walter Dean Myers; Amy Harris-Aber and Rachel Donegan, for acting as writing companions,

supporters, and question answerers; Dominique Chesser, for helping me prepare for my defense, and Amy Kay Nickerson, for showing me that working full-time as a teacher and taking a full load of graduate courses was possible.

To my family and friends, thank you for understanding my three-year long hiatus from being present in our relationships and for missing nights out, birthday parties, and family reunions. Thank you for supporting me through my educational journey and welcoming me back into your hearts and homes after my absence.

To my current and past administration at Riverdale High School, thank you for your understanding and your encouragement. To Stephen Wayne, thank you for encouraging me to begin my master's degree in the first place. To Ryan Nance, thank you for encouraging your staff to strive for excellence and for understanding that giving our best varies by day. To Dr. Maryam Hill, thank you for championing me through the low points of this last year and believing in my ability to get things done. Your support has given me the strength to finish strong.

To Edie Urness-Pondillo, Jennifer Sprinkle, Riki-Lynne Willmon, Chelsea Davis, Bliss Buehring, Malisa Slaughter, and Caron Peck: my past and current colleagues and (most importantly) friends. Thank you for always being willing to share your lesson plans with me and for listening to me gripe about lack of sleep. Thank you for lifting me up when I fall and reminding me that I am capable.

To my students, past and present. Thank you for giving your best even when I could not some days. Thank you for not rolling your eyes when I constantly referenced

my thesis work or made connections between our studies and my course work. Thank you for reminding me why I began teaching and making me want to continue on in this profession. Thank you for inspiring me with your stories and your grit.

And finally, to Dave Cerchiaro. Thank you for home cooked meals after my three-hour night classes and after-work writing marathons. Thank you for being an equal partner in our home and our relationship. Thank you for reminding me that I would finish even when I was not sure. Thank you for the being my constant champion and for always finding a way to make me laugh.

ABSTRACT

Authors of African American literature have addressed the traumas caused by systemic racism—slavery, Jim Crow, or mass incarceration—in order to protect and uplift the next generation. This thesis contributes to the discourse surrounding literary portrayals of the effects of systemic racism on individuals and communities by exploring how authors of contemporary African American young adult literature—Walter Dean Myers, Brendan Kiely, and Jason Reynolds—utilize Robert Stepto’s paradigm of the narrative of immersion in order to respond to the calls of Richard Wright and James Baldwin. Myers’s *Monster* (1999) terminates the narrative of immersion to confirm Wright’s call from *Native Son* (1940) that institutional racism in America’s criminal justice system thwarts the ability of young, Black males to develop into contributing members of society. Kiely and Reynolds’s *All-American Boys* (2015) answers the call issued from Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* (1963) that in order for Black Americans to gain true freedom and equality, white Americans must confront and overcome their fear and racial ignorance. Reynolds and Kiely write their young adult novel in dual chapters from the points view of Rashad, a young Black male, and Quinn, a young white male. Rashad’s quest embodies a contemporized narrative of immersion for young Black readers trying to understand their role in modern America whereas Quinn’s journey teaches white readers to recognize their privilege and take action against racial injustices. Though the didactic impulse has been studied in works of African American young adult texts and Stepto’s work has been applied to adult African American texts,

there has yet to be thorough study of how Stepto's paradigm contributes to the didactic impulse. My project challenges scholars to fill the gap left by this neglect.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

African American authors have addressed traumas regarding the fear of losing a child—whether that child be sold, lynched, or jailed—and created a community through their work by making these seemingly private and isolating experiences a part of the public sphere. Through the art of written expression African American authors such as Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin call out for change in order to protect and uplift the next generation. James Baldwin expresses his opinion on this practice by affirming that “Literature is indispensable to the world The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even a millimeter, the way a person looks at reality, then you can change it” (qtd in Sims 1). Baldwin’s conviction is not unique to him or his era. Brendan Kiely and Jason Reynolds, co-authors of *All-American Boys* (2015), and Walter Dean Myers, author of *Monster* (1999), have taken up the torch Baldwin and his forebearers passed down.

Despite the commonalities in Kiely and Reynolds’s and Myers’s purpose, scholars do not typically place the works of Reynolds and Kiely or Myers within the African American tradition; instead, authors such as Kerri Gallagher Blumenstetter, Choinka Coleman-King, Susan L. Groenke, and Michelle Youngquist, discuss Myers in the context of educational value for students and pedagogical techniques for teachers. Young adult literature scholars, including Yolanda Hood, Kathleen T. Horning, R.D. Lane, Alfred W. Tatum, and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, focus on Myers in the context of the importance of diversity in children books while Rudine Sims Bishop, Lori Akins Goodson, and Marti Parham zero in on Myers’s use of social realism. Despite

the aforementioned scholarly trends, Don Latham's 2010 article discusses Myers's autobiography *Bad Boy: A Memoir* (2001) in context with Frederick Douglass and Richard Wright through a close reading of related themes: literacy and masculinity. Tim Engles and Fern Kory follow suit with their co-authored article which applies the frameworks of double-consciousness, identity formation and the white gaze to Myers's young adult novel *Monster*. Latham's as well as Engles and Kory's articles are pivotal in that they open the door to thinking critically about how Myers synthesizes elements of African American literary traditions with conventions of young adult literature. Reynolds and Kiely (discussed here as a pair because I focus solely on their co-authored novel) have yet received scholarly attention for *All-American Boys* despite its critical acclaim and prizing.

Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely's *All-American Boys* and Walter Dean Myers's *Monster* are both highly prized books in literature. Both received a Coretta Scott King Honor, and *All-American Boys*, fittingly, received the first award issued in honor of Myers: The Walter. Obviously, critics and readers of African American young adult literature have accepted these novels as a part of their body of work, but how, specifically, do the texts speak to and for themselves in the African American literary tradition? What conventions or paradigms of African American literature do the novels display, and for what purpose do the authors use them? How does the duality of their audiences—African American and white, woke and dreaming—affect how the authors use African American literary conventions? In my study, I argue that in response to calls issued by Richard Wright and James Baldwin *Monster* and *All-American Boys* revise and

re-voice an African American paradigm, Robert Stepto's narrative of immersion.

Furthermore, these novels should be considered contemporary calls that invite their teen audiences to become immersed in a literate community.

In *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1979), Stepto defines the narrative of immersion as

. . . an expression of a ritualized journey into a symbolic South, in which the protagonist seeks those aspects of tribal literacy that ameliorate, if not obliterate, the conditions imposed by solitude. The conventional immersion narrative ends almost paradoxically, with the questing figure located in or near the narrative's most oppressive social structure but free in the sense that he has regained sufficient tribal literacy to assume the mantle of an articulate kinsman. (167)

Stepto offers an analysis of W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) work as a narrative of immersion. According to Stepto's heuristic, Du Bois becomes an articulate kinsman, an immersed member of the African American communities existing within the Jim Crow South, by becoming literate in the culture he was ignorant to during his isolation spent in the spatial North. According to Stepto, the articulate kinsman "must be willing to forsake highly individualized mobility in the narrative's least oppressive social structure for a posture of relative stasis in the most oppressive environment, a loss that is only occasionally assuaged by the newfound balms of group identity and that "these 'shared epiphanies' were previously unavailable to the questing figure when he or she was adrift in a state of solitude" (Stepto 167). Reading *Monster* and *All-American Boys* as

narratives of immersion necessitates a revision of the paradigm that specifies what it means to achieve tribal literacy. The questing figure in young adult literature must become aware of their double consciousness in order to become an articulate kinsman.

Du Bois describes double consciousness as

a peculiar sensation [. . .] this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (16-17)

Because of their young age, each protagonist of *Monster* and *All-American Boys* must first recognize his developing double consciousness before he can understand his position as an isolated individual and begin participating in rituals, known as *communitas*, in order to become a member of the community. Stepto's narrative does not require adult protagonists to develop a double consciousness as a part of their journey to kinship; however, it is a crucial step for the young adult characters in *Monster* and *All-American Boys*. *Communitas* rituals in Stepto's paradigm are experiences in which the isolated individual learns about or takes actions toward becoming a member of the community. Partaking in *communitas* allows the protagonist to join a community which aids in his ability to survive his double consciousness and—in some cases—pierce the Veil of Color. Du Bois explains that African Americans are “born with a veil” and goes on to use the veil as a symbol for the color line that separates the Black experience from the white

experience (Du Bois 16). If something thwarts the protagonist's ability to participate in *communitas* and therefore prevents him from joining or rejoining a community, his double consciousness acts as a detriment to identity formation and he remains on his own side of the veil, unable to see beyond it. *Monster* and *All-American Boys* illustrate three revisions of Stepto's journey to immersion—one unsuccessful and two successful.

Understanding the responses of *All-American Boys* and *Monster* requires first listening to the calls issued by their literary ancestors: Wright and Baldwin. Myers and Reynolds both acknowledge the influence Wright and Baldwin had on them as authors attempting to write about the Black experience. Myers recalls that, upon reading *Native Son*, he felt as if he were given permission "to write about black life . . . write about [his] own community and my own life" (Pettus). Similarly, the first book Reynolds ever finished—the book that inspired him to write—was Richard Wright's 1945 memoir *Black Boy* (Lewis) and encourages his own audience to read Baldwin when they are "really, really ready" (Reynolds). The relationships between the contemporary authors and the canonical authors illustrate a common practice in African American literature—the practice of signifying works of their literary forebearers. In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1989), Henry Louis Gates says of signification in African American writing that "Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting to sculpture to music and language use" (*Signifying* xxiv). Gates argues that "Black writers also read each other and seem intent on refiguring what we might think of as key canonical topoi and tropes received from the black tradition itself" (xxii). He calls the tendency of Black authors to repeat and revise tropes

of their previous writers as “tropological revision” (xxv). By participating in tropological revisions, contemporary authors enter into what Gates and Smith refer to as the “chain of tradition” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (xliv). Through signifying, Myers and Reynolds enter into a conversation with their heroes.

Myers’s *Monster* responds to a call issued by Wright while Kiely and Reynolds’s *All-American Boys* responds to a call issued by Baldwin. Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) illustrates the popularization of the African American protest novel and the immergence of social realism through Bigger Thomas’s experiences with institutional racism in the Black Belt of Chicago and the criminal justice system just as Myers’s Steve Harmon experiences institutional racism on the streets and in the prison system of Harlem. Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* (1963) calls for the racial education of white Americans so that true integration can take place which Kiely and Reynolds illustrate in their novel. *Monster* and *All-American Boys* respond to *Native Son* and *The Fire Next Time* by signifying—repeating and revising—tropes from the earlier novels. Each contemporary text responds to its earlier call while also issuing a *cri de coeur* to their young adult audience. These contexts and connections create space for the study of *Monster* and *All-American Boys* as new responses to Wright and Baldwin as well as new calls that rewrite the narrative of immersion not only for their characters but their audience’s as well.

My thesis is divided into three sections. In Chapter One, I analyze Walter Dean Myers’s *Monster* through two points of focus: as a terminated narrative of immersion and a response to Wright’s *Native Son*. *Monster* illustrates the many ways in which a questing figure can be kept from achieving tribal literacy. Myers’s work disrupts the traditional

quest for immersion by preventing the protagonist, Steve Harmon, from developing a sense of self or community due to the time spent under duress in the penal and judicial systems. *Monster*'s post-modern structure, written dually from Steve's perspective in his diary and as a screenplay, contributes to my reading of the novel as a thwarted version of Stepto's quest as the narrative does not take place linearly as is customary.

Through diverging from the tradition identified by Stepto, Myers revises the narrative as a response to the call issued by Wright's *Native Son*. Both Steve and Bigger in *Native Son* yearn for an identity and a community, but systemic racism and lack of community support stymie both young men. *Monster*—in title, in narrative, and in genre—signifies Wright's *Native Son* by creating space for the young adult novel in the rich canon of African American literature. Lastly, it is *Monster*'s thwarted narrative of immersion as well as the novel's parallels to *Native Son* that make it a cautionary tale. Despite the tale's hopeless ending, *Monster* attempts to teach its audience what paths not to choose in hopes that readers will join a safe and supportive tribe. Using Michelle Alexander's discussion of the trauma of incarceration and community respectability in *The New Jim Crow* (2012) and Engles and Kory's discussion of the white gaze and triple consciousness in "What did she see?": The White Gaze and Postmodern Triple Consciousness in Walter Dean Myers's *Monster*, I will argue that Myers attempts to scare his teen audience into participating in socially acceptable (i.e., acceptably black) behaviors by effectively traumatizing his protagonist.

Chapter Two begins with a close reading of *All-American Boys* as a dual-revoicing of the narrative of immersion. Reynolds and Kiely chose to write their young

adult novel in dual chapters from the points of view of Rashad—a young Black male—and Quinn—a young white male. Rashad’s quest embodies a contemporized narrative of immersion for a young Black reader trying to understand what it is to be Black in modern America whereas Quinn’s journey teaches white readers to recognize their privilege. The authors’ decision to include the journey of a young white male from racially ignorant to knowledgeable of his privilege to part of an inclusive community, revises Stepto’s original narrative which traditionally describes the journeys of Black protagonists. The inclusion of Quinn’s perspective responds to Baldwin’s call in *The Fire Next Time* that “We cannot be free until they are free,” thereby placing *All-American Boys* in conversation with canonical works of African American literature and young adult African American literature (10). Reynolds and Kiely’s re-voiced narrative and conversation with Baldwin constitute the novel itself as an artifact of *communitas*—a ritual in the journey to becoming tribally literate. Like *Monster*, *All-American Boys* is an artifact of *communitas* for its child readers, but this time *communitas* that applies to both Black and white children.

My conclusion examines the didactic impulse in African American children’s literature as a call to its audience—an act that ritualistically opens the door to a literate tribe of both Black and white children. While some scholars have argued against didacticism in children’s books, African American literature for children necessitates didactic works due to the racial history of the United States. To support this stance, I utilize Claudia Mill’s *Ethics and Children’s Literature*, Katharine Capshaw-Smith’s *Children’s Literature of the Harlem Renaissance*, and Michelle Martin’s *Brown Gold:*

Milestones of African American Children's Picture Books, 1845-2002. I then argue that, as Mills notes, “The morally and politically charged agenda of inclusiveness was neither sought nor achieved at the expense of literary quality” (5) because works of African American children's literature utilize complex paradigms and literary devices. I call to future scholars to dig into contemporary works of African American literature for children and teenagers in order to bridge this gap in scholarship.

CHAPTER II: “THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US”: THWARTING THE
 NARRATIVE OF IMMERSION IN WALTER DEAN MYERS’S
MONSTER

Myers’s *Monster*—published within the context of the Clinton administration’s introduction of longer mandatory sentencing, implementation of no less than 85% of time served, and the three-strikes rule—illustrates the assertion of Pat Nolan, a politician and prisoner rights activist, that the tightening of these laws acted—and still acts—like a scythe ripping through African American communities (13th 23:51). Because of these laws, between the 1970s and 2010s, the US prison population rose from 356,292 in 1970 to 2,306,200 in 2014 with one in three Black males likely to become imprisoned (13th 14:58 and 50:43 and 1:23:13). The sharp rise in the Black prison population leads to the destruction of millions of Black men. In 2010, Michelle Alexander released *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, an examination of the causes and effects of the epidemic that is mass incarceration. Myers fictionalizes the detrimental effects of mass incarceration through the story of Steve Harmon. Steve lives in Harlem and makes a series of decisions that lead to his arrest for a murder that takes place during the burglary of a local convenience store. Exposure to violence in jail and racism in court traumatizes Steve, and despite his acquittal at the end of the novel, he loses his sense of self and community which leaves him isolated and enslaved by the stigma of his arrest.

Monster illustrates the breakdown of the narrative of immersion when the stigma of criminality thwarts every opportunity for *communitas* with either an immediate or

extended kinship; furthermore, the novel conveys the dire consequences the lack of community has on a young Black man's ability to successfully withstand the white gaze and double consciousness. Moreover, Myers responds to Richard Wright's *Native Son* by terminating the traditional narrative of immersion, a move which illustrates the consistent damage done to young Black people while enslaved by the criminal justice system. Ultimately, *Monster* calls for a solution to the problems of the late 1990s that are different but so similar to the racist trauma caused by slavery and Jim Crow.

Steve's Initial Isolation

Myers's protagonist, sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon, lives in social isolation despite his attempts to exist within two separate communities: one in the domestic sphere and one on the streets. The duality of Steve's life actually disables him from fully incorporating himself into either community because he does not fully understand or commit to the rituals of either. Readers recognize that Steve originally exists as a member of a domestic sphere because in his flashbacks he is an active member of his art school—he makes films—and tries to be a good older brother to Jerry who wishes Steve could be Batman so Jerry “could be Robin” (*Monster* 58; all subsequent references to this edition), yet this life does not fully satisfy Steve because it is not Batman whom Steve wants to emulate. Instead, Steve “want[s] to be tough like [King]”—a local gang member (96). Therefore, he finds himself hanging on the streets of Harlem trying to impress tough guys and gang members like King and Osvaldo even though Osvaldo questions Steve toughness by insulting his “faggot” school and claiming he “ain't got the heart to be nothing but a lame” (81-82). Steve's attempt to join King and Osvaldo's street

community contradicts the *communitas* of his domestic life and acts as a catalyst for his journey. By showing Steve's struggle to exist in the domiciliary world while making a name for himself on the streets, Myers speaks to the crisis he says many youths experience when coming of age: "When you're young, you make mistakes . . . The same kids that would have been in trouble and gotten a stern talking-to are now going to jail for fifteen or twenty years" ("Why Write for Young Adults?" 16). Steve's mistake occurs when he starts hanging out with Osvaldo and King on the street instead of at home with his brother or at school with his film club—two past times acceptable to the domestic community. Myers leaves Steve's reasoning for branching out from his family unit ambiguous to illustrate how seemingly small decisions can lead to catastrophic consequences.

Myers illustrates Steve's duality through the post-modern, multi-modal structure of the novel. Steve's narrative alternates between his personal journal entries—printed in a font that emulates handwriting—and Steve's autobiographic screenplay which allows *Monster*'s structure to mimic Myers's motif of duality. Engles and Kory argue that, "The two-pronged narrative structure reflects the complexity of Steve Harmon's rhetorical situation" and that it comments "on the latent racism of the American judicial system" by utilizing "two distinct modes of narration: Steve's journal, which seems to offer direct access to an emotional truth, and his film script, which offers an overtly crafted telling of his story" (52). Furthermore, Engles and Kory posit that Steve's screenplay conveys his internalization and response to the White gaze and his manipulation of the audience to distance himself from the crime (57). Engles and Kory's interpretation supports my

reading that the two modes of narration also play a memetic purpose in illustrating Steve's developing double consciousness and his inability to complete his journey to becoming an articulate kinsman. Steve's story jumps from journal to film script, from internal to external, from self-image to the image imposed by the White gaze, from present to past, from Steve's experienced reality to his fantasies. He cannot follow Stepto's path from isolation to learning to articulate kinsman. Myers's two modes of narration reinforce the disassociation that occurs at every stage of Steve's constantly thwarted journey and forces Steve to remain a liminal character without a community. Due to Steve's young age, he needs the support of a community to encourage the development of his "dogged strength" which would keep the white gaze and his double consciousness from destroying his identity, but he fails to fulfill the *communitas* rituals to remain a member of the domestic community or to join the street community (Du Bois 17).

A Failed *Communitas* Ritual: Steve's One Wrong Choice

Steve's choice to join a street crew and commit a crime acts as anti-*communitas* for a domestic community, yet his choice elicits a question: why would Steve choose to break the law? Michelle Alexander argues that we should not be shocked by the tendency of young, Black males to join gangs or participate in criminal activity because "these young people do what all severely stigmatized groups do—try to cope by turning to each other and embracing their stigma in a desperate effort to regain some measure of self-esteem" (172). Joining a gang, then, becomes an act of preservation for the self while rejecting a gang is an act of social deviance. For Steve, joining a street crew means

gaining the support and respect of a community that he idolizes as a source of strength. Steve hangs around Osvaldo and King and other members of the delinquent racial underclass who goad Steve into participating in a rite of passage—a corner store robbery. In a flashback, the readers witness Osvaldo, a member of the gang The Diablos, patronizing Steve. After disrespecting Steve’s “faggot school” (80), Osvaldo goes on to challenge Steve’s masculinity by asserting, “You ain’t got the heart to be nothing but a lame. Everybody knows that. You might be hanging out with some people, but when the deal goes down, you won’t be around” (82). Osvaldo challenges Steve’s manhood and place in society by implying Steve does not have the masculinity or strength to actually commit a crime which, according to the rituals of Osvaldo’s tribe, initiates a boy to manhood or an isolated individual into a community. This challenge is a common provocation in Steve’s neighborhood. When King, a member of the Bloods¹, asks Steve to be a look out, he does so by pushing “All you got to have is the heart. You got the heart?” (150). King and Osvaldo taunt Myers’s protagonist to step away from the socially acceptable domestic community and accept the responsibilities of manhood on the streets. These conversations urge Steve to partake in a coming-of-age ritual for gang members that, while not as violent as Osvaldo’s gang’s initiation of slashing a stranger in the face with a knife (108), does include criminal activity. In an attempt to show that joining a gang is not the proper avenue for obtaining the dogged strength Du Bois says it takes to withstand the twoness caused by the white gaze, Myers uses this taunting and criminal

¹ While Myers does not explicitly name King’s gang “The Bloods,” King calls Steve “youngblood,” a term which gives the impression that King is a member of the Bloods and implies Steve’s eagerness to please these young men he idolizes as tough (51).

activity as trauma that cautions his intended audience away from communities that would encourage such violent and dangerous behavior.

One interpretive conundrum of *Monster* is whether Steve agrees to participate in King's planned robbery as the look out or whether his presence at the store is merely coincidence. When interviewed about *Monster's* ambiguity, Myers stated "I wanted the reader, given the facts of the case and having the benefit of Steve's inner thoughts, to reach their own decision. In my mind I was sure of it" ("Why Write for Young Adults 8). Myers goes on to note that "[t]here were decisions that Steve made and some he clearly should have made, but didn't" (10). My reading assumes Steve's original intention was to participate in the robbery in order to prove his masculinity to Osvaldo but then chose to abandon his position when the crime began. Steve hints at his involvement by recalling King's proposition to "have heart" (*Monster* 150) and again in his journal when he writes:

I thought about writing about what happened in the drugstore, but I'd rather not have it in my mind. The pictures of Mr. Nesbitt scare me. I think about him lying there knowing he was going to die. I wonder if it hurt much. I can see me at that moment, just when Mr. Nesbitt knew he was going to die, walking down the street trying to make my mind a blank screen. (128)

Steve purposefully tries to distance himself from the crime in his journal—note that he was walking away from the store when Mr. Nesbitt knew he was going to die and not

inside the store—but also puts himself close enough in proximity to the murder to have had something to do with King’s robbery.

Steve’s choice to abandon his crew mid-robbery ruins his chances of participating in future acts of *communitas* to join their gang. The kinds of *communitas* in which Osvaldo, King, Bobo, and, eventually Steve, partake, are a trauma in themselves and the shared experience is supposed to bind the boys together; however, something keeps Steve from fully participating in the ritual robbery. While Myers keeps the extent of Steve’s role in the robbery ambiguous, Bobo’s testimony makes clear that Steve did not complete his role as look out (190-195). Steve’s decision to back out of his initiation shows that, somewhere beneath the bravado, he understands the destructive and dangerous nature of his prospective community with King. Unfortunately for Steve, the state of New York believes that he completed his initiation—that he was a key participant in a robbery that led to a man’s death—which leads to his second test of choosing a life-affirming and sustaining community and becoming literate in their ways: either joining a community of inmates in a culture of violence or fighting to prove his innocence in the attempt to rejoin a safe extended kinship with the domestic community outside of the prison walls.

In jail, Steve further distances himself from King’s and Osvaldo’s gangs by refusing to participate in and being disgusted by the physical and sexual violence that enlists a new inmate as a member of a jail gang. Steve resists becoming like his fellow inmates, distancing himself from the violence they find normal both in his journal and in his screenplay. In his journal he comments “Violence in here is always happening or just about ready to happen. I think these guys like it—they want it to be normal because that’s

what they're used to dealing with" (144). Finding a community or a family in jail sometimes means that an individual must join a gang, and to join a gang, one must participate in an act of *communitas* typically involving violence. In season three of the podcast *Serial*, Sarah Koenig dives deep into the penal and justice system of Cleveland, Ohio. She notes that the gang, "The Heartless Felons [,] were invented in Cleveland's juvenile lockups" (8, 20:33) and that her main interviewee, a teen named Joshua, "had already passed all of the tests to get absorbed into the gang. They call it getting twisted . . . Twisted is getting in the family" (8, 20:44-20:53). Koenig goes on to report that "If [inmates] don't want to be perpetually bullied and assaulted if [they] want to be able to eat . . . [they] try to join. And to join, you have to get three bodies, assault three people" (8, 20:53-21:05). In *Monster*, Steve does not participate in getting twisted but witnesses physical and sexual assaults (57, 153-154). By not participating in the violence, Steve signals that he does not wish to join the community of gangs within nor continue attempting to "be tough" like King and Osvaldo (130). Steve's lack of community within jail signals that he remains in a sort of limbo, a literal isolation behind bars, and the trauma he incurs by not joining a jail community as well as the stigma that comes with the reputation of jail leaves him unable to fully rejoin his family upon his release. Steve's incarceration disrupts the narrative of immersion, preventing a successful, life-affirming immersion and tribal identity.

The Stigma and Trauma of Incarceration Thwarting *Communitas*

The isolation Steve attempts to mitigate by joining a community with King's gang, leads to trauma, yet it is incomparable to the trauma Steve experiences while in

lock-up and under trial. Through Steve's emotional and often disturbing journal entries, Myers portrays how the penal system causes Steve to turn inward and question his sense of self. On the second day of his trial, Steve's journal entry reports that if someone heard him shouting in his sleep, he "would look weak to everybody. It's not good to be weak here" (63-64). Even in the short period in jail while awaiting trial, Steve learns that adult men cannot show weakness, or they will be beaten. In her study "Violence and Victimization During Incarceration: Relations to Psychosocial Adjustment During Reentry to the Community," Schappell found that "victimization during incarceration was associated with increased antisocial behavior, emotional distress, and PTSD. Feeling unsafe while incarcerated also was positively related to antisocial behavior and emotional distress" (374). They noted, "[t]hese outcomes do not appear to dissipate with time and can impact an individual's chance of successfully transitioning back to the community" (361). Though fictional, Steve's journey depicts the findings of Schappell's study through depicting Steve's journey of immersion as thwarted partially due to the trauma incurred by witnessing violence such as that in his own cell while incarcerated. Steve writes in the camera directions in his screenplay

CUT TO: CU of STEVE lying on his cot. The sounds [of a beating] are in his cell, but he is not the one being beaten. We see the whites of his eyes, then we see him close his eyes as the sounds of the beating stop and the sounds become those of a sexual attack against the inmate who was beaten. (57)

The witnessed violence traumatizes Steve, which subsequently prevents him from participating in *communitas* rituals with his family or his lawyer. Myers aims to show the schism such trauma causes in Steve's psyche and development.

Steve undergoes a series of interactions during his trial that could have acted as *communitas* rituals that give Steve the "dogged strength" to survive the White gaze and become literate in the ways of a domestic kinship, but because of his status as a young Black male and the "de facto white supremacist framework of the US judicial system," (Engles and Kory 50) the judge, the jury, the prison guards, and even his own family and lawyer automatically judge Steve as guilty. Myers's uses the assumption of guilt to effectively terminate Stepto's narrative of immersion by "depicting the psychic damage [the white gaze] causes [Myers's] protagonist" (49). Steve's lack of confidence in his identity as well as his inability to overcome his double consciousness and subvert the white gaze leaves him unable to join a community upon release.

The white gaze omnipresent in America's judicial system forces Steve to develop double consciousness and his lawyer, Miss O'Brien, acts as the catalyst when she explains her job as his defense attorney: "My job is to make sure the law works for you as well as against you, and to make you a human being in the eyes of the jury. Your job is to help me" (*Monster* 16). In order to provide Steve as an "acceptably black"² defendant for

² According to Engles and Kory, O'Brien's instructions to Steve regarding behaviors that make him appear human—paying attention to the trial, not doodling, emphasizing a separation from King and Osvaldo—imply that he needs to act "acceptably black," defined by Bob Garfield as "being nonthreatening to white people inclined to feeling threatened by black people. It means standard English, clean-cut appearance . . . and the most Caucasian features possible" (qtd in Engles and Kory 57-58).

the court, Steve's lawyer educates Steve in the white gaze and asks him: "You're young, you're Black, and you're on trial. What else do they need to know?" (79). Her instructions force Steve to confront a double consciousness that, heretofore, he was not aware of. He begins to question his identity as he knows it because the prosecuting attorney depicts him as a "monster" to the judge and jury (21). Myers depicts Steve's disassociation with his sense of self in a journal entry where Steve does not recognize himself in the mirror and wonders "if [he] will look like [himself] when the trial is over" (2). Steve's disassociation from his physical body compounded by his courtroom experience with the white gaze in the court room thwarts his ability to develop as a young man as well as his ability to participate in acts of *communitas* because he does not have a community supporting him in learning how to achieve the dogged strength it takes to survive double consciousness. Steve's "twoness" traps him in a version of himself that prevents growth or change, making Steve both static and liminal in character. His lack of self—compounded with the need to perform in the court room—leaves Steve vulnerable to the trauma of the white gaze that permeates the criminal justice system in America.

Steve's double consciousness is not the only factor that eliminates his ability to participate in *communitas*, for the stigma that comes with being labeled a criminal in America bars the domestic community from participating in the rituals as well. Michelle Alexander borrows sociologist Devah Pager's explanation to explain the stigma of criminality:

those sent to prison 'are institutionally branded as a particular class of individuals' with major implications for their place and status in society.

The 'negative credential' associated with a criminal record represents a unique mechanism of state-sponsored stratification. (151)

The state-sponsored stratification expands the stigma of having been arrested beyond the court room and the jail cell and into the rest of the community. The stigma even extends into the family dynamics of previously convicted individuals as ex-felons are seen as pariahs. Alexander states, "the prison label is not something that a black man in the ghetto can ever fully escape" (162). In *Doing Time on the Outside: Incarceration and Family Life in Urban America*, Donald Braman reports that, criminals and families of criminals "are not shameless; they feel the stigma that accompanies not only incarceration but all the other stereotypes that accompany it—fatherlessness, poverty, and often, despite every intent to make it otherwise, diminished love" (219). Incarceration, like slavery, destroys Black familial ties.

The effects of stigma against accused criminals terminates Steve's parents' ability to participate in *communitas* even though they try; their perception of their son has shifted because of his arrest, leaving them, like him, questioning his identity. Steve's interactions with his father on visitation days exhibit the impact of the stigma of incarceration on their attempt at *communitas* and the effect of these failed attempts on Steve's psyche. Steve's father cannot reconcile the image he had of his son before he was arrested with the image of his son as someone capable of crime. Steve's father cries and reminisces to Steve about all of the dreams he had for his son as a baby—to go to his alma mater, to play football, to do all of the things that he could not do—but these dreams were shattered with Steve's arrest (110-113). Steve's father has internalized the

stigma of his son as a criminal and realizes that if Steve is found guilty of this felony, he will not have the opportunity to fulfill the dreams of his father. Even though Steve has not been found guilty, the assumption of guilt has broken down the relationship between father and son, which further destabilizes Steve's sense of self and his ability to rejoin the domestic community once he is released from prison. His father cannot offer support to Steve as *communitas*; instead he allows the stigma of criminalization to thwart their opportunity to bond. Steve's arrest has taken away his father's role as a parent to love, support, and protect his child, therefore, punishing the father for the alleged crimes of the son.

The stigma of Steve as a criminal extends to his relationship with his mother as well, and her inability to protect her son contributes to their inability to achieve *communitas*. The criminal justice system overpowers her attempts to protect Steve at every turn. The police take away her power to protect him when they abduct him from her apartment without telling her their reasoning or their destination (125-126). Furthermore, when she attempts to bring a Bible to their visit, the guards search it and tamper with her attempt at *communitas* (146). These power seizures take away Steve's mother's role as protector and cause her to feel an intense separation from her son which causes her to mourn him "as if [he] were dead" (158). The inability of Steve to connect with his mother, compounded with his inability to connect with his father, terminates Steve's ability to recognize himself and he questions whether or not he is "fooling" himself (148). If at any point Steve's mother had been able to see her son as she had before his arrest, Steve may have been able to project her maternal support thereby

helping him realize that he has the ability to overcome the trauma and stigma of incarceration, but the criminal justice system does not allow her to humanize his experience. Like Steve's father, Steve's mother has been victimized and made powerless.

The tearful encounters with his parents do nothing to improve Steve's confidence in himself; in fact, they do the opposite. In the journal entries after his father's visits, he confides that the relationship with his father is "like a man looking down to see his son and seeing a monster instead" (116). Even after his release, Steve believes that his father does not know who he is anymore:

After the trial, my father, with tears in his eyes, held me close and said that he was thankful that I did not have to go to jail. He moved away, and the distance between us seemed to grow bigger and bigger. I understand the difference. My father is no longer sure of who I am. He doesn't understand me even knowing people like King or Bobo or Osvaldo. He wonders what else he doesn't know. (280-281)

The distance between Steve and his father illustrates Steve's status as an isolated individual. Losing the trust of his family affects Steve's sense of self and his confidence that they will see him as anything other than a criminal. He confesses that the distance between himself and his father "is the reason why I take the films of myself. I want to know who I am. I want to know the road to panic that I took. I want to look at myself a thousand times to look for one true image" (281). Steve cannot join the same community in which his parents participate in in society because he cannot gain their trust or successfully work through the stresses he endured while in prison; as a result, Steve's

story ends inconclusively as he attempts to comprehend that society sees him as a monster because of the color of his skin. His struggle with his double consciousness and the lack of community support disables Steve from achieving his position as an articulate kinsman because he has no means to obtain tribal strength or sustenance.

In his book *Racial Myths and Masculinity in African American Literature*, Jeffrey B. Leak states that there is a “shared [story] of black invisibility in the larger social world and in the criminal justice system” (69). Myers depicts a form of invisibility through Steve’s experiences on the streets and in the court room just as Ernest J. Gaines’ canonical *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993) does through the character of Jefferson. Myers and Gaines both illustrate how being young and Black make Steve and Jefferson invisible in the court of law because of the stereotype that all young Black men are criminals, thus taking away their identity. Gaines uses Jefferson’s trial and imprisonment as a ritual space for trauma, but unlike *Monster*, he shows that the trauma of trial and incarceration can be withstood through the support of a community. *A Lesson Before Dying* opens with Wiggins, the narrator, explaining that “I was not there, yet I was there. No, I did not go to the trial, I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be” (Gaines 3). A college educated Black male, Wiggins understands that Jefferson’s trial, taking place in the Jim Crow South, has no chance of being fair. The trial acts as a ritual of its own that protects the white tribe by putting on a performance of justice. Jefferson, the Black man on trial for the murder of a store clerk, might as well have never been in the court room. The verdict would have been the same either way because he is young, Black, and male. The racism that Jefferson experiences has not diminished in the fifty

years between Jefferson and Steve's trials, it only changes from overt to covert. While Steve experiences a longer trial than Jefferson and actively observes his surroundings, evidenced in the details of his screenplay, he and Jefferson share the experience of invisibility. In one of Steve's journal entries he confesses that

It's funny, but when I'm sitting in the courtroom, I don't feel like I'm involved in the case. It's like the lawyers and the judge and everybody are doing a job that involve me, but I don't have a role. It's only when I go back to the cells that I know I'm involved. (*Monster* 59)

The guards generally ignore him; his lawyer, O'Brien, becomes uncomfortable when he asks about her life or tries to make conversation; and the prosecuting lawyer, Petrocelli, lumps him in with the rest of the defendants (21). The covert racism psychologically traumatizes Steve and leaves him aware of his twoness as he cannot identify himself as evidenced when he looks into the mirror in his cell and does not recognize his face (1) and when he takes video after video of himself in order to understand what others see when they look at him (281). Steve and Jefferson both fall victim to what Leak describes as the "myth of black criminality" or the stereotype that all young Black men are dangerous criminals, and trauma exaggerated by this myth, together with the distress of physically being in jail, affects the deconstruction of their sense of self (Leak 59).

Steve's prison guards could alleviate the trauma of incarceration and the stress of Black invisibility by participating in *communitas* with Steve as one of Jefferson's guards does with him. However, Steve's guards' lack of empathy adds to his dehumanization and "the profound peculiarity of the sensation" of his double consciousness (Du Bois 16).

Gaines's novel highlights the ability of a prison guard to participate in *communitas* with an inmate in a way that successfully humanizes the incarcerated protagonist, Jefferson. Paul, a white prison guard, befriends Jefferson while he waits on death row and participates in *communitas* by helping Jefferson listen to the radio; by facilitating visits with Jefferson's aunt, teacher, and preacher; by being with Jefferson during the execution; and by carrying out Jefferson's last wishes. In the end, Paul proclaims that Jefferson was the "strongest man in that crowded room" during the execution (Gaines 253). Participating in *communitas* with Jefferson gives Paul the opportunity to join the Black community by becoming friends with Jefferson's teacher—Grant Wiggins (255-256). Their friendship, then, may become a source of strength for Grant's and Paul's own journeys of immersion.

The kind acts of *communitas* portrayed by Paul do not extend to Steve's guards in Myers' novel. Throughout *Monster*, the prison guards play a key role in dehumanizing Steve—adding to his trauma and inability to survive his double consciousness. Steve's guards dehumanize him by trivializing his trial, calling it a "motion case. [The lawyers, judge, and jury] go through the motions' then they lock them up" while they have Steve "handcuffed to a U-bolt" (*Monster* 14). Unlike Paul, Steve's guards never turn to his side or acknowledge his humanity. Myers's depiction of Steve's relationship with the guards depicts Alexander's theory that criminals "are the one social group in America we have permission to hate. In 'colorblind' America, criminals are the new whipping boys. They are entitled to no respect and little moral concern" (141). Because Steve is treated as less than human by the prison guards, he has no chance of forming a relationship with them.

Instead of attempting to have a civilized discussion with Steve, one guard asks if Steve wants in on a bet: “Hey, we got a pool going. I bet you guys get life without the possibility of parole. The guys on the next block think you’re going to get 25 to life. You guys want in on it?” (266). Steve’s fate is a game to the guards. If the guards had tried to communicate with him as a human and attempted to cross the color line as Paul does in Gaines’s novel, then Steve may have had the opportunity to initiate a conversation that develops the formation of an inclusive community. The dangerous and racist philosophy behind institutional racism has seeped into the brains of Steve’s prison guards; therefore, they do not even attempt to have a human relationship with their prisoners. They, like Steve’s parents, are robbed of the opportunity to build a relationship with Steve because of the stigma of criminality.

In some ways, the opening statements of the prosecuting attorney, Petrocelli, manipulate Steve’s sense of self and search for identity more than his thwarted experiences of *communitas* with his parents or the prison guards. She opens with a generalization: “Most people in our community are decent, hardworking citizens who pursue their own interests legally and without infringing on the rights of others. But there are also monsters in our communities—people who are willing to steal and to kill” (21). This either/or comparison makes Steve’s identity crisis clear during the trial: is he a man or a monster? Similarly, in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Jefferson’s lawyer dehumanizes his client during the opening statement: “Gentlemen of the jury, look at him--look at him—look at this. Do you see a man sitting here? . . . Why I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this” (Gaines 7-8). In both novels, the audience “witness[es] the

emasculating tactics of white America in relation to black men” (Leak 64) The boys have to come to terms with this emasculation to find the truth in how they perceive themselves versus how the court and penal system perceive them. Jefferson immediately assumes his identity as a hog until Wiggins and his aunt finally convince him of his humanity before his execution. However, Steve does not have a teacher like Wiggins nor an aunt capable of supporting him; therefore, Steve never successfully rejects the label of “monster” thrust upon him. At the end of the trial, Steve’s screenplay cuts to a close up that conveys Steve’s internalization of the label: “His image is in black and white, and the grain is nearly broken. It looks like one of the pictures they use for psychological testing, or some strange beast, a monster” (*Monster* 276-277). Despite his acquittal, Steve’s self-image harkens to Petrocelli’s description of him—a monster.

Monster keenly portrays in fiction the reality and common story shared by young Black males in America. In 2014, Jennifer Gonnerman, a journalist for *The New Yorker*, wrote “Before the Law,” in which she recounts the story of Kalief Browder. The 17-year-old was walking home from a party in 2010 when he was accused of stealing a backpack, stopped, frisked, and arrested—an experience not uncommon for boys in his demographic as evidenced through the tragic deaths of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Trayvon Martin. Browder was taken to Riker’s Island and held for three years in the Robert N. Davoren Center. In 2013 he was released from prison, never having undergone a trial, and forced to enter the world as a man who had spent most of his late adolescence in solitary confinement. In 2015, Kalief Browder committed suicide. In the article written before his death, Browder told Gonnerman, “Before I went to jail, I didn’t know about a

lot of stuff, and, now that I'm aware, I'm paranoid. I feel like I was robbed of my happiness." In Browder's case and in Steve's case, attaining knowledge through the traumatic experience of incarceration left them with the inability to rejoin society upon their release from prison. Both boys, real and fictional, were left with a feeling of alienation after spending time in prison. Steve still questions who he is and how others see him five months after his release. In his journal, he writes, "I want to know who I am. I want to know the road to panic that I took. I want to look at myself a thousand times to look for one true image" (*Monster* 281). Myers leaves the ending of Steve's story ambiguous—will he figure out who is and be able to join a community, or will he forever languish in isolation? By fictionalizing a contemporary situation, one with (too) many real-life examples of tragic endings, the novel suggests that boys like Steve has a rough future ahead of him.

Steve's Enduring Isolation: Terminated *Genius Loci*

Stepo's journey of immersion ends successfully with the protagonist "located in or near the narrative's most oppressive social structure but free in the sense that he has gained or regained sufficient tribal literacy to assume the mantle of an articulate kinsman" (167). Furthermore, as an articulate kinsman, the protagonist

must be willing to forsake highly individualized mobility in the narrative's least oppressive social structure for a posture of relative stasis in the most oppressive environment, a loss that is only occasionally assuaged by the newfound balms of group identity. (167)

Steve cannot return to his individualized mobility—dwelling liminally between the domestic community and the street community—after his release from prison, and he cannot rejoin his original domestic community. Though his family unit may not be the “most oppressive social structure” if seen as an entity of its own, its roots in New York City—where Kalief Browder’s experience took place—Steve’s family has always existed in an oppressive location that has never been able to protect him. Despite wanting to, Steve cannot return to his family because the trauma of his incarceration and the victimization of his parents has destroyed the family unit. Miss O’Brien’s dismissal of Steve’s gratitude symbolizes his lack of community. Her physical movement away from his hug sends Steve into the depths of an epistemological crisis that he cannot withstand because of the lack of community support (*Monster* 276-277). Moreover, Myers illustrates Steve’s family’s inability to reform through the exchange between father and son:

After the trial, my father, with tears in his eyes, held me close and said that he was thankful that I did not have to go to jail. He moved away, and the distance between us seemed to grow bigger and bigger. I understand the distance. My father is no longer sure of who I am. He doesn’t understand me even knowing people like King or Bobo or Osvaldo. He wonders what else he doesn’t know. (280-281)

Steve ends his journey isolated from his family and obsessed with trying to understand how the world views him. He belongs to no tribe, dismissed from society, like so much of our Black male population.

Call and Response: Myers Answering Wright’s Protest Call in *Native Son*

“He is poor. He is black. And you know what we have made those things mean in our country.” (Wright, *Native Son* 403)

Written during the height of Jim Crow in 1940, Richard Wright’s *Native Son* illustrates the civic cost of society’s refusal to empower or protect African American youth. Wright’s work depicts the internal struggle of his protagonist, Bigger Thomas, as he journeys from relative safety in the Black Belt of Chicago to the inherently dangerous white neighborhoods. Working as a chauffeur to the Daltons, a family made rich from renting slum apartments to African Americans, Bigger’s crisis comes from internalizing the white gaze on his double consciousness and realizing the extent of his powerlessness as a Black man in America. In “Black Boys and Native Sons,” Irving Howe notes “The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever . . . Richard Wright’s novel brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear, and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture” (Howe). Bigger’s character has become a trope whose epistemological struggles Myers mirrors in his contemporary novel for young adults: a young, Black male trying to safely navigate a society which sees him as a monster.

If we follow Gates’s paradigm of signifying, Steve exists as a modern-day Bigger Thomas, a tropological revision: he finds himself involved in a corner store robbery, charged with murder, incarcerated, dehumanized by the prosecuting lawyers, and isolated from his community. Writing in different eras and for different audiences, Myers and

Wright each write protest novels about the treatment of African American men in society through conveying the experiences of each young man at the mercy of a hegemony which disregards their humanity. Both authors hold society at fault for the stunted growth of their young protagonists.

Myers revises the corner store robbery trope in *Native Son* in order to signal that the socio-economic issues and rituals of committing crime to demonstrate masculinity still exist for Steve in the 1990s as they did for Bigger in the 1930s. Bigger chooses not to participate in the robbery of Blum's shop because he comes to the conclusion that "He was a fool for wanting to rob Blum's just when he was about to get a good job. Why hadn't he thought of that before? Why take a fool's chance when other things, big things, could happen?" (Wright 34). Bigger then justifies his choice to not go through with the robbery by asserting his physical power over his friend Gus, which illustrates to his friends that even though he's not going to commit the crime, he is not a coward (Wright 36-41). Myers's signifying the corner store robbery in *Native Son* to convey that proving masculinity and using criminal activities as *communitas* for street communities exists in modern society as it did in the 1940s. Steve is coerced into participating in a robbery by King—a Bigger-esque character who asserts his power over Steve by threatening Steve's masculinity (*Monster* 150). Before the robbery, Steve wants to "be tough like [King]" so he shows up the day of the robbery (130). Despite Bigger and Steve each choosing to not fully participate in the robberies, both boys find themselves in prison and on trial for felony murder and at the mercy of their prosecuting lawyers' acid tongues.

Despite the sixty years between Bigger's and Steve's trials, Wright and Myers both convey the prejudicial tendencies of the judicial system and the similarities in trauma incurred by being the subject of the white gaze in court. Steve's prosecuting attorney, Petrocelli, utilizes similar dehumanizing tactics as Bigger's prosecuting lawyer, Buckley in order to prove the guilt of the young Black men they attempt to charge with felony murder. Buckley chooses to parade the Black body of Bessie, Bigger's girlfriend whom he raped and murdered, in front of the jury in order to demonstrate the monstrosity of Bigger's crime. Bigger realizes that "To offer the dead body of Bessie as evidence and proof that he had murdered Mary would make him appear a *monster*; it would stir up more hate against him" (Wright 331, my emphasis). In *Monster*, Petrocelli mimics Buckley's strategy by bringing in pictures of Mr. Nesbitt, the shop owner murdered in the thwarted store robbery, in order to show the jury what Steve is capable of doing (*Monster* 68). Myers signifies Buckley's moves in the court room through Petrocelli, however Myers revises these moves to display the subtlety of modern systemic racism in the judicial branch. Instead of wheeling the actual body of Mr. Nesbitt through the court room, Petrocelli utilizes photographic evidence, but the purpose remains the same: to warp the image of Bigger and Steve. Furthermore, both Buckley and Petrocelli dehumanize Bigger and Myers through their language in addressing the judge and jury.

Myers signifies Wright titularly by pulling the title *Monster* from Buckley's closing arguments in which he calls Bigger an "infernal monster" who, beyond a doubt, deserves the death penalty for his actions (Wright 412). Wright illustrates the magnified racism of the prosecuting lawyer in order to convey the corruption of the American

judicial system, as Bigger's defense lawyer Max explains, "A man's life is at stake. And not only is this man a criminal, but he is a black criminal. And as such, he comes into this court under a handicap, notwithstanding our pretensions that all are equal before the law" (Wright 382). Myers's Petrocelli uses the same tactics; however, Myers curtails the overtones of Petrocelli's racism in order to convey how racism has gone from explicit in Bigger's time to implicit in Steve's. Petrocelli subtly dehumanizes Steve by broadening her assertion from specifically calling Steve a monster to juxtaposing "decent, hardworking citizens who pursue their own interests legally and without infringing on the rights of others" to "monsters in our communities—people who are willing to steal and to kill, people who disregard the rights of others" (*Monster* 21). Whether through Buckley's forthright racism or Petrocelli's subtle racism, the dehumanization of Wright's and Myers's protagonists indicates a profound crisis in identity.

Myers signifies Wright's call for action through the defense attorneys' strategies for defending their clients. Max takes the road of most resistance by attempting to teach the judge about institutional racism in the judicial system, illustrating all the ways the white hegemony should take responsibility for making Bigger a murderer. Max points out to the judge that "[Bigger] is poor. He is black. And you know what we have made those things mean in our country" (Wright 403). Max attempts to shift the blame for Ms. Dalton's and Bessie's murder from Bigger to the Court, but the Court does not accept this responsibility. Max loses the argument and Bigger loses his life. O'Brien's form of defense is subtler. Instead of shifting the blame of the crime and pointing out the racism of the court, O'Brien attempts to shift how the jury views Steve by "presenting [him] as

someone the jurors can believe in” (*Monster* 216). O’Brien tells Steve, “You’re young, you’re Black, and you’re on trial. What else do they need to know?” (79). O’Brien then coaches Steve in behaviors to exhibit in court to shift how the judge and jury perceive him. During a meeting before Steve testifies, O’Brien tells Steve

I’m going to take this cup and place it on the table. Then I’m going to ask you some questions. When I like the answers you give me, I’ll leave the cup face up. When I don’t like the answers, I’ll turn it upside down. You figure out what’s wrong with the answer you gave me. (*Monster* 218)

Steve’s attorney trains him in this manner because she is “afraid that the jury wouldn’t see a difference between [Steve] and all the bad guys taking the stand” (116). While O’Brien’s subterfuge wins Steve his freedom, it still causes Steve to lose his sense of self which is a metaphorical death.

Wright’s *Native Son* issues a call to action to change the systems that oppress African Americans, and through signifying major tropes from Wright’s novel, Myers takes up his call. However, Myers revises Wright’s protest novel by giving Steve agency in the beginning of his thwarted narrative of immersion: agency to choose to stay within his family’s domestic community. While Bigger is guilty of murder, *Native Son* portrays his crimes as inevitable products of living under white hegemony. Max argues Mary Dalton’s death was “an act of *creation!*” (Wright 400; emphasis in original). According to Wright, Bigger had no choice but to commit his crimes as “he was a product of a dislocated society; he was a dispossessed and disinherited man” (“How Bigger was Born” 446-447). To some degree, Myers’s *Monster* disagrees with Wright. Myers warns against

this lack of responsibility by the protagonist. In “Why Write for Young Adults?” Myers reveals that “[i]t is the language of values that I hope to bring to my books. I want to bring values to those who have not been valued. I want everyone to keep their values in mind and to live by them” (17). Viewing *Monster* from this perspective conveys Steve’s thwarted journey of immersion as preventable. According to Myers, if Steve had lived by a certain set of values, he would not have known King or Osvaldo, and, therefore, he would not have been arrested. Myers “wanted the reader to consider the consequences of Steve’s actions and understand the enormity of the risks involved” (“Questions for Walter Dean Myers” 6). Unlike Wright, Myers faults his protagonist for the actions that led to a thwarted journey of immersion. Despite this difference in fault, each author protests racism in the judicial system as seen through the detrimental toll incarceration and trial takes on their protagonists.

Issuing a Call

Myers issues a call to his readers to be wary of what our nation calls justice and what our communities call monsters. Not only does he want his young Black readers to think deeply about their choices; he wants the white audience, the privileged audience, to become aware of their assumptions and the role they play in institutionalized racism in the United States. Engles and Kory posit that “Myers effectively reverses the racial lens, exemplifying the potential of young adult fiction to engage readers in productive scrutiny of the hegemonic white gaze” (62). He does this by providing “majority-cultured readers” “with an opportunity to see their own privilege reflected in Steve’s depictions of relatively empowered white characters” (59). Along with Myers’s protest call, depictions

of Steve's prison guards and the attorneys issue a second call to his young readers to engage in self-reflection. Both calls have been picked up and answered in Brendan Kiely and Jason Reynolds's *All-American Boys*, a novel that confirms and contemporizes Stepto's narrative of immersion.

CHAPTER III: “WE CANNOT BE FREE UNTIL THEY ARE FREE”:
 THE DUAL-VOICING OF THE NARRATIVE OF IMMERSION IN *ALL-
 AMERICAN BOYS*

In 2013, the Seminole County Court acquitted George Zimmerman of the charges brought against him for the murder of Trayvon Martin. In 2015, the Federal Justice Department came to a similar decision regarding the innocence of Darren Wilson in the murder of Michael Brown. And the of country responded, though not in unison. Ta-Nahesi Coates recalls in *Between the World and Me* the reaction his young son had to the Michael Brown verdict: “You stayed up till 11 p.m. that night waiting for the announcement of an indictment, and when instead it was announced that there was none you said, ‘I’ve got to go,’ and you went into your room, and I heard you crying” (Coates 11). Authors Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely had emotional reactions to Zimmerman’s acquittal similar to that of Coates’s child. Reynolds recalls his feelings in an NPR interview: “I’m angry and I’m frustrated and I’m sort of wrought with emotion — and I’m traveling and living with a [white] stranger” (Bates 1). That stranger was Brendan Kiely, a fellow author on the Simon and Schuster book tour. Through open and honest communication, Reynolds found out that Kiely felt the same emotional turmoil regarding the lack of justice for Trayvon Martin, and a friendship flowered from their shared anguish. A year later, when Officer Wilson gunned down Michael Brown, Kiely invited Reynolds to respond to social injustice in the form of a novel for young adults in hopes of “get[ing] young readers thinking about the recent spate of real-life, racially charged policing incidents, and how to process their emotions about it” (Sullivan). *All-*

American Boys is the result of their collaboration. The novel depicts the experiences of two young men as they learn about racial prejudice and privilege during the Black Lives Matter Era. Reynolds writes the chapters which follow Rashad, a young Black male, as he struggles with the experience of becoming the victim of police brutality. Kiely writes Quinn's chapters, which illustrate his journey from a place of white privilege to a place of alliance and social activism.

The 2015 novel's response to the injustices served to youths of color in the United States has garnered much acclaim in the media. James Sullivan noted in his review for *The Boston Globe* that the novel was deemed "'timely and powerful' and 'a deeply moving experience'" (sources for quotation not given by Sullivan). Kekla Magoon's review in *The New York Times* offers a more nuanced observation, claiming "It is perhaps too easy to call this worthy book timely and thought-provoking. Let us reach beyond simple praise and treat it instead as a book to be grappled with, challenged by, and discussed." And while the novel has been named a Coretta Scott King Honor Book and a winner of The Walter, a new award given in the name of Walter Dean Myers for books that depict outstanding diversity, the only scholarly article focused on *All-American Boys* can be found in *First Opinions, Second Reactions*, an educational journal. The article shows how to adapt the novel for use in theater sequences as enrichment activities for students (Rowland 30). The context for *All-American Boys*, though, should be much broader. A contemporary explanation of police brutality, the novel also participates in the African American literary tradition as a response to James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*.

Just as *Monster* signifies on Wright's *Native Son*, *All-American Boys* signifies on Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* effectively connecting the Civil Rights era (as Coates' *Between the World & Me* did) with the early twenty-first century Black Lives Matter movement. Baldwin shepherds his nephew (and other youths of color) through the racist world of the 1960s by teaching them that the only way they can truly be lost is if they begin "believing that [they] really are what the white world calls a *nigger*" (4). He pleads with his nephew: "Please try to remember that what [white people] believe, as well as what [white people] do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority, but to their inhumanity and *fear*" (8). Baldwin contends that young Black people have no reason to try and shape themselves to be more like their white oppressors; instead, they should accept their oppressors by loving them and teaching them to live without fear (8). Reynolds and Kiely's novel affirms Baldwin's call that "We cannot be free until they are free" by putting Baldwin's instructions for his nephew into narrative form (10). *All-American Boys* follows two young men as they tell their personal stories of traveling from isolation to immersion in a multi-raced, multi-gendered, multi-generational community attempting to "make America what America must become" (Baldwin 10). In order to answer Baldwin's call, Kiely and Reynolds revoice and extend Stepto's immersion narrative by introducing new components: a revised location of the spatial South, a white protagonist, and an *inclusio genuis loci*—an act performed within an inclusive and diverse community.

Revisions and Extensions: A Short Explanation

Kiely and Reynolds refigure the metaphorical North and South in *All-American Boys* in order to convey the universality of Rashad and Quinn's experiences. In Stepto's narrative of immersion, the Black male protagonist conventionally begins in a place of isolation (the symbolic or spatial North). His isolation makes him illiterate to the ways of his tribe, leaving him vulnerable to the manipulation and/or physical danger imposed on him by the white world. The dangers of isolation propel the protagonist on a pilgrimage to the spatial South in search of refuge among his Black kinship (Stepto 167). Kiely and Reynolds revise the physical journey from North to South for a symbolic one taken from isolation to brotherhood in the generic town of Springfield.³ The choice to keep the protagonists' spatially stationary in Springfield demonstrates that the common structures of institutionalized racism have seeped into every town in the United States and that the Black Belt no longer acts as a clear dividing line between the racially progressive North (relatively speaking) and the Jim Crow South. Kiely and Reynolds' choice to shift the spatial locations to one generic American town illustrates the commonality of the New Jim Crow and emphasizes the ubiquitous nature of racism in modern America.

With the addition of a white journeyman, Kiely and Reynolds extend the traditionally Black immersion narrative, emphasizing the need for white people to

³ The protagonists' journeys in *All-American Boys* take place in the generic and all-American town of Springfield and while there is a mention of watching a New England Patriots and Denver Broncos football game, the town could be located anywhere in the United States (Kiely and Reynolds 104). Springfield is Every Town when it comes to the race relations that take place there, yet it is important to note that it shares the name with Springfield, Illinois, the home of Abraham Lincoln—the Great Emancipator—and a town which had its own Race Riots in the 1900s.

become aware of their role in contemporary race relations and take responsibility for it. To foreground this point, Kiely and Reynolds write in alternating chapters. This rhetorical strategy underscores the existence of the color line in Springfield, effectively emphasizing Quinn's white privilege and Rashad's racial trauma. Rashad and Quinn go to the same school, have similar peer groups, go to the same parties, and frequent the same corner stores. They both worry about their futures and reputations. They even have similar family structures: military fathers, hard-working mothers, and one brother as a sibling. Rashad and Quinn are both the titular All-American boy. Yet, despite these similarities, the experiences they have with American social systems differ based on their races. In order to unite with a larger, extended kinship, both boys must develop a double consciousness, overcome their fears, and learn their new roles as articulate kinsmen in society. The addition of Quinn as a white journeyman illustrates the importance of white people's awareness of their role in society as allies for the marginalized and foregrounds the work white Americans must do in order for true freedom and justice to exist for all.

Kiely and Reynolds depict a revision of community and the *genius loci* in *All-American Boys* as all-inclusive and diverse. In an immersion narrative, the ultimate act of joining the community is through what Stepto defines as *genius loci*, "the expressions of 'race-spirit' or 'race message'" in a space considered dangerous to an individual but made safe by the presence of his ancestral [Black] community (67-70). Traditionally, the community which makes *genius loci* possible pre-exists the journeyman's pilgrimage, as it does for Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* or Janie in *Their Eyes were Watching*

God,⁴ and it exists as exclusively Black. Kiely and Reynolds revise this community in two ways: 1) the community forms as the book takes place and 2) they include members of all racial descent and backgrounds with the unifying goal of fighting institutional racism. While it might seem that diverse communities exist at the beginning of the novel—particularly at Jill’s party—the groups do not have a common goal beyond seeking pleasure nor does the party include any cross-generational members. By the end of the novel, though, members of those previously isolated communities create a larger cooperative with a common goal which allows for the act of *inclusio genius loci*—the protest at Police Plaza 1. The new community determines its members not by race but by the creed that all Americans are created equal. Kiely and Reynolds’ revisions and extensions modernize Stepto’s paradigm for a contemporary America and convey the process of obliterating the color line for community members through the spiritual pilgrimages of Rashad and Quinn from isolated individuals to members of an extended and shared kinship.

“I was here, screaming at the top of my lungs. Rashad Butler. Present”: Rashad’s Journey

Isolation

True to Stepto’s traditional immersion narrative, isolation shrouds Rashad Butler at the beginning of his journey. His dual community identity and his lack of double consciousness make him illiterate to the dangers of the white world. Rashad’s community

⁴ For a reading of how Du Bois uses musical epigraphs as part of his narrative of immersion see Cheryl Wall’s “Resounding Souls: Du Bois and the African American Literary Tradition.” *Public Culture*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2005, pp. 217-234. For an interesting study of how both Stepto’s narrative of ascent and narrative of immersion exist simultaneously in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God*, see Evora Jones’s “Ascent and Immersion: Narrative Expression in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.” *CLA Journal*, vol. 39, no. 3, 1996, pp. 369-380.

identity swings from the need to appease his father's belief that "[t]here's no better opportunity for a black boy in this country than to join the army" to his desire to create his own path as an individual apart from his father's expectations (8). Rashad does not fit in among his peers in ROTC or his Black friends or the wider community of Springfield High School. Instead, Rashad splits his time between fulfilling his father's expectations and following his own heart through his choice of dress (15-16), hitting on girls at parties (16), helping his friend with graffiti ideas (14-15), and drawing in his sketchbooks (144). His inability to converge these identities—ROTC kid, Don Juan, artist—causes him to behave as a shadow in his own life, hovering in the margins instead of within a community. Reynolds depicts Rashad's liminality through the ritual of changing clothes in the school bathroom immediately after the last bell on Uniform Friday (15-16). The transformation signifies Rashad's inability to identify concretely with one particular community.

Rashad's initial isolation manifests itself through the physical separation from his friends as he undergoes a transformation in the bathroom stall after school. The bathrooms at Rashad's high school can be constructed as physical ritual grounds for *communitas*: grooming rituals, plan making, and, most importantly, storytelling which takes the form of joking and roasting one's peers. The men's restroom embodies a space where male identity is performed and community is fostered, much like a locker room (10). Reynolds first introduces Rashad's friends—English, Shannon, and Carlos—while Rashad changes clothes in a stall and the others hang out in the bathroom. The bathroom stall illustrates Rashad's status with his friend group: close yet an outsider. The stall door

cuts Rashad off visually and physically from the world to which he marginally belongs. Rashad does interact in conversation with the disembodied voices of his friends, but the conversation further stresses Rashad's difference. English and Shannon both play basketball and Carlos tries out for the school team every year but always gets cut. Joking about the shared experience of playing basketball takes up the majority of the bathroom conversation, so while Rashad throws a few jokes in about his friends, he cannot truly participate. Because of ROTC, Rashad does not play basketball. The entire scene in the bathroom circles around basketball and the party taking place at Jill's house later that evening, which all of the boys plan on attending. As plans solidify and English, Shannon, and Carlos leave, it becomes obvious that Rashad will spend the rest of his Friday afternoon alone.

Rashad's lack of companionship makes evident his lack of racialized social literacy and double consciousness: two traits that leave his Black body vulnerable to the hostilities of a white world. Rashad's refusal to heed his father's many warnings about how to behave when confronted by a police officer conveys an illiteracy of racism in the United States—and therefore a lack of double consciousness—which puts Rashad in danger of becoming the next Black victim of racial violence (50). When the object of the gaze of the white police officer and the white store clerk at Jerry's corner store, Rashad does not have a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 16-17). Reynolds communicates Rashad's lack of double consciousness through his ignorance of how the white world perceives his Black body as he "bopped

down the magazine aisle. . .” (Kiely and Reynolds 18). Rashad does not realize his Black body is the reason the clerk nods at Rashad “suspiciously. Like he always did” (17) or why the policeman automatically believes Rashad is reaching for a weapon when he “reached into [his] pocket to grab the dollar” (22). Rashad explains the clerk and cop’s suspicion as being a result of recent bout of shoplifting. He does not realize that any movement he makes will be considered a threat to the white men because of their conscious or unconscious inherent fear and suspicion of black men.⁵ Therefore, when a white woman trips over Rashad and both bodies sprawl on the floor, Rashad does not understand why the police officer automatically resorts to physical force—violently handcuffing and beating him—rather than calm questioning. Rashad’s lack of literacy, double consciousness, and allies to defend or protect him leave him open to attack by two men who have internalized the institutionalized racist notion of the child super predator⁶. The incident at Jerry’s alters the fabric of Rashad’s life and acts as the genesis of his journey to achieving tribal literacy.

Shifts: From Isolated Individual to Journeyman

To become an articulate kinsman, Rashad must undergo a shift from single consciousness to double consciousness. Du Bois states that the development of double consciousnesses, or the creation of the self “within and without the Veil of Color,” is

⁵ I am in no way attempting to blame Rashad for his own beating. Rather, I am attempting to illustrate his ignorance when it comes to the part he plays in America’s race relations.

⁶ John Dilulio’s 1995 *The Weekly Standard* article “The Coming of the Super Predators” explains the concept of the super predator as children—most frequently Black—raised in moral poverty who find pleasure in murder, rape, drugs, and violence. Also see chapter 1 of Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* for the legal history of arresting and incarcerating young males of color based on fears stemming from the trope of the super predator.

“painful” and “fatal to self-confidence” (148-149). Rashad, despite the blow to his dueling selves, must confront his identity on both sides of the color line. Without the self-recognition of how his Black body is perceived by the white people he lives among, he cannot become literate in the ways of the diverse community that is working to eradicate the “peculiar wrenching of the soul, [the] peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment” that the mere existence of the Veil of Color creates (Du Bois 16-17). Rashad’s shift in consciousness involved a confrontation with an image of himself that appears in the mirror and on the news and that differs from what he envisions as his identity. It is the epistemological crisis triggered by these two images that facilitates the “twoness” of his developing double consciousness.

In contrast to the novel’s previous mirror scene in the high school bathroom, Rashad begins establishing a double consciousness by performing the “uncomfortable . . . strange task” of looking at his bruised and beaten face in the hospital room mirror (88). Confronting his face in the mirror elicits a different kind of emotional response from the bathroom scene in which English takes his time making romantic faces at himself in the mirror while admiring his hair follicles. Rashad can barely maintain eye contact with himself because the mirror forces him to experience a “peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment” (Du Bois 149). Rashad does not recognize himself. The juxtaposition of these two scenes highlights the isolation and difference in Rashad since his run in with Officer Galluzzo. Like Steve in Myers’s *Monster*, Rashad finds it hard to confront his reflection because he does not recognize himself with this

new face. The mirror sparks a questioning in Rashad that deepens when he sees how the media portrays his image on television.

The public portrayal of Rashad and perception of his identity as “just another teenage criminal” because of his black body force Rashad to confront the white gaze (Kiely and Reynolds 186). When Rashad sees the cell phone video of Officer Galluzzo using excessive force on his own limp and handcuffed body, Rashad cannot identify with his image: “I mean, it was me, but it wasn’t. But...it *was*. Like, how could I be that boy—a victim. Me. It was just...I don’t know...surreal” (94). When he later views a news interview of a cabbie who says he would not pick up a young man who looked like him, Rashad realizes that the color of his skin, not merely his dress, is the reason for discrimination (187-188). Engles and Kory argue that the “White gaze surveils African American youth, imposing illicit identities to which they often must respond with strategic performance of non-threatening blackness thereby developing doubled and even tripled forms of self-consciousness” (51). Rashad’s epiphanies develop his literacy of how the white world reads, interprets, and responds to his Blackness, but the development of a double consciousness cannot save Rashad from his isolation and duality. If, like Myers’s Steve, Rashad had merely settled for performing the part of a non-threatening Black male, he might have stayed stagnant and trapped within the Veil; however, Rashad chooses to partake in the rituals of *communitas* in order to find strength, beauty, and power in his own Blackness, a choice that enables him to return the gaze via participation in the protest march.

Rashad's *Communitas* through Storytelling

Multiple members of the forming inclusive community utilize the art of storytelling as *communitas* to shepherd Rashad on his journey to kinship. The stories allow him to grow from his traumatic experience and pierce the veil of his double consciousness instead of crumble under its weight. Storytelling as *communitas* assists Rashad in participating in the final ritual of *inclusio genius loci* because it teaches Rashad how to become literate in the ways of his community. Most of the storytelling rituals come from members of his family, including his mother's tales of familial support and connection, his father's confession, and Spoony's pep talks; however, members of the inclusive community participate in the storytelling rituals as well. His friends tell him stories about their experiences with policemen; and Mrs. Fitzgerald, the gift shop clerk, tells him stories of past efforts to obtain civil rights. Reynolds splits the storytelling rituals into two categories: stories told to Rashad by his friends and family and stories told to the community on Rashad's behalf.

Founding members of the inclusive community in Springfield partake in storytelling rituals by telling Rashad's story to the media and citizenry. Carlos uses his art, graffiti, to tell the story of Rashad's experience and to effect change by tagging the sidewalk in front of their school building with a large spray-painted tag: RASHAD IS ABSENT AGAIN TODAY. Rashad's school mates, most notably Jill, find encouragement in Carlos's tag and begin to tell Rashad's story by working with Spoony, Berry (a law student and Spoony's girlfriend), teachers, and church groups to plan a protest. In the absence of Rashad and in the face of injustice toward him, different parts

of Springfield come together in his name to create a multi-gendered, multi-generational, and multi-raced coalition to stand up to the institutional racism represented by police. The new inclusive community embodies Baldwin's urge to all Americans:

If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. (105)

The community at the end of *All-American Boys* achieves its—and Baldwin's—goal by telling the story of Rashad and other young Black males who experience similar injustices and by bringing together diverse peoples in action.

While some allies guide Rashad in a personal, intimate manner by telling him the stories of their traumatic experiences and others promote Rashad by telling his story to a wider audience through social media, news media, and an organized protest, it must be noted that the mode of *communitas* corresponds with the trope of literacy which exists in Stepto's paradigm of immersion.⁷ The cultural lessons Rashad learns by partaking in storytelling rituals makes him literate in the ways of his community. Storytelling establishes a foundation for Rashad as an individual so that he can leave his isolation and

⁷ The trope of literacy follows the tradition of African American young adult literature that dates back to W.E.B. Du Bois's children's editions of the *Crisis* (1910-1922) and the spin-off children's magazine, *The Brownies' Book* (1920-1921). In a 2011 survey, "African American Children's Literature: Researching Its Development, Exploring Its Voices," Rudine Sims Bishop notes that ". . . African American Children's Literature stems from a tradition in which literacy and literature served a number of functions in addition to "purely literary" ones, including self-affirmation, protest, disseminating information, and racial uplift" (229).

participate in the protest his kinship has planned in his name. The two types of storytelling—personal and public—convey to Rashad that a community larger than he has ever known formed in his absence and waits to welcome him as a kinsman and a brother.

Specific Storytelling Rituals

Rashad's mother, Jessica, tells Rashad multiple stories that enhance Rashad's literacy of his familial connections and affirm that he deserves acceptance and love despite the white gaze on his Black body. Her storytelling ritual takes the form of an affirmation of what she knows about Rashad. She confirms Rashad's identity through negating the identity imposed upon him by the white gaze. She tells him

You are not a criminal, Rashad, I know that. I know every word you said was true. You didn't deserve this. You're not a criminal. . . You're not some animal they can just hunt. You're not some punching bag, some thing for them to beat on whenever they feel like it. (193)

Her insistence on Rashad's humanity makes it obvious that even though she must deal with her own trauma of seeing her son brutalized by the police because of his race, she plans on fighting for him. Unlike Steve's mother in *Monster*, Jessica's maternal trust of Rashad and the passion with which she portrays her love illuminates for him that he has a champion in her. Later, Jessica points out characteristics that Rashad shares with his father—a nervous stomach—in order to help strengthen their familial ties (298).

Jessica's support of her son does not stop at affirmations. She extends her support by

finding a lawyer to defend Rashad and participating in the protest (268-270, 303). Her actions tell Rashad that his mother has more than soothing words to give; she is prepared to stand with her son. She even helps in the organization of the protest by calling Pastor Johnson to “round up some folks too” (281). Her dual-pronged approach, affirmations mixed with public action, helps Rashad see that he is indeed a person worth supporting. In the end, Rashad’s mother joins the supportive kinship epitomized by the protestors, which allows him to do the same.

Rashad’s father, David, participates in *communitas* through the storytelling ritual of confession that makes Rashad literate of his father’s behaviors and beliefs in ways he was previously unable. The instantaneous and constant championing Rashad receives from his mother is juxtaposed with his father’s initial doubts regarding Rashad’s innocence. When Jessica tries to defend her son, he takes the side of the police officer by stating, “But they don’t know that . . . What they see is what he presents. And it sounds like he presented himself as just another—” (49).⁸ It’s not until after David spends a full day being sick—his nervous stomach—that he confesses the mistake he made as a police officer: shooting and paralyzing an innocent, young Black male (Kiely and Reynolds 231-238). This particular ritual of storytelling acts as *communitas* for Rashad by enabling

⁸ David believes in the stigma that Michelle Alexander defines in *The New Jim Crow*: “Parents and schoolteachers council[ing] black children that, if they ever hope to escape [America’s racist] system and avoid prison time, they must be on their best behavior, raise their arms and spread their legs for the police without complaint, stay in failing schools, pull up their pants, and refuse all forms of illegal work and moneymaking activity, even if jobs in the legal economy are impossible to find . . . Never mind that white children on the other side of town who made precisely the same choices—often for less compelling reasons—are in fact going to college” (215).

him to comprehend David's expectations as well as The Talk⁹ he and his brother repeatedly received growing up: "Never fight back. Never talk back. Keep your hands up. Keep your mouth shut. Just do what [the police] ask you to do, and you'll be fine" (50). His father's confession further enables Rashad to see the complexity of the relation of race to his own experience with police brutality. David's experience as a police officer displays the complexity of institutional racism. Rashad's father, a Black man, made the same racist assumption as Officer Galluzzo, a white man. His father's confession prepares Rashad for joining a community that dissolves the color line.

In order for Rashad to become a member of an extended kinship, storytelling rituals must extend beyond immediate family members to a larger context that includes his friends: English, Carlos, and Shannon. Not until Rashad listens to the stories of his friends' experiences with the police does he begin to understand that he is not isolated in his experience (201-203). The process of relating their common shared experiences creates a new connection between Rashad and his friends, and, as a result, Rashad agrees to participate in the protest because he realizes that the movement is "bigger than me," in effect abandoning his isolation to join an extended, diverse kinship (203).

Beyond Rashad's friends and family, Mrs. Fitzgerald—a new acquaintance—aids Rashad as he moves from isolation to community. Mrs. Fitzgerald, the gift shop worker in Rashad's hospital, acts in a "grandmotherly" (240) fashion to Rashad in his time of need by 1) being able to read when Rashad needs the luxury of being anonymous and 2)

⁹ For more information about the cultural practice of The Talk, see Cudore L. Snell and Tracy R. Whitaker's article "Parenting While Powerless: Consequences of the Talk" and Taylor Pittman's "Inside the Heartbreaking Talk Black Parents Must Have with their Kids."

knowing when Rashad needs an extra push to join the protestors. Mrs. Fitzgerald's story reveals the regret she feels for not participating in the Civil Rights movement because she was scared. She preaches to Rashad that safe is not always better than sorry (245). Mrs. Fitzgerald's regret acts as a cautionary tale for Rashad and calls him to join the fight despite his fear. Mrs. Fitzgerald embodies a necessary figure for Rashad because she gives him permission to join a new community committed to fighting for equality. Her message instills in Rashad the importance of taking action with a community to effect change which empowers Rashad to find strength in his identity. Rashad decides to take off his facial bandages for the protest conveying a physical manifestation of his inner condition:

I wanted people to see me. See what happened. I wanted people to know that no matter the outcome, no matter if this day ended up as just another protest and Officer Galluzzo got off scot-free, that I would never be the same person. I looked different and I would be different, forever. (303)

Rashad's conversation with Mrs. Fitzgerald acts as a catalyst for him to take agency, claim his own identity, and unify with a diverse extended family.

Rashad Actively Joining the Inclusive Community as an Articulate Kinsman

The final indication that Rashad has left his status as an isolated individual, has come to terms with his double consciousness with pride in his Black body, and has pierced the Veil of Color is the addition of a face to his self-portrait. Rashad shares his developing self-portrait with Clarissa, his white nurse, over the course of his hospital

stay. Unlike the storytelling rituals Rashad experiences with his friends and family, Clarissa acts as the listener while Rashad tells his story via art. Her status as a nonjudgmental and supportive audience helps Rashad work through his feelings about his trauma and, ultimately, confirms that Rashad “deserves a face” (273). Clarissa’s role as Rashad’s compassionate caregiver portrays her position as a member of Springfield’s diverse community. When Rashad finishes the self-portrait, he presents it to Clarissa, intimating that Rashad has chosen to reveal his new identity as an articulate kinsman.

Rashad’s choice to participate in the protest—the *inclusio genius loci*—signals his status as an articulate kinsman, not only within the African American community, but also with everyone who stands for breaking the institutionalized system of oppression that caused Rashad’s beating and subsequent trauma. Paradoxically, he ends the novel in the same way that he started: marching. In the beginning, he marches with the “wack ROTC drill team” because the activity is an expectation of his father (5). In the end he marches: “But it wasn’t like I was used to. It wasn’t military style. *Your left! Your left! Your left-right-left!* It wasn’t like that at all. It was an uncounted step, yet we were all in sync. We were on a mission” (306). At the end of his journey, Rashad marches with and for a community that he accepts and that accepts him. The marching motif illustrates the he has been able to merge his dual identities because he has found something worth marching for: himself and his kin. To solidify his new position, he participates in a call and response ritual with his fellow protestors that gives space to their fellow members who have fallen victim to the system: “‘Michael Brown!’ ‘Absent again today!’ ‘Tamir Rice!’ ‘Absent again today!’ ‘Eric Garner!’ Absent again today!’” (308).

Rashad follows Stepto's trajectory for becoming an articulate kinsman by moving from isolation, to literacy learner, to member of a community that provides support and protection from the oppression of the white world. Rashad has joined his voice with his new community through his art and raised his voice through protest. His membership with his community gives him the dogged strength to survive double consciousness and feel the power of his Blackness. By obtaining strength and power from the community, Rashad gains the ability to return the white gaze with a Black gaze which he ultimately focuses on Quinn.

“All I wanted to do was see the guy who I hadn't seen one week earlier”: Quinn's Journey

Rashad's story could stand alone as its own narrative of immersion, but what makes *All-American Boys* an atypical and potentially subversive rendition of Stepto's paradigm is the decision to send Quinn—a white person—on a journey of immersion. The parallel structure of Rashad and Quinn's journeys insures that neither Quinn nor Rashad can be seen as purely stereotypes of their races, but as normal teenagers trying to do their best to fit in at school, plan their futures, and live up to paternal expectations. They even frequent the same convenience stores. However, the outcomes of their individual Friday excursions differ drastically. Like Rashad's journey, Quinn's journey begins at Jerry's corner store and transforms him from isolated individual to articulate kinsman through *communitas* via storytelling. Quinn must, like Rashad, take on the role of the listener to become literate in the language of the blooming diverse community in Springfield. His transformation entails his growth from one who looks but does not see,

and listens but does not hear, to one who becomes acutely conscious of the source of racial inequality that controls interactions between Black and white people in the United States and then takes action to rail against racist systems. Quinn, who uses the white gaze in the beginning of the novel, demonstrates the process of listening and participating in a critical self-analysis which transforms his gaze from one of unacknowledged power and privilege to one of active alliance. Quinn's development of a white double consciousness is the prerequisite to participating in *inclusio genius loci* and joining Springfield's diverse community.

White Double Consciousness

The term "white double consciousness" has been conceptualized in different ways in past scholarship. In *Black Writers on Adventures of Huckleberry Finn One Hundred Years Later* a special issue of *Mark Twain Journal* Rhett S. Jones defines white double consciousness as white people gazing upon Black people in two different ways: "Euro-Americans have moved back and forth between their two perspectives on Africanity, now seeing blacks as less than human, now recognizing their membership in the family of man" (28). For Jones, white double consciousness hinges on the racist projections of white people upon Black people; or the use of the white gaze.¹⁰ I, however, argue that white double consciousness has less to do with projection and more to do with introspection. Linda Martín Alcoff contends that

¹⁰ In *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*, George Yancy defines the white gaze as "Whites 'see[ing]' the Black body through the medium of historically structured forms of 'knowledge' that regard it as an object of suspicion. . .[assuming] how dangerous and unruly it is, how unlawful, criminal, and hypersexual" (3).

white double consciousness requires an ever present acknowledgement of the historical legacy of white identity constructions in the persistent structures of inequality and exploitation, as well as a newly awakened memory of the many white traitors to white privilege who have struggled to contribute to the building of an inclusive human community. (25)

By this definition then, white double consciousness should occur internally when a white person becomes self-aware of his/her role as oppressor of African Americans. Alcoff asserts that becoming doubly conscious “when coupled with a repudiation of white privilege, can disable a positive self-image as well as a felt connection to community and history, and generally can disorient identity formation” (7). The development of a double consciousness causes an epistemological schism that could lead to the stunting of a character’s identity if they do not have a community to encourage their development of “dogged strength,” as it does for *Monster’s* Steve. Or, developing double consciousness could—compounded with self-reflection and a helpful community—lend itself to the formation of a new identity as a member of a new or different community as it does for Rashad. For Quinn, the development of a double consciousness first creates a struggle with his identity and his use of the gaze, but through the process of self-reflection and with the help of journey guides, he makes strides to become an active member of Springfield’s newly emerged inclusive community.

Quinn’s journey from single consciousness to double consciousness can be traced through his gaze. In the beginning Quinn has the prototypical white gaze. At Jerry’s, he looks upon his surrogate father—Officer Galluzzo, known to Quinn as Paul—brutalizing

a Black teenager and automatically assumes that Paul knows what he's doing. Quinn's "gut wanted to rush to help Paul" (38) because he assumes the stereotype of the criminality of the faceless teenager. When Jill reveals Rashad's identity to Quinn, he realizes, "I'd quickly convinced myself I had no idea who that kid with Paul was that night. And yeah, there were like a thousand kids in each grade at school, or whatever, but I did know him. Or know *of* him" (108, emphasis in original). A discussion with Nam, a Vietnamese teammate, about the prospect of Paul's show of police violence confuses Quinn, and afterward he realizes that his teammates look at him differently. At one point in class, Nam turns to gaze upon Quinn, which signals a shift in power. The power of Nam's gaze makes Quinn question his status for the first time. He wonders "Why did it feel like everyone was looking at me? Wanting answers to all those questions from me? . . . Shouldn't they be looking at Guzzo instead?" (125). Nam's gaze makes Quinn question his identity and his role in Rashad's beating which makes him uncomfortable in his own skin and wonder what people had seen him do. By the end of his journey, Quinn's gaze transforms as he clearly identifies Paul as the guilty party because he realizes that "Paul had gotten it all wrong. Becoming a cop would not make him a hero—but what kind of cop he became could have" (266). He then sets his gaze upon Rashad (who likewise gazes upon Quinn) with the intent of aligning himself with Rashad as two fully-developed and equal All-American boys.

The threat of being on a video of Rashad's beating facilitates the development of Quinn's double consciousness. Like Rashad when he views himself being beaten on the television screen, Quinn reacts to the *potential* of an unfamiliar image of himself by

questioning his identity. Nam's gaze makes Quinn question why anyone would look at him in that manner, which makes him remember the video. He hypothesizes that if he were on the video, "[t]hat must have been why everyone was staring at me like I had four heads. They were looking at the dude who just stood there like a pants-shitting five-year-old watching everything happen in front of him instead of doing anything about it" (125). Just the possibility of people viewing him as the passive observer of the video chips away at his self-assuredness and makes him question himself, but unlike Rashad, Quinn's privilege allows him to escape the trauma of actually appearing on screen. For Quinn, the threat of being the object of the gaze rather than the subject adds to his developing double consciousness. Through thinking about himself as the object of the gaze, Quinn feels the eyes of the burgeoning inclusive community blaming him for his inaction and stripping away his self-confidence. His shifting awareness of himself allows Quinn to acknowledge how both communities view him: by whites as a non-threatening, All-American boy and by people of color as a privileged, ignorant, dangerous All-American threat. He realizes that Black people are "probably afraid of people like me. I didn't blame them. I'd be afraid too But I didn't have to be because my shield was that I was white . . . just a 'regular kid,' an 'All-American' boy. 'Regular.' 'All American.' White" (180). By coming to the realization about how people view him, Quinn begins feeling self-conscious about his own actions instead of only worrying about Paul's actions, and, with the help of a journey guide, Quinn begins down the pathway to racial literacy. Through Quinn's experience, Kiely illustrates the double consciousness a white person must

develop in order to obtain the title of articulate kinsmen and participate in a community that strives for true equality—true Americanness.

It is important to note that white double consciousness differs from black double consciousness stemming from the differences in American identity and the ability to choose. In his dissertation “White Double Consciousness in Lillian Smith’s *Strange Fruit*, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and Geraldine Brooks’s *March*,” Jean-Paul Konda Ntusi discusses the importance of American identity in terms of double consciousness. He utilizes Du Bois’s assertion that African Americans want “to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (17). Ntusi asserts that Du Bois makes the point “that to be ‘American’ equates to being ‘white’ since Negro and American are antitheses to each other” and that “Since American identity is at play, it is impossible to think that the consequences of racial prejudice are only felt by the oppressed without any repercussions on the oppressors as a group” (15). Kiely and Reynolds convey the issue of American identity through Rashad and Quinn’s journey of immersion as each boy struggles with their roles in America’s racialized societies. Whereas Rashad has no choice but to experience double consciousness because of his role as an Other—an African American—and therefore a member of the oppressed, Quinn has the ability to choose because of his status as the standard American, a member of the privileged racial class.

Quinn's Isolations

Quinn begins his journey in isolation for two reasons: his homogeneous, white community and his lack of double consciousness. Quinn's white community isolates him from the lives and struggles of people of color in his town because their social constructs require him to continue to portray himself as an All-American boy and remain loyal to the other members of the white community without question by blindly supporting Officer Galluzzo. Quinn realizes that "Everybody wanted me to be loyal. Ma wanted me to be loyal. Guzzo wanted me to be loyal. Paul wanted me to be loyal" (267). Before witnessing Paul's violence, Quinn never questioned his loyalty. Springfield's white community keeps to itself which means that, despite going to an ethnically diverse school, Quinn does not develop meaningful relationships with people of color even though he works closely with English and Shannon on the basketball team. Quinn considers the other members of his team as competition for playing time and scholarships, not as potential allies and friends (66). Quinn's choice to hang out with the white members of the basketball team—Guzzo, Paul's cousin, and Dwyer—illustrates the one-dimensionality of his relationships which intensifies his isolation from any form of community outside of what he finds nonthreatening and comfortable. Despite having the opportunity to be friends with the players of color on his basketball team, Quinn chooses to spend his free time with two young men who look more like him. Self-segregated isolation enables and ensures his racial illiteracy.

Even after witnessing Rashad's beating, Quinn segregates himself from any community that could help him process the incident. Like Rashad's physical separation

from his friends in the school bathroom, Quinn physically separates himself from a group of his peers at the beginning of his journey. Cut off from the pseudo-inclusive community that exists at Jill's party,¹¹ Quinn chooses instead to spend the evening getting drunk with Guzzo and Dwyer while watching the party through the window: "I was out there in the darkness of the back porch, looking in through the window to the bright kitchen like I was watching the whole damn party unfold on TV" (62). Quinn's gaze through the window illustrates the separation between himself and his peers that mirrors the struggle he has throughout the rest of the novel—he can see the existence of a diverse way of life, but he does not understand it. Furthermore, Quinn's choice to separate himself with his gaze, despite having the privilege to interact with everyone at the party, illustrates his isolation. Quinn's separation from the party shares spatial similarities with Rashad's physical separation in the bathroom scene. They are both physically separated from a group of people; however, Rashad is in total isolation inside the bathroom stall whereas Quinn has the company of Guzzo and Dwyer. Moreover, Rashad's stall door completely blocks his gaze while Quinn has the power to look through Jill's windows.¹² The juxtaposition magnifies both the similarity in isolation between the two protagonists as well as the difference in societal power and privilege.

The basketball team acts as a distortion of a truly inclusive community thereby exemplifying Quinn's self-segregation. Despite the diversity of the team, which offers

¹¹ Students of all back grounds and races attend parties at Jill's which intimates an inclusive community. But because the students are more concerned with the pleasures of partying than community support, the party does not qualify as a fully developed inclusive community

¹² Quinn has the freedom to choose to separate himself from his peers after the incident at Jerry's whereas Rashad must experience forced hospitalization—an oppressive space in comparison to Quinn's freedom of mobility. This, too, shows the difference in power dynamics.

Quinn the opportunity to build relationships with people of color, the team self-segregates when it comes to anything beyond discussing basketball. At basketball practice his coach orders the team to “. . . ignore that shit . . . In this gym we’re all Falcon’s, you hear me?” (138). Coach Carney technically orders his team to forget the media coverage about their potential to go to the state tournament and the college scouts that will inevitably attend every game; however, his orders expand beyond the basketball court to the controversy surrounding Rashad and Paul. Quinn notices the undertone of white privilege in Coach Carney’s order which makes him reflect upon race and responsibility: “I’d walked onto the court and seen the team like this: seven black guys, five white guys, two Latino guys, and one Vietnamese guy. . . I thought that maybe leaving all the shit behind at the door wasn’t such bad advice. And hell, it wasn’t my problem, really, right?” (139). Coach Carney’s orders convey his attempt to turn the team into a community, but it really forces the players to participate in a fake integrated community, one that does not allow his players to acknowledge the reality of their fellow student’s brutalization. Coach Carney gives these marching orders under the guise of creating unity; however, they act as veiled instructions to ignore what is going on with Rashad and the Springfield PD. Quinn’s initial reaction—wanting to follow Coach Carney’s orders—displays his privilege to walk away from the controversy and remain a member of the white hegemonic community, yet his developing double consciousness makes him question the validity of his coach despite still lacking the ability to comprehend Coach Carney’s orders from a Black point of view. Quinn reflects on practice, pondering that

Maybe for this one practice we were all thinking only about the team: one unit, one thing, no parts, one whole, no problems, just one goal for one team, no one thinking about race or racism, all of us color-blind and committed like evangelicals to the word “team,” just like Coach wanted. Maybe. But I doubted it. That’s what I wanted to think, but it wasn’t what was in my mind or gut. Instead, I knew there was a problem, and I was beginning to think I was part of it—whether I was in the damn video or not. (140)

Quinn’s questioning conveys the slow awakening of his critical consciousness, but he does not comprehend the extent of how his complacency makes him part of the problem. Moreover, the process of becoming self-aware means that Quinn has slowly begun to move away from the white community but still has not fully accepted—or been accepted by—the forming inclusive community.

Carlos’ use of graffiti as social activism, tagging “Rashad is absent again today” on the front of the school, forces Quinn to confront his isolation and eventually refocus his status as complacent oppressor to active ally. The tag forces the awareness of Rashad’s brutalization on anyone who views it. The graffiti mobilizes the school into picking sides, which becomes evident during lunch when all of Rashad’s supporters eat outside by the tag, and all of Paul’s supporters eat inside the cafeteria. The physical separation of the two sides makes the color line visible and illustrates the schism in Quinn as he must decide where to eat lunch—with his old community in the cafeteria or with the new inclusive community outside. Quinn realizes his privilege at the same

moment he realizes he has to choose a side: “I’d always just walked into the cafeteria and sat wherever the hell I wanted. In fact, I did that pretty much anywhere I went” (167-168). He experiences for himself Guzzo’s expectant gaze upon him: “Guzzo looked up and saw me in line, he waved me over to their table, and although he’d ignored me all day yesterday, his interest now kind of ticked me off . . . he was too insistent, beckoning me like he was some kind of Mafia boss and I was supposed to hustle right over to him” (166). Being the subject of Guzzo’s gaze takes power away from Quinn, which causes him to feel discomfort. He has not been the subject of the white gaze before; therefore, he has not felt the powerlessness that comes with being summoned by a look. Quinn experiences the “peculiar sensation” of his double consciousness as his friend looks upon him in “contempt” (Du Bois 16-17). Quinn’s usual feeling of comfort has been revoked, and he is torn in two.

“Let’s go together”: Quinn’s Guides to Kinship

Quinn, like *Monster’s* Steve, could have stayed stagnant in his isolation, in a sort of limbo between communities. Or Quinn could have done the easy thing and remained a member of the hegemony, but his experiences of *communitas* led by Jill and English—his journey guides—allow Quinn to become an articulate kinsman with a new network of support. Jill Galluzzo, Paul and Guzzo’s cousin and Quinn’s love interest, provides a feminine voice¹³ to the narrative and provides *communitas* that guides Quinn through the epiphanies that allow him to become an articulate kinsman. Jill acts as an incubator for

¹³ In his acknowledgements, Reynolds salutes the “women of every civil rights movement, whether victim or leader, who always seem to get overlooked.” Reynolds and Kiely make a point of providing strong female leaders and acknowledging movements such as “Say Her Name” throughout the novel.

Quinn's intellectual and emotional journey by creating a safe space for him to process his thoughts. Without Jill, Quinn would be alone with his questions and would not be able to commit to his journey to enlightenment. He confesses to her: "I know this sounds weird, but I kind of feel like you are the only person I can talk to about this right now" (130).

Due to Jill's position as someone already familiar to Quinn and also already committed to building the inclusive community, Jill can meet Quinn where he is on his journey— isolated between his old community and learning the ways of his new community—and usher him to "the right side" of history (290). Jill aligns herself with the inclusive community rallying around Rashad and encourages Quinn to join her at the protest despite the danger of being outcast by her own family: "Look, Paulie, Guzzo, my mom—they all hate me now. But it's like it says on the flyer . . . IF YOU ARE NEUTRAL IN SITUATIONS OF INJUSTICE, YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE SIDE OF THE OPPRESSOR" (290; emphasis in original). She sets an example for Quinn through her strength to act according to her own beliefs.

English also guides Rashad in the development of his double consciousness through a series of heated conversations. By the grace of his patience, English eventually teaches Quinn about his white privilege through tough love. English tells Quinn that he leans into the fact that "Everyone just sees you as Mr. All-American Boy, and you can just keep on walking, thinking about other things. Just keep on living, like this shit don't even exist" (176). Because of English's accusation, Quinn realizes for the first time the extent of his complacency and how people of color see him because of his privilege. When Coach makes Quinn run suicides, a running drill that is meant to punish the body,

Quinn realizes that “I could just walk away from [the controversy] like a ghost. What kind of person did that make me, if I did?” (178-179). By utilizing suicides and the term “ghost,” Kiely creates the image of Quinn killing the part of himself English criticizes, the part that takes advantage of his white privilege and views the world through his white gaze, the part English dismisses “leaving [Quinn] looking like the idiot [he] was” (176). Finally, Quinn grasps the extent of his privilege signals a break from the hegemonic community and signifies that he will resurrect himself as a member of Springfield’s inclusive community by choosing not to ignore Rashad’s racially-determined brutalization. Quinn realizes that he is not alone in his fear as the *communitas* with English compels him acknowledge that “[People of color] were probably afraid, too. Afraid of people like Paul. Afraid of the cops in general. Hell, probably afraid of people like me. I didn’t blame them. I’d be afraid too. . . but I didn’t have to be because my shield was that I was white” (180). English’s admonishment forces Quinn to face his fears and abandon his privileged position and causes his unification with the inclusive community that had been coming together to proactively support Rashad. It is through listening to English’s perspective and being under English’s gaze that Quinn’s double consciousness comes to fulfillment. He realizes how his view of self differs from how English’s view of him because of his white skin and how his white privilege has allowed him to ignore English’s experience as a Black American.

“I didn’t want to walk away anymore”: Taking Action as *Communitas*

The final leg of Quinn’s journey toward racial literacy consists of multiple gestures that mark his transformation from ignorant to “woke” and from isolated

individual to articulate kinsman. Baldwin asserts that “To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger” (9). Jill assists Quinn in coming to terms with two revelations: first, fear controls his lack of action to fight for justice and equality; and second, inaction produces the same results as racist actions (Kiely and Reynolds 128-33 and 181-85). Quinn chooses to act thereby signaling allegiance to his new community despite the backlash he faces from his coach, his mother, his friends, and Paul. By switching his loyalties, Quinn illustrates his willingness to “betray’ [his] racial privilege in [his] fight for a better human society” (Ntusi 19). Quinn decides he does not “want to walk away anymore” (Kiely and Reynolds 185).

The first action Quinn takes toward becoming an articulate kinsman is to watch the video of Paul’s brutal beating of Rashad. Quinn decides to watch after coming to the realization that his “shield” from taking responsibility for Paul’s racist actions stems from his whiteness and he “already *had* walked away” by waiting so long to watch the video (180). He asserts that “Not watching the damn video was walking away too” (Kiely and Reynolds 180). Quinn’s revelation about his own privilege allows him to watch the video through the lens of support and allegiance and empathy instead of through the prejudicial white gaze he had originally viewed the incident. Quinn’s need to talk through his viewing with Jill and their final conclusion that refusing to acknowledge injustice is as much an act of “racism” as partaking in overt acts of racism conveys Quinn’s movement from ignorant and isolated individual to a knowledgeable kinsman (184).

Quinn’s final confrontation with Paul acts as another significant action Quinn takes in order to reach the status of an articulate kinsman. Quinn confronts his dueling

views of Paul as a father figure and Paul as a monster by ultimately casting their relationship aside after Paul attempts to sway Quinn back to his side by claiming that “The kid took [a white woman] down because she caught him stealing” and that “[Paul] was protecting the lady” (209). However, because Quinn has begun to develop an understanding of his white privilege, he realizes that there can be no justification for such a violent arrest and decides that what he saw on the sidewalk is “the real story” no matter what happened inside of Jerry’s (210). Quinn’s dismissal of Paul illustrates Quinn’s development as racially literate and doubly conscious because he is able to read through Paul’s subterfuge and see the truth to the situation. Ntusi argues that white people “experience their double consciousness in moments when they weigh whether they should remain loyal to their communities in letting immoral racist practice continue or to speak their minds and become the community’s enemy” (9). Quinn’s choice signals danger because by walking away from Paul, he walks away from the protection offered by his white shield. He can no longer call on Paul, a police man and therefore a person with power, for assistance. Furthermore, Quinn’s dismissal of Paul shows a transition of status from surrogate father/son to strangers. When Quinn walks away from Paul, Quinn physically and metaphorically moves away from the old hegemonic and closer spatially and mentally to new kinship.

Quinn signals his status as an articulate kinsman by participating in a call and response ritual involving Ralph Ellison’s short story, “Battle Royale,” and his English class. His participation in the ritual acts as *communitas* for Quinn who adds his voice to the collective voice of the new community. Quinn and Tooms—one of Quinn’s Black

teammates—initiate an oral reading of “Battle Royale”¹⁴ when their teacher explains that administration thinks “it’s best to just move on to the next unit” (214). Quinn realizes that the administration is wrong to silence Ellison’s call by telling Mrs. Tracey to “just move on to the next unit,” and he felt as if “we [the students of the Springfield’s diverse community] were getting cheated out of something” (214-15). The two boys work together to allow Ellison, their teacher, their classmates, and themselves to be heard—to not miss out on the opportunity to learn from Ellison’s work. Tooms reads Ellison’s words out loud first, then Quinn reads, then the class joins in through a pop-corn style reading ritual which facilitates the creation of an inclusive community in the classroom—one of two instances in *All-American Boys* where call and response is used to construct community. The class’s ritual acts as a response to the call Ellison issued through his story that institutional racism shatters a Black man’s identity as they respond to the text by interacting with it. Through their interaction, the class makes Rashad visible despite his absence. The ritual of call and response draws attention to the fact that “#RashadIsAbsentAgainToday” (165).

The act of reading aloud in community is an act of rebellion. In *Huck’s Raft* (2004), a history of American childhood, Steven Mintz posits that for slave children, “literacy was an act of resistance, which instilled a sense of self-worth and offered psychological freedom” (110). Under a similar logic, Quinn and his classmates act in a

¹⁴ Kiely and Reynold’s choice of “Battle Royale” for the call and response, a convention of African American literature and culture, is significant because it chronicles a brawl among Black people done for the entertainment of watching white men. The violence mimics the beating of Rashad and elicits strong emotions from Quinn and his classmates. Like Rashad’s exposure to the famous Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron Douglas, Quinn’s exposure to Ellison further aligns him within an inclusive community.

rebellion against the institutional racism imposed most immediately by the school and more widely in the town. The call and response reading ritual further stresses the importance of literacy to Quinn’s journey to becoming an articulate kinsman because it illustrates that he is learning how to read and understand his role in racial injustices. This experience functions as *communitas* for Quinn who realizes that “If I didn’t want the violence to remain, I had to do a hell of a lot more than just say the right things and not say the wrong things” (218). Quinn’s movement toward becoming an articulate kinsman is also illustrated in the fact that Quinn follows Tooms’ lead in this form of rebellion—Tooms reads aloud first. Quinn’s ability to follow instead of lead conveys his understanding of the importance of being an ally in support of his friend without trying to speak for him or over him. In this ritual space, Tooms accepts Quinn’s participation as an olive branch for his past misconduct and welcomes Quinn to a new inclusive community.¹⁵ Tooms’ acceptance gives Quinn the confidence to continue on his path to becoming a part of a new surrogate family.

This event, which occurs on Thursday, is the first of a series of actions that solidify Quinn’s membership in Springfield’s inclusive community. He stands up to Guzzo about Paul’s actions (221-224), wears a shirt to school advertising his intent to march in the protest (252-254), helps English create a basketball play honoring Rashad (258), files a police report about witnessing Paul’s brutalization of Rashad (285-286), and respectfully disobeys his mother’s orders not to march (264). All of these deeds put

¹⁵ The inclusive community has now been formed as signified by the whole classroom’s participation in the choral reading and the planning of the protest.

Quinn in some form of danger from the hegemonic community, but he performs them anyway because he wants to be “[s]omeone who believed a better world was possible—someone who stood up for it” (267). His new awareness of his white privilege and social literacy allows him to realize that supporting the inclusive movement from afar and remaining inactive means that he would remain of a part of the problem instead a part of the solution.

Inclusion and Participation in the Final Ritual: *Inclusio Genius Loci*

Stepo’s ritual ground for *genius loci* takes place in a space where an individual would feel the most fear and the most oppression. The ending of *All-American Boys* adheres to Stepo’s paradigm by ending the novel at Police Plaza 1. Given Quinn’s status as a witness of Paul’s crime, he might have felt uncomfortable at the sight of the police station on a normal day, but the presence of tanks and “thousands of cops” who look like “an army of Robocops—black paramilitary outfits, helmets, automatic rifles” magnify the feeling to terror before the protest begins (287, 293). Quinn’s fear spawns from worry for his own safety (“I mean, it was one thing to have a conviction, but to be beaten up or killed for it—was it worth it”) and from his fear of consequences instilled in him by his old community symbolized by his Coach Carney’s wrath (“There’d be consequences for all of us skipping practice, I knew that, but that would be Monday”) (291-92). However, he participates in the protest because, as he states, for racism to come to an end, “*We!* White people! We had to stand up and say something about [institutional racism] too, because otherwise it was just like what one of those posters in the crowd outside school said: OUR SILENCE IS ANOTHER KIND OF VIOLENCE” (292). Quinn’s

participation in the protest makes him aware of his privilege as a white American to revert to ways of ignorance toward racial injustice. He wonders,

Would I need to witness a violence like they knew again just to remember how I felt this week? Had our hearts really become so numb that we needed dead bodies in order to feel the beat of compassion in our chests? Who am I if I need to be shocked back into my best self? (296)

These questions illustrate Quinn's acknowledgment of his white privilege, his awareness of his ability to easily slip back into the old thinking and behavior patterns of the dominant racial group, but his choice to remain at the protest conveys his choice to cast off the shroud of ignorance he had previously relied upon for protection. Quinn participates in the call and response chant, confirming his place in Springfield's inclusive community: "'Michael Brown!' 'Absent again today!' 'Tamir Rice!' 'Absent again today!' 'Eric Garner!' Absent again today!'" (308).

During the call and response ritual, Rashad and Quinn see each other, figuratively and literally, for the first time in the novel. The usual power dynamic of the white gaze has shifted due to the development of double consciousness for both boys—Quinn's development of racial awareness and Rashad's development of a secure identity. Rashad's journey to becoming an articulate kinsman gives him the power to look, and by looking, to pierce the veil. He sees Quinn and can read him as an ally, noting that "I could tell [he] was thinking about those names too" (309). Rashad also feels powerful and "[p]roud that I was there. Proud that I could represent Darnell Shackelford. Proud that I could represent Mrs. Fitzgerald—her brother who was beaten in Selma" (310).

Rashad's ability to see and read Quinn's intention and see they were both "connected to those names now" while also feeling empowered by his ancestral identity solidify his status as an articulate kinsman (310). On the other hand, Quinn's intention to "see the guy I hadn't seen one week earlier" is an act of allegiance (309). Quinn had the power of the gaze at the beginning of the novel, but his journey shifted the meaning of his gaze from that of ignorance and fear to that of awareness and recognition of humanity without erasing race. As these All-American boys gaze upon each other in the final scene, neither feels their power stripped away or their humanity erased; instead, their looks empower each other to keep fighting "[f]or all the people who came before us" (310). The final shift in perspective for both boys voice Kiely and Reynold's call that we all must try, to the very best of our ability, to actually see our brethren.

In Response to Baldwin

In 1963 Baldwin published a collection of two essays under the title *The Fire Next Time*, which according to *Biography.com*, ". . . was meant to educate white Americans on what it meant to be black. It also offered white readers a view of themselves through the eyes of the African-American community" ("James Baldwin Biography"). In the first essay, written as an open letter to his nephew James, Baldwin calls for the Black youth of America to take pride in themselves and their kin as they continue the uphill battle educating white America about Black America's humanity. Baldwin issues a call to his readers on either side of the color line to understand the destruction caused by racism and to take action to defeat it. Kiely and Reynolds respond to Baldwin's canonical letter to his nephew by adding Quinn's journey to the narrative of immersion and by including

signifying motifs used by Baldwin to build a bridge between Baldwin's then and Kiely and Reynolds's now.

The motif of the face, symbolic for identity, chronicles both Rashad and Quinn's struggles with understanding themselves as well as their place in their extended kinship. Baldwin's opening words to his nephew construct a kinship through the motif of faces: Baldwin states, "I keep seeing your face, which is also the face of your father and my brother" (3). Baldwin empowers his nephew by creating a familial connection through the similarities in facial attributes. These similarities symbolize a kinship and a community which verifies Baldwin's nephew's identity. As discussed earlier in this chapter, when Rashad does not recognize himself in the mirror or on the television, Kiely and Reynolds signify that he does not feel a connection with himself nor his community (88, 94). His inability to recognize his own face demonstrates his isolation from his family and extended kinship. Furthermore, Rashad's sketches originally do not include faces because "Maybe [his subjects are] there, but maybe they're not. Like, ghosts. Or invisible people" (147). The lack of faces in the art Rashad creates symbolizes both his confusion over his experience and his lack of identity. However, over the course of a week, Rashad learns that a myriad of people supports him which allows him to realize that he does, indeed, deserve a face, and he adds one to the self-portrait portraying his beating. His realization that he deserves a face responds to *The Fire Next Time* by illustrating that Rashad has come fully out of isolation through the acceptance of his individual identity and his communal identity and is now ready to face the white world.

Quinn's experience with faces responds to Baldwin's call for white people to "see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it" (10). Quinn's obsession with Paul's face and the way it looked when he viciously beat Rashad wakes Quinn up from his ignorant slumber and begins making him self-aware. Quinn cannot "shake that look of rage I'd seen on the face of a man I knew and thought of as family" (40). Witnessing the beating acts as a catalyst to disassociate from his hegemonic community and initiates a reassessment of Paul. Quinn "could hear [Paul's] voice, and yet it wasn't him. [He] could see [Paul's] face, and yet it wasn't him" (62). Paul's face, because of his status as Quinn's surrogate father, stands as a symbol for the hegemonic kinship Quinn claims in the beginning of the novel. Witnessing the act of violence committed by that face forces Quinn to question how he sees his white community and how people of color must see him which leads him down the path of self-awareness, ultimately leading to his double consciousness.

Kiely and Reynolds's use of the motif of fear in two different ways throughout *All-American Boys* also signifies Baldwin. One kind of fear utilized by both Baldwin and Kiely is the racial fear white people have of Black people. Baldwin tells his nephew that white men feel so threatened by Black people that they perpetuate institutional violence. Baldwin states that "[White people] have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men In this case, the danger in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity" (9). In other words, part of the white identity is the belief in unchallengeable superiority and to admit inferiority would damage the white identity. When part of the hegemonic community,

Quinn gazes upon English and sees him as competition on the basketball court and with girls and, therefore, a threat to Quinn's manhood. Quinn does not see English as a whole person, instead opting to dehumanize his teammate into a single dimensional symbol of competition—someone who has the power to take away his chance at a basketball scholarship and, therefore, his identity (66). However, as Quinn begins to realize and work through his thoughts about race with Jill, he sees English as a fully dimensional human being.

The other form of fear signified throughout *All-American Boys* is the fear of challenging the white hegemony. Baldwin describes this fear as “a fear that the child, in challenging the white world's assumptions, was putting himself in the path of destruction” (27). However, he argues that “To defend oneself against a fear is simply to ensure that one will, one day, be conquered by it; fears must be faced” (27). Becoming a member of a community does not mean that articulate kinsmen live free of fear, only that they participate in *communitas* despite their fear. In *All-American Boys*, both Quinn and Rashad feel fear about participating in the protest. The danger of the protest is real—but now that it is faced together, the fear is bearable. Their shared fear responds to Baldwin's call that both the white oppressors and the Black oppressed must face their fears in order to “end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world” (Baldwin 105). The community that gathers at Police Plaza 1 stands as a symbol for Baldwin's vision.

Finally, Reynold's and Kiely's decision to create an inclusive community responds to Baldwin's call to young Black people that

. . .these [white] men are your brothers—your lost, younger brothers. And if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it. (9-10)

Baldwin explains to his nephew, and all young Black people, that many white people know better than to believe in their superiority to Black men, yet white “people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger” (9). Quinn’s tendency to run away from his problems in the beginning of the novel and his wish to follow Coach Carney’s orders illustrate Baldwin’s description of white people. Quinn’s slowness in realizing his privilege and reluctance to take action partnered with English’s and Jill’s teachings conveys Baldwin’s theory that white people need to be coerced—forced—into confronting their role in the racial reality of the United States. The addition of Quinn’s journey to the traditional narrative of immersion results in a novel that fully answers Baldwin’s call. Without telling the story of Quinn’s development from ignorant to “woke,” Kiely and Reynolds’s audience could not see the extent to which a truly inclusive, democratic society—that considers all citizens to be Americans—depends on white Americans learning their history, facing their racial fears, and then taking action.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

Walter Dean Myers's *Monster* and Brendan Kiely and Jason Reynolds's *All-American Boys* follow the long African American tradition of responding to calls as a form of social education and acts of rebellion. Stepto analyzes the tradition of call and response in his study of African American narrative by beginning with "The Call" which identifies the African American pregeneric myth in slave narratives and then follows with a study of "The Responses" in which he discusses how narratives from his "modern era" answer the call of certain prefiguring texts. Stepto contends that James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* responds to Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* and W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* responds to Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*" (Stepto x). Just as Stepto sees the call and response tradition connecting Johnson to Washington and Du Bois and Wright to Douglass, I have argued that *Monster* and *All-American Boys* respond to the calls of Wright and Baldwin by revising and revoicing the narrative of immersion. The revision and revoicing illustrates how the novels fit into the canon of African American literature. However, I would be remiss to only discuss these two books from the lens of African American literature when they are so clearly and so purposefully written for a young adult audience. Discussing *Monster* and *All-American Boys* in terms of their status as young adult literature as well as African American literature offers another frame of reference and a deeper layer of scholarship. The question is, though, how do the African American paradigm of call and response and the narrative of immersion correlate to the

heuristics of children's literature? The answer lies in the long-debated issue of didacticism among scholars.

From the *The Orbis Pictus* (1658) to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788) to John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) to Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* (2017), authors of literature for young people aim to teach, to enlighten, to illuminate some aspect of the world through their literary instruments. Since the dawn of children's literature, authors have called out to their audience in the hopes that the child will respond to the lesson by acting a certain way in the real world, learning vocabulary for the objects of the world, the benefits of self-control, coming to terms with a terminal illness, or the cost and importance of taking a public stand against racial injustice. But didacticism has been critiqued by some children's literature scholars. In her book *Ethics and Children's Literature*, a collection of essays discussing didacticism in children's literature, Claudia Mills observes that

. . . as a profession we pride ourselves on having overcome our now-discredited origins in preachy parables and maudlin moralizing. It has become a commonplace in histories of Anglo American children's literature to advance the claim that ever since Alice fell down the rabbit hole, we seek to entertain rather than to instruct or enlighten. But do we? And should we? (Mills 1).

Perry Nodelman argues that we should aim only to entertain and compares didacticism in children's literature to colonialism. He claims that children's literature can be analyzed as "as an adult style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over childhood"

(Nodelman 29). Nodelman goes on to state that “. . . we write books for children to provide them with values and with images of themselves *we* approve of or feel comfortable with” (30, emphasis in original). However, Mills would disagree, noting that “[scholarly] attitudes regarding didacticism are historically and culturally situated” (5).

Nodelman’s critique of didacticism in children’s literature focuses on the disadvantages of imposing didactic calls on white, middle- or upper-class children. Even though Nodelman discusses Othering in his article, his metaphor refers to the white adult authors Othering white children as compared to white Europeans colonizing “the Orient” (29). He makes no mention in his argument of how didacticism might work among different demographics: for instance, African American authors writing for African American children or African American authors writing for white children. Noting the race for which Nodelman bases his argument makes a difference, for the history of racial discrimination in the United States complicates his analysis. Nodelman’s arguments cannot be applied to African American young adult literature because one cannot make the argument that the experience of reading as a white child correlates to reading as Black child. Dianne Johnson argues that assumptions of how an African American child reacts to a book cannot be based on the white experience. In response to William Feaver’s study of the purpose of illustration in children’s books, Johnson notes,

To a certain extent . . . [Feaver’s] formulation applies more to the middle-class European and white American children of whose interest he is primarily speaking; children who can, to some degree, indulge in a kind of

cult of childhood (to the degree that they are not concerned at an early age with serious issues such as racism). (Johnson 10)

Johnson's observations about African American children's reactions to illustrations in picture books illuminates Emma Adelaida Otheguy's claim that "Avoiding didacticism in children's literature is a dearly held belief among Anglophone writers, critics, and scholars, but this value is by no means universal" (29). In fact, Charlemae Rollins and her fellow "proponents" of African American Children's literature in the 1930s "considered the didactic lessons of this cultural training to be essential preparation for democratic participation, and far different from concurrent efforts to train children in ideologies of racism and fascism (Hinderer 41). So, while some critics argue that "Fiction that is too narrowly focused on any mission of teaching or shaping readers is likely to be aesthetically flawed for that reason," Mills argues that "the morally and politically charged agenda of inclusiveness was neither sought nor achieved at the expense of literary quality" (3, 5). *Monster* and *All-American Boys* participate in the didactic impulse common in African American children's literature without sacrificing aesthetics or complexity by utilizing the paradigm of the narrative of immersion and signifying on common motifs and themes of adult African American literature to elicit their call.

Scholars study the impulse of didacticism in African American children's literature from slavery to the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement to the current "Golden Age of African American Literature" (Martin xiii). Steven Mintz argues in his survey of the history of childhood in America that "For many [slave] children, literacy was an act of resistance, which instilled a sense of self-worth and offered psychological

freedom” (110), and since slavery, literature has been utilized by African Americans to create pride in the face of racism, to educate about survival in a hostile country, to create a community out of a diaspora, and to encourage—in some cases—acts of rebellion.

In *Children’s Literature in the Harlem Renaissance*, Katharine Capshaw-Smith argues that authors of the Harlem Renaissance use multifaceted, complex literary tools that illustrate the artistry of the work in order to teach their child audience how to live in the racist world of the 1920s. She begins her study by analyzing Du Bois *The Brownies Book* and his utilization of positive images of and stories about Black children to instill a sense of pride in his young readers and to redefine their self-image. Capshaw-Smith notes Du Bois’s didactic impulse in context with the 1906 cover of the *Crisis* in which a Black child is wrapped in an American flag. She argues that “the image decidedly takes control of public black identity, replacing bifurcation (“an American, a Negro” in Du Bois’s terms) with a spirited statement of black childhood’s integral connection to nationhood” (xiii). Kiely and Reynolds’s *All-American Boys* harkens back to Du Bois’s purpose of his children’s editions of the *Crisis* and his children’s magazine *The Brownies Book*. Just as Du Bois tries to provide a community for his young readers via his magazines to help them learn the “dogged strength” to keep their double consciousness from tearing them asunder, Kiely and Reynolds’s novel uses the narrative of immersion to achieve a similar goal. The support of the community uplifts Rashad and makes him able to join their ranks as an articulate kinsman, while the protest instills a sense of responsibility in both Quinn and Rashad to participate in their new community. By rewriting the narrative for the contemporary racial issues of modern America, the authors achieve didacticism—

teaching their readers how to participate in a community that will lift them up—while working in artistic forms within the tradition of African American literature.

Despite the call for the end of didacticism from some scholars of Anglo American or Anglo European children's literature, works of African American children's literature affirm the impulse by continuing the practice of call and response. Authors of African American children's literature issue calls through the lessons taught in their books in hopes that their audience will respond. The ritual of call and response between author and reader makes their work necessary for social change. As previously mentioned, Baldwin believes "Literature is indispensable to the world . . . The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even a millimeter, the way a person looks at reality, then you can change it" (qtd in Sims 1). However, in order for the world to change, the didactic call from African American books for young adults must be heard by a white audience as well in order to aid white children in understanding their whiteness in relation to its role in a racially polarized United States. Capshaw-Smith argues that Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemp's partnership in the 1920s "suggest[ed] a shift in visible black children's literature away from populist expressions . . . toward more stylized productions from major publishing houses that were marketed to interracial child audiences" (Capshaw-Smith xxv). Even though this shift of audience precedes Baldwin by four decades, it speaks to his message that "[Black people] cannot be free until [white people] are free" (10). To be free, white people need to be educated in their racial history, and one way to bolster the education of white Americans is through literature. Both *Monster* and *All-American Boys* signify this message in their portrayal of white privilege

in modern dress. Steve does not find freedom because his white guards, white jury, and white lawyer are not free of their prejudice, whereas Rashad finds a form of freedom in his community because Quinn and his white counterparts overcome their racial fear in order to take up arms as allies. Through signifying Baldwin's message, Myers and Kiely and Reynolds portray their message without blunting their artistry with too-forward lessons for their readers.

The Black Arts Movement offers another connection between aesthetics and didacticism in children's literature that could be applied to contemporary African American children's literature. In *Brown Gold: Milestones of African American Children's Picture Books, 1845-2002*, Michelle Martin argues that the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, commonly referred to as BAM, influenced African American children's book authors to broach difficult subjects in order to teach their child readers that they are not alone in struggling with the Black experience. BAM encouraged Black artists to create their own aesthetic and, as Martin claims, sparked a new renaissance of African American children's literature that allowed Black artists to present their art with realism just as Myers and Kiely and Reynolds do. Using Larry Neal's work on BAM, Martin argues that BAM and the Black Power Movement shaped children's literature:

The Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement both played an important role in the evolution of the genre of African-American children's literatures. [BAM], however, the 'aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept,' gave voice to many ideas that, even though they may have not translated directly into African-American children's

picture books, still surface in substantial ways in this body of literature.

(Martin 73)¹⁶

In the case of *Monster* and *All-American Boys*, the Black Arts Movement called for Myers and Kiely and Reynolds to “express anger at the plight of black children in America—and this anger often comes not so much in what the child character expresses but in what the narrative evokes in the reader in response to the child’s situation” (Martin 74). Both *Monster* and *All-American Boys* elicit an angry response from readers when confronted with Steve’s experience in jail and his thwarted journey of immersion, Rashad’s brutalization at the hands of the police, and Quinn’s ignorance to his privilege and role in the hegemony. The contemporary African American young adult novels answer the call of the Black Arts Movement in order to teach their audience without sacrificing artistry.

Myers, as well as Kiely and Reynolds, are not the only contemporary authors in conversation with both African American literature and African American young adult literature. In fact, many contemporary works illustrate the many lenses I’ve used in my close readings: Stepto’s narrative of immersion or ascent, the African American literary and cultural tradition of call and response, Gates’s literary definition of signifying, Ntusi’s discussion of white double consciousness, Capshaw-Smith’s study of didacticism and aesthetics in Harlem Renaissance children’s literature, and Martin’s study of the influence of BAM on children’s literature. These heuristics and paradigms can be applied

¹⁶ Neal, Larry. *The Black Arts Movement*. New York University School of Arts, 1968.

to multiple contemporary works. Mildred Taylor's *Road to Memphis* (1990), Walter Dean Myers's *Somewhere in the Darkness* (1992), and Christopher Paul Curtis's *Bud, Not Buddy* (1999) could be used to continue the discourse surrounding kinship and journeys of immersion and ascension. Angie Thomas's *The Hate You Give* (2017) could be read as a female journey of immersion and a feminist companion to Kiely and Reynolds's *All-American Boys*. Nikki Grimes's *Bronx Masquerade* (2002), Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* (2017), Angie Thomas's *On the Come Up* (2019), and Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X* (2018) could all be considered as texts in conversation with Stepto, Gates, Capshaw-Smith, and Martin. Based on the plentitude of rich African American children's literature available to study, it seems as if we are, indeed, in the golden age of African American literature for young people despite the primacy of the didactic impulse. To bolster and enrich the discourse surrounding African American literature for young people, we must begin to utilize the paradigms and lenses common to studying adult literature. It is necessary to continue this type of work so that the genre can continue to thrive and continue to call out to all readers—Black and white—to obliterate the color line.

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