

Disrupting the Canon with Young Adult Remixes

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DEDICATION

To all the teachers trying to provide mirrors to their students through literature.

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ABSTRACT

The Western literary canon has several texts that remain on required reading lists in secondary English classrooms throughout North America. Texts from the canon are overwhelmingly white and do not represent the culturally and linguistically diverse students in classrooms nationwide. To consider ways to disrupt whiteness in the Western literary canon and English/Language Arts (ELA) curricula, this study analyzed how *Romeo and Juliet*, a commonly taught canonical text, is retold by Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) authors as remixes for young adults (YA). Through critical comparative content analyses, *Romeo and Juliet* was compared to four YA remixes (*If You Come Softly*, *Romiette and Julio*, *These Violent Delights*, and *Street Love*) written by BIPOC authors.

Findings show that the authors of the remixes did not rely on plot to reimagine *Romeo and Juliet*, but rather focused on retelling a love story and transforming the theme of star-crossed lovers. All YA remixes acted as counter-stories to the hegemonic whiteness of *Romeo and Juliet* by centering stories that are often ignored or untold in the Western literary canon. Three out of the four YA texts critiqued racism and whiteness in contemporary society through intentional additions when compared to *Romeo and Juliet*. These findings help readers understand how BIPOC authors transformed *Romeo and Juliet* and in what ways the retellings can be used in secondary ELA classrooms to push back against the whiteness of Shakespeare's text.

Implications for secondary ELA teachers and teacher educators are discussed with suggestions for pairing texts in classrooms, including pairing *Romeo and Juliet* with a BIPOC-authored YA retelling through the lens of critical literacy. Teacher educators may wish to introduce critical

literacy to pre-service teachers as a framework for analyzing and resisting? the Western literary canon as pre-service teachers imagine their future classrooms.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

My Relationship with Young Adult Literature

For over a century, educators have recognized the value that engaging and relevant literature can bring to adolescents in the English language arts (ELA) classroom. The earliest claim I could find was Thurber (1905) stating that his high school English students did not want to read the classic texts assigned to them in school, but preferred fiction on topics they enjoyed. He explained that while many ELA teachers hope to spark a love of literature for their students, it often does not work when they hand students the “most difficult works of that literature— in no way suited, as far as I can discover, to the tastes of boys and girls” (p.173). He advocated that teachers become familiar with the “tastes” of their students and center texts that interest them in classroom instruction. While Thurber (1905) did not name young adult literature (YAL)--as it was not established as a genre yet, his argument has been picked up by advocates of YAL who argue YAL deserves a more central place in the ELA curricula for its ability to engage adolescent readers (Smit, 2019; Buehler, 2016; Ivey & Johnston 2013, Gallo, 2001; Bright, 2011; Kaywell, 1993).

In my past experiences as a secondary ELA teacher, I witnessed Thurber’s claims come to life when I privileged contemporary texts and student interest over classic texts. I was fortunate enough to work in a school with a supportive department head who allowed me to bring six YA novels into my classroom over the course of five years. While reading the YA novel, *Period 8*, by Chris Crutcher (2013), my students said: “This is the first book I’ve ever fully read.” “I can’t believe the characters talk like us.” “Can I stay during lunch to read more?” “Can I please take this book home?” My students’ love of reading this novel drove my class

forward as students developed their own weekly discussion topics, presented a book talk to their peers, and saw their grades improve.

Because of the high level of reading engagement I witnessed, I reached out to my former education professor, Dr. Wendy Glenn, at the end of the school year. Dr. Glenn was my advisor in my teacher preparation program at the University of Connecticut. Dr. Glenn taught classes on YAL pedagogy and brought YAL into many of the methods courses I took while pursuing my teacher certification. I informed her of the enthusiasm I witnessed from my students as they were reading *Period 8* and how I wanted to become more involved in using YAL as a tool to educate and inspire my future students.

Through discussions with Dr. Glenn, we developed a research project for the following school year. With the election of President Donald Trump and the implementation of travel bans, we recognized that we are living in a xenophobic moment and wondered how reading YA novels might affect students' understanding of an underrepresented and often marginalized culture in the US. We wanted to choose novels featuring Muslim protagonists and Islamic content to analyze how reading these novels might influence students' perceptions and understandings of Islamic culture. As nobody on the research team identified as Muslim, Dr. Glenn asked two Muslim-American preservice teacher candidates in her classes and one colleague at another institution, to help with text selection. With their guidance, we selected titles that spanned a variety of contexts and time periods to avoid providing a set of novels that told a single story about Muslim people and Islamic culture. The novels included *Tasting the Sky*, by Ibtisam Barakat; *Shooting Kabul*, by N.H. Senzai; *If You Could Be Mine*, by Sara Farizan; and *All We*

Have Left, by Wendy Mills. My students were able to self-select a novel based upon their preferences (see Table 1 on Appendix p. 171 for a short description of each novel).

The students' interest was apparent from the moment we introduced them to our four chosen novels. The students selected their top choices and began to read with a passion I hadn't witnessed from this specific group of students before. The previous year I saw how students were excited about *Period 8*, and the same excitement was rippling through my classroom as these students read their YA novels. The students read in both small groups and independently as they worked their way through their novels over the course of eight weeks. Each Friday, the students participated in a lesson that connected their novel and a key social justice topic, such as othering, equity, stereotypes, and more. The lessons we created asked students to engage in difficult, real-world topics.

Witnessing my students' interest, engagement, and commitment to reading a YA novel helped me develop what Murphy (2019) calls "craft knowledge:" in my case, the understanding and belief that YAL could not only motivate adolescent readers to read, but also engage students in insightful discussions about contemporary social issues and encourage growth in their thinking (Drossopoulos & King, 2018; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2020). Murphy (2019) defines craft knowledge as "stem[ming] from the understanding gathered over time by practitioners, including through stories, ad hoc observations, and intuition" (para. 4.). What I witnessed in my classroom through observation and intuition helped to build my craft knowledge and deep belief that bringing YAL into the classroom is a valuable tool that ELA teachers can use to foster both reading lives and important conversations with adolescents.

After the culmination of the research project with Dr. Glenn, I continued to refine my pedagogy as an educator and learn from my experiences using YAL. The next school year, I found myself debating whether I could use a canonical text from my school's preapproved list or bring in a new YA text to facilitate discussions centering social justice. The work I had done with Dr. Glenn and the Muslim-centered YA novels showed me how class discussions around racism, othering, and stereotyping were timely and meaningful to my students. I wanted to give another set of students the opportunity to engage in similar discussions.

At the time, I didn't have a research-based rationale for centering race and social justice in my teaching (besides knowing that it felt important when my students and I were engaging in conversations around social justice topics—more “craft knowledge”). The classroom felt alive, conversations felt charged, and it felt like our discussions were doing *something*. Intuitively, it felt like we were doing important work--work that I wanted to continue the following year.

During the time I was planning for the following school year, Philando Castile's murder was in the news, which made me want to bring discussions around #BlackLivesMatter and racism into the classroom. I wanted to connect the real world to the literature we were reading, and while I knew books in my curriculum, like *A Raisin in the Sun* (Hansberry, 1959), *could* facilitate discussions around race and racism, I wanted to find literature that would explicitly center topics of race, racism, and privilege in a way that was more contemporary and relevant for my students. This led me to select *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, winner of the 2016 Walter Dean Myers Award and Coretta Scott King Book Award Honor, as the core text in a unit centered on race and privilege. I found the dual character narration and dual racial identities of the authors compelling, and I believed that the dual narrations

representing dual identities would allow students to engage with multiple perspectives in ways that supported empathy development and critical thinking (Banack, 2020). In addition, Reynolds and Kiely directly address issues of racism, police brutality, and privilege in *All American Boys* (AAB), which stood in stark contrast to all the other texts in my curricula. For example, after one of the main characters in AAB, Rashad, is wrongly accused of a crime and assaulted by a white police officer, another character states: “I don’t think most people think they’re racist. But every time something like this happens, you could, like you said, say, ‘not my problem.’ You could say, ‘it’s a one-time thing.’ Every time it happened” (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015, p. 184). This explicit naming and explanation of racism is woven throughout the entire text. Through choosing AAB, I believed the students would be engaged reading about racism as it exists in the world today.

While my students were engaged while reading AAB, my unit planning lacked intentionally-centered instruction about systemic racism (see Banack, 2020 for a full reflection on this unit). My students and I had discussions about police brutality and privilege, but a strong understanding and explicit instruction about how the roots of white supremacy enable white privilege and police brutality to survive in our society was lacking on my part. When I was teaching in 2017, I had not read about Critical Race Theory (CRT) or anti-racist pedagogy. In contrast, in my current position as a doctoral candidate I am encouraged to spend time thinking and writing about how to apply critical lenses to my practice. I have thought about my positionality as a middle-class, cis-het, white, woman and strive to be an antiracist educator and accomplice (Baker-Bell, 2020; Johnson, 2021; Love, 2020; Muhammad 2020). I believe that in order to stop harming our Black and brown students, our education system needs to be abolished

and reimagined, as our existing educational policies—including what literature gets sanctioned in secondary ELA classrooms—are anti-Black, racist, and unjust (Love, 2019). ELA classrooms have historically been sites of oppression through the overwhelmingly white texts we teach and how we police and punish students’ oral and written expression (Baker-Bell, 2020). Bettina Love (2020) reminds us:

The shift to anti-racism does not happen overnight or after one professional development session: It happens through a process of self-discovery, healing, and learning to reject and call out racist ideas, people, and structures. Anti-racist teaching is not a teaching approach or method, it is a way of life. (para. 7)

Being an anti-racist ELA teacher and teacher educator requires constant work and reflection— work I am committed to doing through reading the work of scholars of color, centering scholars and authors of color on course syllabi, using inclusive citation practices, and engaging in regular reflection on my whiteness and positionality. I recognize the importance of a sustained approach to racial literacy in a classroom (Skerret, 2011) and believe the ELA classroom can be a site where educators actively resist white supremacy through the texts we teach and the ways we teach them. As I looked for YAL texts to pair with the Western literary canon in this dissertation, I asked myself: How will my instruction and text selection engage students’ thinking about power, equity, and the disruption of oppression? (Muhammad, 2019, p. 353). This dissertation focused much more on text selection rather than instruction, but I considered Muhammad’s question of instruction in the implications of this dissertation.

However, when I was teaching in 2017, I did not use critical lenses or intentionally reflect on my whiteness while teaching. I had my students’ (assumed) best interests at heart,

found literature I felt would help me discuss important topics, and tried to plan a cohesive unit around police brutality, race, and privilege. My ignorance at the time is not an excuse; I could and should have done better, researched more, and spent more time thinking about how the unit could center around systemic oppression and reflected on how my whiteness informed my pedagogy. Reflecting on this time, I also realize how I wasn't encouraged to do this kind of thinking because I didn't have colleagues to engage with around these topics, my school leaders were not encouraging this type of discourse, and I didn't have a community of practice to engage with. With this knowledge, as a future teacher-educator, I hope to cultivate a community of practice that inservice teachers can return to and collaborate around ways to center race and racism in their classrooms in meaningful, critical, and impactful ways.

Ultimately, reflecting on the *AAB* unit called attention to the fact that I needed to do more work as a white teacher to be intentionally anti-racist in my pedagogy and work to understand, daily, how I am implicated in racism and whiteness, but it also continued to support my belief that *YAL* was an engaging tool in the classroom. I witnessed increased student engagement compared to when students read canonical texts, as evidenced by participation in class discussion, increased test scores on common assessments, and portfolio projects at the culmination of the unit.

While I had a flexible and supportive department head who empowered me to bring *YA* texts into my classroom, there was also an expectation that I still teach two canonical texts a year. In the curriculum, ninth grade teachers were expected to teach one short story unit and four thematic units throughout the year. My department head explicitly told me that I could replace any two of the four core texts in the thematic units with *YAL*, but the other two needed to come

from a list which included *Romeo and Juliet*, *Of Mice and Men*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and *The Great Gatsby*. While my department head didn't provide me with a rationale for her decision, researchers have discussed the tensions many teachers face when trying to incorporate YAL into their classrooms in place of canonical texts, including white nostalgia over the Western literary canon, concerns about the perceived lack of rigor of YAL, pushback from parents and administrators, and curricular mandates (Buehler, 2016; Gibbons et al., 2006; Glaws, 2021; Krickeberg, 1995; Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016; Malo-Juvera & Greathouse, 2021).

Ultimately, my experiences witnessing the power of YAL in the classroom to engage students, and also my experiences navigating the tensions of choosing between YAL and the Western literary canon, led me to pursue my doctoral degree at the University of Tennessee in the Literacy Studies program with a specialization in Children's and YAL. It was during my time in the program that the inspiration for this dissertation was born. In my first year of my doctoral program, as part of my graduate research assistantship and as part of a pilot study Dr. Groenke had developed, I observed a local 9th grade teacher implement YA literature circles while students read *Romeo and Juliet*. Our research team wanted to understand the intertextual connections students were making when they read the YA novel paired with the canonical text. This teacher used *Romeo and Juliet* as a whole class text and YA novels for literature circles. Students in his class read *The Fault in Our Stars*, by John Green; *Romiette and Julio*, by Sharon Draper; *If I Come Softly*, by Jacqueline Woodson; and *Scribbler of Dreams*, by Mary Pearson (see Table 2 on Appendix p. 172 for text descriptions).

The teacher used structured literature circle worksheets to guide discussion around the YA novels, and we were often able to see connections students made on their worksheets (text-

to-text, text-to-self, text-to-world). This was my first experience seeing a teacher *pair* YA and canonical texts, as I had only ever used one or the other in my former teaching experiences. It was exciting for me to witness how students were using the YA text to make sense of the canonical text and to listen to their weekly discussions. As the students in the pilot study often worked independently of the teacher to fill out their worksheets and facilitate their own literature circle discussions, the pilot study also showed me how important teacher instruction was to the process of making intertextual connections. If the teacher had facilitated student discussion about intertext connections, and modeled his own connection making, I believe our research team would have seen richer and deeper connections being made by the students. Following the pilot study, the research team decided to refine the study for the next year to include student interviews to learn more about how students were making connections between the novels.

The research team and I applied for, and was awarded, an ALAN research grant to continue our work on examining the intertextual connections adolescents were making between YAL and canonical texts. Through the grant, we developed lit kits that included YA texts and teaching resources for teachers to use with *Romeo and Juliet* and *Pride and Prejudice*. We found two teachers who were interested in using the lit kits with their students, and I organized the materials and observation schedule with the teachers. One teacher worked in a 9th grade classroom and wanted to pair *Romeo and Juliet* with literature circles, inviting students to read *The Fault in Our Stars*, *The Juliet Club*, *Eleanor and Park*, and *Scribbler of Dreams*. The other was a 10th grade Honors teacher who planned for the whole class to read both Jane Austen's classic *Pride and Prejudice* and Ibi Zoboi's YA remix, *Pride*.

At both of these research sites, I made weekly observations, took field notes, and conducted student interviews in both one-on-one settings and focus group settings. In the classroom where students read both *Pride* and *Pride and Prejudice*, one student said, “Zoboi wrote *Pride* to help the younger generation understand *Pride and Prejudice* because it’s a very hard book to read and, like, understand what’s going on.... [Y]ou can make connections easy between the two books so you actually know what happened in *Pride and Prejudice*.” This students’ reflections on pairing the two texts revealed a self-awareness of enhanced understanding of plot in the canonical text. This work excited me, especially witnessing the conversations happening in the classroom where students were reading *Pride*.

The conversations around *Pride* differed from the classroom where students were reading *Romeo and Juliet*, as *Pride* was written by a Black author and encouraged discussion about social justice through the themes cultural identity, class, and gentrification that Zoboi posed in her YA novel. *Pride* is set in a present-day, rapidly gentrifying neighborhood in Bushwick, NY. The protagonist, Zuri Benitez, does not want to get to know the wealthy Darcy family (including two teenage boys, Ainsley and Darius) that moves in across the street, as they represent change in her neighborhood and life. Throughout the novel, Zuri and Darius are forced to find commonalities.

When reading *Pride*, students made text-to-text connections to *Pride and Prejudice*, but they also made text-to-world connections and brought up topics of socioeconomic class, racism, and stereotypes throughout their discussion of *Pride*. When discussing why the main character in *Pride*, Zuri, liked Warren and how it connected to Elizabeth’s feelings for Mr. Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*, teacher-facilitated conversations with students often sounded like this:

Teacher: So let's connect this to *Pride and Prejudice* and how Elizabeth likes Wickham. Are there any parallels that Elizabeth likes Wickham?

Student 1: In the reading [*P&P*], it talks about that, like, you don't have to have manners, you just have to be polite and fashionable and say nice things.

Teacher: So what you're saying is very surface level so it doesn't represent their inside like Warren and Wickham.

Student 2: I think Zuri thinks she knows Warren even before she meets him because she has stereotypes about people just like Darius because she thinks he's stuck up so she thinks she'll have more in common with Warren.

Student 3: They are also closer in terms of class than Zuri and Darius, so it's not as big of a leap for her.

Student 2: This isn't about the question, but I was just going to say she talks about how she tries to defy stereotypes, but she has stereotypes of her own, so it shows even if you want to defy stereotypes, people will still have stereotypes of you.

Student 1: In *Pride and Prejudice*, Wickham is the younger son and he was supposed to go to the clergy and he wants to do something else, but Elizabeth thinks that he's been wronged by the Darcys, and in *Pride*, Warren is in the projects and Zuri thinks he's like the hurt dog and Zuri tries to help him.

As this excerpt reveals, students made text-to-text connections drawing parallels between the characters and their relationships in both books, and also text-to-text connections regarding the theme of social class. Social class is a major theme in both novels, and Student 2 drew on this theme to understand why Zuri and Elizabeth like both men in the novels.

What was even more exciting to witness through this conversation was the students discussing stereotypes by noting how Zuri tries to defy stereotypes before applying this recognition to their own life by stating, “even if you want to defy stereotypes, people will still have stereotypes of you.” This pivot from talking about Zuri to being aware of how stereotypes exist for people today, or “you,” showed me how first students made text-to-text connections about the characters and then moved to text-to-world connections about stereotyping through their discussion of the paired novels. Being able to witness these conversations demonstrated how using YAL in the classroom could foster important conversations with students. Students weren’t only making text-to-text connections and understanding the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* more thoroughly, but they were using *Pride* as a jumping off point to discuss real-world issues.

The research I was doing for the ALAN grant and my graduate assistantship inspired me to ask the teacher who paired *Pride* with *Pride and Prejudice* if she would be willing to collaborate the following year on my dissertation research. She said yes, and I was excited to collaboratively plan with her and immerse myself in her classroom listening to students discuss the two paired novels. Unfortunately, I had completed about three weeks of observations when the Covid-19 pandemic struck and the school moved to remote learning for the remainder of 2020. We communicated throughout the rest of the school year in anticipation of restarting the study the following school year, but the pandemic continued, as did remote learning. The teacher couldn’t get her students copies of *Pride* to read while they were at home, and the logistics of carrying out the study were implausible for the 2020-2021 school year. As we kept in touch and discussed the 2021-2022 school year, it was revealed that her school was moving to adapting a

scripted curriculum as well as transitioning to block scheduling. She was unsure if and when she would be able to teach *Pride*, so I decided to pivot the focus of this dissertation.

When reflecting on my experiences observing three teachers pair YAL with canonical texts, I realized I could explore the relationship between the text pairings themselves. I was able to see the pairings doing *something* while in the classroom to facilitate discussions around race and social justice, especially in my observations of *Pride*. Love (2019) tells us that reimagining and rewriting the curriculum can provide opportunities for resistance by teachers and students. The classroom discussions I witnessed made me wonder if pairing the Western literary canon with remixes written by BIPOC authors could serve as an act of resistance educators can engage in to counter white supremacy in the classroom. Witnessing these classroom discussions also helped me realize it might be important to consider why and how authors of color like Ibi Zoboi rewrote the Western literary canon through their YA remixes. Therefore, this dissertation is an exploration of the following questions:

- How do authors of color retell *Romeo and Juliet* from the Western literary canon?
- Do these texts critique whiteness or racism compared to the whiteness prevalent in *Romeo and Juliet*?
- Do these remixes act as counter-stories to disrupt whiteness in the original canonical text?

It seemed important to focus on pairings because in all of the classrooms I observed, the school districts required canonical texts be taught each year, yet teachers were trying to find ways to bring YAL into the classroom. This tension was mitigated by the teachers I observed through the YAL and canonical pairings they facilitated in the classroom. As I've written, I also

navigated this tension in my own previous teaching experience by replacing two canonical texts a year with YAL texts. While advocating for critically interrogating the use of canonical texts in school curriculum and replacing the canon with inclusive YA texts might better represent the linguistically and culturally diverse students in classrooms, this is getting increasingly more difficult as states pass restrictive legislation around materials used in the classroom. The pull of the Western literary canon remains strong in classrooms across the nation, and pairing the canon with YAL--to privilege the YA text--is an exciting possibility to explore through this dissertation work for teachers to better serve their students.

Tensions between Teaching the Western Literary Canon and YAL

Young adult literature offers opportunities for educators to engage with their students around stories that center complex and diverse portrayals of adolescents (Groenke et al., 2010) in contrast to the majority white stories told in the Western literary canon (Bissonette & Glazier, 2015), thus better reflecting the identities of the students in our classrooms. However, the Western literary canon has remained static and unchanging with canonical texts often being required reading in high school English classes across North America (Wolk, 2010; Glaws, 2021). Students across the nation are expected to read classic texts deemed "great works" (Bright, 2011), despite the lack of diversity and engagement the Western literary canon has to offer (Bissonette & Glazier, 2015; Daniels & Zemelman, 2004; Gallo, 2001). Advocates and scholars of YAL claim YAL has the same educational value as the classics as it can teach students the same literacy skills, such as reading comprehension, while increasing student engagement, motivation, and exposing students to diverse literature (Gallo, 2001; Glaws, 2014).

However, when teachers try to bring contemporary YAL into curricula to replace canonical texts, they often encounter resistance from administrators, fellow educators, and parents (Glaws, 2021; Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016; Malo-Juvera & Greathouse, 2021). Some argue that “the books are not complex enough to prepare students for the demands of high-stakes tests or the challenges of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)” (Buehler, 2016, p. 4). The CCSS require Shakespeare be taught in secondary ELA classes and provide other text exemplars from other canonical authors, like Keats. Similarly, starting in grade 9, teachers and administrators cite concerns that YAL lacks sophistication, rigor, and merit (Claiborne, 2004; Gibbons et al., 2006; Samuels, 1983) and feel that YAL is too easy for students in grades 11 and 12 (Krickeberg, 1995). Glaws’ survey (2021) found that “33.33% [of teachers] indicated that they would like to include MG/YAL but are unable to because of a required curriculum” (p. 25). There are a myriad of reasons educators find themselves caught in the tension between using canonical texts in the classroom, whether they are required to or not, and wanting to provide opportunities for their students to read YAL.

To mitigate the tension between YAL and the classics, advocates of YAL suggest that YAL can be used to scaffold adolescents’ literary competence with canonical works (Glaus, 2014, Bright, 2011). In *From Hinton to Hamlet: Building Bridges Between Young Adult Literature and the Classics*, Herz & Gallo (2005) suggest that connecting YA texts and classic works allows teachers and students to focus on the “big ideas” the texts share (p. 27). Students are provided with opportunities to make intertextual connections and practice literacy skills when pairing YA and classic texts. Kaywell (1993) proposes using YAL as a “complement to the classics” to help make the classics “relevant and meaningful” (p. IX). With the Western literary

canon being firmly entrenched in school curricula, Kaywell produced four volumes of her book, *Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics* (1993, 1995, 1997, 2000) and *Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics: Addressing Critical Issues in Today's Classrooms* (2010). This trend of publishing books on pairings continues today, with three edited collections published this year focused on pairing canonical texts with YAL (Malo-Juvera et. al, 2021; Greathouse & Malo-Juvera, 2021a, 2021b). By using YAL as a bridge to the classics, this rationale can provide teachers with an opportunity to bring engaging and diverse literature into their curricula.

Bright's (2011) content analysis revealed that many YA novels published in the last twenty years (e.g., Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series with *Wuthering Heights*) reveal intertextual relationships between contemporary and canonical literature. Bright (2011) advocates that "when adolescents read contemporary literature they form a link to classics, forging a better understanding of canonical material by engaging with contemporary books" (p. 40). Many YA authors have reimagined canonical works with a modern twist in hopes of engaging readers with similar themes. Shakespeare's classic play, *Romeo and Juliet* has a wide range of YA titles with intertextual links, including Mary Pearson's *Scribbler of Dreams*, Sharon Draper's *Romiette and Julio*, Jacqueline Woodson's *If You Come Softly*, John Green's *The Fault In Our Stars*, Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor & Park*, and Walter Dean Myers' *Street Love*. While some texts are thematically linked (e.g. *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Romeo and Juliet* feature star-crossed lovers), others are imitation texts, using similar plot and characters to the original story while making changes to culture or time period (e.g. *Romeo and Juliet* and *Romiette and Julio*). Importantly, many retellings of texts from the Western literary canon are being written by Black,

Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) authors with BIPOC main characters, in stark contrast to the white authors and stories privileged in the canon.

Whiteness in the Western Literary Canon

Thinking back to my time in my 9th grade classroom when I turned a critical eye towards the canonical texts available to me, and my time as a graduate student observing in local classrooms, the stories featuring majority white adult males stood in opposition to the culturally diverse backgrounds of the students in these classrooms and the increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse students in the US overall (Hussar & Bailey, 2013; deBrey et al., 2019). The Western literary canon's lack of BIPOC characters reinforces racial exclusivity (Bissonette & Glazier, 2015) by privileging stories of upper-class white men. White authors and stories are given priority over literature that represents people of color, which in turn creates a racialized curricula that privileges whiteness above all (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Butler, 2017; Johnson, 2018; Johnson et. al, 2017; Kirkland, 2013; Kinloch, 2005). As ELA classes historically have been places that reinforce racism through the texts that we teach and the ways that we teach them (Borsheim-Black et. al, 2014; Baker-Bell, 2020; Cridland-Hughes & King, 2015; Johnson et. al, 2017; Sarigianides & Banack, 2021), the Western literary canon functions as a tool to privilege stories of whiteness in our schools. As Tyson (2015) notes, "the literary canon has thus been used to maintain white cultural hegemony" (p. 347). The whiteness and racism of the canon stand in stark contrast to the cultural makeup of students present in classrooms today (Hussar & Bailey, 2013; deBrey et al., 2019), as the literature serves to reinforce invisible racial ideologies of whiteness (Morrison, 1992).

While the Western literary canon has long been critiqued for its racial exclusivity (Bissonette & Glazier, 2015; Brooks, 2009; Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Dyches

2018a; Dyches 2018b; Johnson et. al, 2017; Tyson, 2015), which will be discussed be more in chapter two, some educators themselves express a belief that texts in the Western literary canon provide students with (white) cultural capital (Samuels, 1983). This positions whiteness as cultural capital, as whiteness is the only experience that is represented in the Western literary canon. If teachers are expressing canonical texts hold cultural capital, it implies that only white stories provide cultural capital as the experiences and narratives of BIPOC protagonists are absent from the Western literary canon. Samuels (1983) also identified nostalgia as a justification for teaching canonical texts, as the teachers with whom he talked often discussed wanting to teach books they had been taught when they were students. This rationale for teaching books that have “stood the test of time” (Samuel, 1983, p. 87) only serves to reinforce the whiteness of the Western literary canon by purposefully excluding contemporary, diverse texts from being taught in place of canonical texts.

Glaws (2021) surveyed teachers about their use and perceptions of middle grade and YA novels in the classroom and found that many teachers still find the Western literary canon as important as Samuels found in 1983. Teachers in Glaws’ survey “expressed beliefs that canonical texts provide students with an ‘entrance into the community of literature’ and ‘a background in the things that are part of our collective culture’” (p. 28). The collective culture referenced here privileges whiteness, as whiteness is the only culture discussed in the Western literary canon. The “collective culture” must be interrogated because how can it be a collective culture if the majority racial experience represented in the Western literary canon centers whiteness? The collectiveness then only encompasses white narratives and lives and excludes the experiences of BIPOC. References to the “community of literature” also privilege white stories,

as researchers have long critiqued the racial exclusivity of the Western literary canon. While the educators surveyed did not explicitly relate whiteness to collective culture, it is easy to make the connection that the “collective culture” is one of whiteness, as the Western literary canon does not include a diverse range of cultures or experiences. This white nostalgia for the Western literary canon demonstrates how ingrained the canon is in secondary ELA classrooms as teachers rationalize its longstanding existence as a reason to continue teaching texts within the canon.

Consequently, when students are only fed “a strict diet of the classics... they are cut off from the larger world of literacy” (Buehler, 2016, p. 3). Canonical texts do not address relevant, contemporary, or racial issues adolescents are faced with today and therefore limit students’ ability to connect to the literature and critique systems of power in today’s society. Witnessing the racial exclusivity of the Western literary canon through my own teaching and observation experiences had me caught in the tension of realizing how embedded the canon is in school curricula, reinforcing white Anglo-male perspectives of the world, and knowing YAL could offer students more diverse and engaging stories. Thinking about the possibilities of pairing YAL to texts in the Western literary canon had me questioning if paired texts by BIPOC authors could be a way to counter the canon and include marginalized groups who have intentionally been excluded from the literature. Pairing the Western literary canon with YAL and including critical lenses, like Critical Race Theory (CRT), could highlight the ways racism is at work in the canon and how BIPOC authors push back against white supremacy through retellings.

Study Purpose and Key Terms

The juxtaposition between the lack of representation and engagement the Western literary canon offers students and the diverse experiences written about in YAL drive my research

interests in pairing YA retellings with canonical texts by BIPOC authors. My personal experience witnessing students' engagement with diverse YAL in contrast to the Western literary canon, paired with the knowledge that there is a longstanding expectation that teachers use overwhelmingly white classic texts in their classroom, fuel my research interest of exploring the connections between the canon and YA retellings of canonical texts by BIPOC authors. The purpose of this study was to identify how BIPOC YA authors remix the Western literary canon and explore whether and how their stories act as counter-stories to the overwhelming whiteness of the canon.

In this study, I focused on retellings by BIPOC authors to counter the reality that canonical texts are overwhelmingly white and male and thus reinforce master narratives of whiteness in ELA curricula (Baker-Bell, 2020; Cridland-Hughes & King, 2015; Johnson et. al, 2017). I used a Critical Comparative Content Analysis (CCCA) approach (Sulzer et. al, 2018) to understand what connections exist between each canonical text and paired YA retelling. This enabled me to understand what the YA text added, omitted, and revised in the retelling of the canonical text. I used Critical Race Theory (CRT) as an analytic framework to consider how the YA texts comment on racism and whiteness in the Western literary canon and whether they function as counter-stories (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Williams, 2004) to the canon. Critical Race Theory helped me understand in what ways BIPOC authors remixed the canonical texts to speak back to the dominant narrative of whiteness and how to provide students opportunities to extend discussion using lenses grounded inequity and social justice.

Key Terms

These key terms and acronyms will be used throughout the study:

- *BIPOC*- Black, Indigenous, People of Color
- *CRT*- Critical Race Theory. Discussed in chapter 3.
- *CCCA*- Comparative Critical Content Analysis. Discussed in chapter 3.
- *Western literary canon/Canonical/Classic texts*-These terms will be used interchangeably and mean a phrase applied to describe historically preserved bodies of literature that often project the voices and experiences of Anglo White males (Dyches, 2018).
- *Young Adult Literature (YAL)*-Literature marketed towards and often featuring adolescents.

Research Questions

Understanding the tensions that exist between teaching required canonical texts and bringing contemporary YAL into the classroom, coupled with the overwhelming whiteness of the Western literary canon privileged in secondary ELA classrooms, led me to develop the following guiding research questions:

- How do BIPOC authors retell a text, *Romeo and Juliet*, from the Western literary canon?
- Do the resulting texts critique whiteness or racism in ways that contrast with the white normativity prevalent in *Romeo and Juliet*?
- Do these remixes act as counter-stories that disrupt whiteness in the original canonical text?

Positionality

I bring multiple privileges, insights, and biases to this study that I will work to recognize as I conduct my analysis and writing of this study.

Social Identities Relative to Using Critical Race Theory

I am a cis-het, white female who was raised in suburban New England in an upper-middle class family. I work to understand how these privileges benefit me daily as I move throughout society and, more specifically, as I work in the majority white field of teaching and teacher preparation. White women make up nearly 80 percent of the U.S. K-12 teacher workforce (Will, 2020), but teach a diverse population of learners (deBrey et al., 2019). As I contribute to this majority white field of teachers, I work to locate how my positions of privilege can be used to disrupt white supremacist master narratives at work in our educational systems.

As this study focuses on the writing of BIPOC authors in contrast to the white authors of the Western literary canon, I recognize myself as a cultural outsider (Emdin, 2016) to the BIPOC texts I am writing about. As I worked through my analyses of the YA books written by BIPOC authors in this book, it was important for me to adopt a racialized reader response approach, as developed by Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019). Keeping the below questions in mind and journaling in response to them as I read the BIPOC adaptations of texts, helped me begin to consider what interpretations I brought to the texts as a white reader. To demonstrate this reading approach in the analyses of my data, I provide questions Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) propose readers ask themselves, along with some short excerpts from my journaling in response to *If You Come Softly*:

- *What is your racial identity? How does your racial identity shape your reading of this text?*
 - White female. Shapes my reading as I can only identify with Ellie, who provides me a mirror into the text given our shared racial identities. The character of

Jeremiah opens a window for me— looking into his experience as a Black male in the world. But also, both Ellie and Jeremiah provide a new window, as I have never been in an interracial relationship before. My identity as a white woman could influence things I see as “normal” in the text because whiteness is normalized in society. For example, I must pay attention to how Ellie’s whiteness allows her to move throughout the world whereas Jeremiah does not have that privilege. I must pay attention to how society reacts when the two of them are in public together and if it differs from when Ellie is in public alone. I must pay attention to how racism and whiteness are normalized because my racial identity allows me not to.

- *Does this text position you as a racial insider or outsider? How do you know? How does your positioning influence your reading experience?*
 - Both! I know because Woodson is explicit about race. The first sentence of the novel starts with Jeremiah talking about how he is Black—letting me know I am not the same race as him. Jeremiah’s experiences can provide a window for me to look through in Woodson’s text. I am a racial insider to Ellie, as she is white and her family subscribes to colorblind ideologies. I vividly remember my mom telling me she doesn’t see color in the same way Ellie’s mom alludes to this. This positioning influences my reading experience as I navigate my memories of having conversations around colorblindness with my mother and recognizing where I am now in explicitly naming race and racism.

- *What are aspects of the text to which you can relate? How might not relating to a character in a novel in terms of race or power be important for you as a reader— or important for learning about your racial identity?*
 - I cannot relate to so much of it. Being in an interracial relationship, dealing with police brutality, every damn day encountering racism—all of these things my white privilege protects me from. What I could relate to was Ellie beginning to recognize her white privilege and how that shaped her view of the people in her life. Attending grad school and reading critical theories and challenging myself to constantly critically reflect (like when reading this!!) is something I could relate to Ellie. It's hard when you realize people you love (like Ellie and her sister, Anne) subscribe to colorblind ideologies or don't understand how their white privilege functions in the world. Not relating to Jeremiah is a function of this white privilege. This made me think about how--without space to reflect and think critically about myself and texts that I read, I might not have recognized how important it was for Ellie to challenge her sister's colorblind ideologies. Woodson makes an important colorblind ideas through the characters of Ellie and her mother, but without the time and space to explore CRT, I might not have recognized this. I wonder how I can help in-service classroom teachers reflect on their own positionalities and introduce them to critical frames so they can critically read and reflect upon texts like Woodson's.

- *Are there aspects of the text that cause feelings of discomfort, uncertainty, or resistance?*

What might these aspects of the text reveal to you about your own experiences or assumptions? (p. 47).

- I was pretty uncomfortable when Ellie first met Jeremiah and wanted to touch his hair. I actually feel like I cringed. It's just.... so well-known you don't touch another person a) at all without their consent (and she didn't, so thank goodness) and b) you don't exoticize Black people's hair. This brought me back to teaching in East Hartford and having discussions with my Black students when they got a new weave and how I learned from them about the culture of Black hair. Thinking critically about this— was Ellie first seeing Jeremiah as the exotic other? I was forced to reflect upon this and think about my experiences at EHHS and wondering if I ever acted as Ellie and saw my Black student's hair and culture as “exotic.” I know I commented on liking a new hairstyle but this scene made me consider if I had previous assumptions like Ellie and I felt uncomfortable realizing I may have made similar mistakes in the past.

Consistently reflecting on my whiteness and how it influenced my interpretations and interactions with YA adaptations by BIPOC authors was imperative to this dissertation work. Using racialized reader response questions as a form of journaling helped me be cognizant and aware of how my racial identity and status as a cultural outsider affected my analyses.

To better understand the intentions of the BIPOC authors I am writing about, I also read author interviews where they discussed their intentions for writing a remix of a canonical text.

For example, when Jacqueline Woodson discussed writing *If I Come Softly*, she explained what she wanted young people to understand from the novel:

I kept asking myself ‘What would be different if *Romeo and Juliet* was being written today?’ But when I was younger, I was also deeply affected by the death of Edmund Perry—an African-American boy who was attending prep school and while home on break, was shot by cops. (Woodson, para. 3)

Reading through interviews like this helped me to understand why BIPOC authors might make specific additions or omissions in a retelling. Woodson’s memory of Edmund Perry helped elucidate the inter-racial romantic relationship that reimagines the plot and theme of forbidden love in *If I Come Softly*. When discussing her novels in general, Sharon Draper states, “Race is a reality in today’s world. We cannot be blind to it” (Draper, 2014, para. 9). Draper’s acknowledgment that we cannot be colorblind to race helped me to understand why she might have featured an interracial relationship in her canonical retelling, *Romiette and Julio*.

I acknowledge that my understanding as a white woman will only be a partial understanding of racism in the texts I am analyzing, but I relied on the words of the authors and CRT scholars to help me in my analyses. I also acknowledge there is a tension about white women scholars using CRT as an analytic framework, and I tried to honor the work of scholars of color through inclusive citations and acknowledgment of the long history of contributions CRT scholars have made in the field of education. I do not position myself as an expert in the field of CRT, and thusly immersed myself in the work of scholars of color to better understand how to apply CRT in this research. This includes *Racism Without Racists*, by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva; *Black Girls’ Literacies*, by Detra Price-Dennis and Gholnecsar E. Muhammad; and *How*

We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective, by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. I also read the work of Black scholars who use CRT as theoretical frameworks for literary analyses, such as Wanda Brooks. I consistently journaled using a racialized reader framework as I worked my way through both nonfiction texts and the texts for this dissertation.

In an anti-racist English Education workshop at the University of Tennessee in December of 2021, Dr. Lamar Johnson spoke about how white people can engage in “soul work” through critical self-reflection. Dr. Johnson provided prompts for us to engage in racial storytelling as a way to understand our identity and confront “racial hauntings.” While at the workshop, I began engaging in this racial storytelling and continued to do so at home throughout the rest of that week. An excerpt of this racial storytelling as I reconciled my past with present is below:

Standing at the Meriden movie theater when I was maybe ten years old, I vividly remember a family member telling my brother he couldn’t go and play the video games they have at the movie theaters (the ones with the cars and who knows what else) because there was a group of Black boys playing the game. Dimitri pleaded with her to give him 50 cents to go play and she said no, grabbed our hands, and walked us out of the theater lobby. I remember asking her in the parking lot, again, why she wouldn’t just let Dimitri play and she said it was dangerous. At the time, I knew something wasn’t right. How was Dimitri playing a video game dangerous? Why couldn’t she just let him play? I had no words to name the blatant racism I was listening to. Now, I know what that was. And in May of 2021 when she came to Knoxville and visited me, I had the words to name it when she told me “I was watching you as you walked to the bathroom because a Black guy was behind you and I wanted to make sure nothing happened to you.” I had the

language and the knowledge to say, “Well that’s racist just to assume a Black man is dangerous for walking.” She hmped and didn’t say much else. Later in her visit somehow George Floyd got brought up and she started going on about how he was a criminal and I asked her if he deserved to die and if she thought the same thing would happen to a white man. Begrudgingly she said no and then changed the subject. While I don’t think I will *change* my family member, this calling her out (or in?) is letting her know it’s unacceptable to speak like this around me. My future self (and daughter) will not listen to her off-hand racist remarks because I am making a conscious effort to show her I will not tolerate hateful language like that.

While that is only an excerpt of my racial storytelling piece, it felt important to include here. I have spent time thinking about and reflecting on how my life experiences have shaped the way my past, present, and future self think about race and racism. Throughout this dissertation process, I continued to reflect, add to my racial story, and follow the lead of Black scholars, like Dr. Johnson, on how to use critical frameworks as a white woman educator. As I critiqued the whiteness and racism of the Western literary canon and used the work of BIPOC scholars and authors to do so, I recognized that it is the responsibility of white educators to shoulder the burden of anti-racist instruction instead of leaving it to educators and writers of color.

Relationship with YAL

As an advocate of YAL and witness to the magic it can bring to a classroom, I recognize I am biased in advocating that educators pair YAL with the Western literary canon in their classroom. My prior experiences using YAL in the classroom have shaped my craft knowledge (Murphy, 2019) and resulting conviction that YAL is more engaging and motivating than

canonical texts, a bias I will work to recognize in this work. I relied on the method of CCCA, as well as memoing, to keep my analysis between each pair as unbiased as possible. I regularly referred back to my research questions to remind myself that I was trying to discover how BIPOC authors rewrite the Western literary canon, not make a case for using YA in the classroom.

Chapter Summary and Organization of the Study

Through this chapter, I have briefly outlined my relationship with YAL, traced the argument that YA texts can be used as a scaffold or pair to canonical texts, discussed how embedded the Western literary canon is in ELA curricula, and recognized how white stories dominate the canon. Chapter two will further detail the pervasiveness of whiteness in the Western literary canon and its unchanging nature in ELA curricula, the history of pairing YA and canonical texts, and the analytic framework of CRT. Chapter three will detail the method of CCCA, text selection process, data sources, and how CRT was used in the analysis process. Chapter four details the data, findings, and analysis, while chapter five discusses the findings and implications. Throughout the study, I consistently returned to my research questions as I layered new data, perspectives, and analysis in each chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter One established the need and background for this doctoral dissertation study, as well as presented the research questions. This chapter will provide an in-depth literature review of the 1) history of the Western literary canon as it relates to whiteness; 2) history of pairing the Western literary canon with YAL; and 3) contextualization of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as it relates to education. Readers will be able to trace how the Western literary canon got established and why this led to the overwhelming whiteness of texts; how the Western literary canon became entrenched in school curricula and the resulting tensions between pairing YAL and the Western literary canon; and how CRT could be useful in analyzing retellings of canonical works by BIPOC authors.

History of the Western Literary Canon

While I contend, like Taylor (2006) and Bissonnette and Glazier (2016), that what is referred to as the Western literary canon is socially constructed, it is important to define what the Western literary canon is and explore the history of how it was developed. Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) note, “Texts are not self-evidently canonical; individuals, groups, and societies must agree” (p. 55), thus reinforcing the idea that the Western literary canon is a social construction. When referring to the Western literary canon, I use Dyches’ (2018a) definition of “a phrase applied to describe historically preserved bodies of literature that often project the voices and experiences of Anglo White males” (p. 539). The words “classic,” “great,” and “traditional” are also used in conjunction with describing the Western literary canon — conflating white stories and authors with greatness and authority in the English curriculum.

A formal shift in defining what authors exist within the Western literary canon started with Harvard's 1894 entrance exam that required applicants to respond to a piece of literature written by one of five white British authors. As other universities began requiring a response to literature as part of their admission requirements, this affected secondary ELA curricula, as schools tried to include literature that was commonly found on college entrance exams (Applebee, 1974). In 1892, the National Educational Association also formed its Committee of Ten to provide recommendations to standardize education across the country. The Committee published its report in 1894, and while the committee promoted equality in the way education was taught to students despite their post-secondary goals, their suggested readings included almost exclusively white, male authors (National Educational Association, 1894). Ever since these recommendations were made, secondary ELA curricula has had a history of "an almost total subservience to British literature" (Stotsky, 1991, p. 53).

This allegiance to the Western literary canon can be seen through surveys conducted across secondary ELA classes about English teachers' required reading lists. In 1989, Applebee conducted a national survey to find out which books were commonly taught in secondary schools. Applebee (1989) found that across public, Catholic, and independent schools, the lists were similar and focused on white-Anglo authors and stories (see Table 3 on Appendix p. 167 for results from Applebee's study). Stories by white, male authors centering white, male protagonists make up the majority of titles named across the three types of schools Applebee surveyed. There is an obvious lack of racial, cultural, and gender diversity across Applebee's results, which has been echoed across many other studies throughout the years (see: Bushman, 1997; Claiborne, 2004; Scanlon, 2000; Hill & Malo-Juvera, 2019; Stotsky et al., 2010). Stotsky

et. al (2010) point out that Shakespeare is still the most commonly taught author in secondary ELA schools. The Western literary canon has remained static and unchanging (Applebee, 1989; Wolk, 2010; Glaws, 2021), as students are required to read what are considered to be “great works” (Bright, 2011) from lists of canonical texts.

The most recent survey I could find comes from Glaws (2021), whose regional survey of secondary ELA teachers in Colorado still echoes Applebee’s (1989) findings. Glaws (2021) notes:

The book titles most frequently listed include *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, which were each listed by 18 survey respondents. Other frequently listed texts include *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (listed 15 times), *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare (listed 14 times), *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller (listed 13 times), *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (listed 11 times), and *Night* by Elie Wiesel (listed 11 times).

While there are some additional contemporary YA titles on Glaws’ list, like *The Outsiders*, many of the frequently listed texts also appeared on Applebee’s (1989) list almost three decades earlier, demonstrating the Western literary canon’s staying power. Teachers in Glaws’ (2021) survey reaffirmed a belief in the importance of canonical literature given assumptions that it may give students an “entrance into the community of literature” and “a background in the things that are part of our collective culture” (p. 28). The teachers expressed beliefs that canonical literature is a “part of the shared knowledge of [the students’] culture” and “is a cultural and academic expectation that students will have” (Glaws, 2021, p. 28).

While the teachers in Glaws' study did not expand on these statements, it can be assumed that the "collective culture" and "shared knowledge" privilege whiteness and white ideologies, as those are the only perspectives presented in the Western literary canon. The culture and knowledge these teachers want students to understand are rooted in whiteness. The emphasis on believing that canonical literature affords students important cultural and background knowledge shows how deeply embedded whiteness and the Western literary canon is, not only in ELA curricula, but in teacher's beliefs. Once a text has established its place in the secondary canon, a variety of reasons, ranging from state standards, teacher perceptions, white nostalgia, and availability of resources, can prevent changes in a school's literary curricula (Borsheim-Black & Sariaginides, 2019; Glaws, 2021; Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016).

The allegiance to canonical works can also be seen in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for ELA. The CCSS advocates that teachers use canonical texts by requiring Shakespeare to be taught in secondary ELA classes and providing text exemplars from other white, male authors. For example, CCSS reading literature standard 11-12.7 asks students to "Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem... evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare...)" (NGO/CCSS, 2010). Other ELA CCSS include suggestions of authors like Keats and Shelley, further providing white, male perspectives as the standard of great authorship. Schieble's (2014) content analysis of text exemplars in the CCSS found there is an "overrepresentation of European male authors" (p. 158) throughout. While the CCSS, published in 2010, are over two decades older than Applebee's (1989) survey of commonly taught texts, we can still see an emphasis on the same texts and priority given to the Western literary canon.

The works of Shakespeare, specifically, have long dominated lists of most frequently taught texts from 1907 until today (Malo-Juvera & Greathouse, 2021). Titles such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet* have consistently appeared on reading lists over the past century (Hill & Malo-Juvera, 2018), reinforcing the tradition of teaching the Bard in secondary schools. Not only is Shakespeare referenced in the CCSS, but his works are referred to often on the Advanced Placement Language and Literature test (Albert Team, 2020), further embedding the idea that educators must teach Shakespeare's works in order to prepare students for the test. As marginalized students are consistently and historically underrepresented in enrollment in AP courses (Kolluri, 2021), this rationale for teaching Shakespeare's texts continues to privilege white students. If educators must prepare students for the AP test, and a majority of white students are taking the AP test because of systemic racism keeping marginalized students out of AP courses (Kolluri, 2021), the canon only continues to perpetuate the status quo of whiteness in ELA curricula.

The titles on the required reading lists surveyed, along with the titles centered on CCSS and AP tests, reinforce the idea that Anglo-white, male perspectives are prioritized in secondary ELA curricula, sending a message to students about whose stories matter. The Western literary canon intentionally excludes BIPOC authors, as well as female authors, offering students limited perspectives, uniformly emphasizing white stories as valuable resources to learn about and from, and continuing to make ELA classrooms sites where racism is reinforced (Ball & Lardner, 2005; Borsheim-Black et. al, 2014; Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Baker-Bell, 2020, 2017; Bissonnette & Glazier, 2016; Johnson, 2018; Johnson et. al, 2017; Kinloch, 2005; Sarigianides & Banack, 2021; Toliver, 2020, 2018). The whiteness of the Western literary canon can in part be

explained by the “selective tradition” as defined by Williams (1977): “an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a preshaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification” (p. 115). The history of the selective tradition is discussed in more depth in the sub-section “Whiteness of the Western Literary Canon.”

Pairing the Western Literary Canon with YAL

The Western literary canon remains unchanged and is continually found on required reading lists (Boser, 2014; Glaws, 2021; Wolk, 2010), while teachers are left to mitigate the tensions between using white canonical texts and more diverse YAL (Bright, 2011, Bissonette & Glazier, 2015; Daniels & Zemelman, 2004; Gallo, 2001). Scholarship analyzing YAL has shown the ways popular YAL reflects diverse experiences and how authentic representation of identity can help students find deeper engagement and connection with texts (Brooks, 2006; Guerra, 2012; Lacy, 2015). Young adult literature also offers opportunities students opportunities to read complex and diverse portrayals of adolescents (Ginsberg & Glenn, 2020; Groenke, Maples, & Henderson, 2010). Young adult literature stands in stark contrast to the majority white stories told in the Western literary canon (Bissonette & Glazier, 2015; Dyches, 2018a), better reflecting the identities of students in classrooms across the nation.

Advocates of YAL suggest that the genre can scaffold adolescents’ literary competence with the Western literary canon (Bright, 2011; Glaus, 2014; Malo-Juvera & Greathouse, 2021; Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016; Scherff, 2012). Reed & Schallert (1993) used YAL to make *Romeo and Juliet* more relevant, as “students can better understand the play...they can examine how contemporary writers use characters to carry the plot’s action and utilize language to develop

characters and themes” (p. 93). Reed & Schallert (1993) also advocated that using YAL can help students discover universal themes in both texts. However, it’s important to be critical of who the themes are universal to, as the Western literary canon’s definition of universality is grounded in whiteness. This dissertation explores how BIPOC authors transform themes in Shakespeare’s work and how educators can frame critical discussions around themes. Reed & Schallert’s (1993) method of using YAL as a scaffold has continued until present day with many educators and scholars building on it throughout the years.

Scherff (2012) also presented the argument that YAL could be used as a scaffolding tool for struggling readers to build confidence, fluency, and motivation before moving onto canonical texts. Scherff (2012) advocates using YAL in conjunction with higher order thinking skills to help students interpret, evaluate, critically question, and discuss a text. As YAL appeals to adolescents because it is literature that is “written *about* teenagers, *for* teenagers, and within contexts that mirror the world of teenagers” (Brown & Mitchell, 2014, p. 6), students are provided with opportunities to use the YAL texts as a “mirror” in contrast to the canon. While YAL appeals to a wide variety of readers, it is also theorized to increase student engagement and motivation (Bull, 2012). Groenke and Scherff (2010) posit that YAL honors “teens’ lives and their experiences... showing teens as capable, smart, and multidimensional” (p. xii). These attributes of YAL can encourage students to make text-to-self connections, which is shown to aid reading comprehension and recall of a text, strengthening the argument for using YAL as a paired text or scaffold (Scherff, 2012).

Styslinger (2017) wrote *Workshopping the Canon* where she suggested using YAL, non-fiction texts, and multimedia resources to promote student engagement with the Western literary

canon. Just this year, Victor Malo-Juvera, Paula Greathouse, and Brooke Eisenbach (2021) published an edited book titled *Shakespeare and Adolescent Literature: Pairing and Teaching* and focused on pairing Shakespeare with YAL. They note that the pairings offered in the collection “combine some of the best the Bard has to offer while at the same time increasing relevance and engagement” (Malo-Juvera & Greathouse, 2021, p. ix) for students. Greathouse and Malo-Juvera (2021a; 2021b) also published two volumes of edited collections pairing additional canonical texts with YAL, centering on the idea that both texts can complement each other. They argue that as our world has shifted as a result of social movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, canonical texts need to be paired with contemporary YAL in order to address these important issues in the classroom (Greathouse & Malo-Juvera, 2021a; 2021b). Positioning YAL as a bridge to the classics and a way to improve literacy skills can provide teachers with an opportunity to bring engaging and diverse literature into their curricula that may ultimately help push back against the white hegemony of the Western literary canon.

Explicit Young Adult Retellings

As contemporary retellings of canonical texts are being written more often, Scrofano and Richmond (2020) explored this new trend of explicit retellings. In their analysis, they focused on nine retellings “that featured diverse gender and cultural groups” (Scrofano & Richmond, 2020, n.p). Some texts featured Black and Latina protagonists, while others took up LGBTQIA themes as ways to diversify and retell the stories in the Western literary canon. Scrofano and Richmond (2020) discussed positioning “both the classic book and the retelling on a continuum of discourse on any perennial human concern, like justice, love, or power” (para. 8). This enabled neither the classic or the YA retelling to be positioned as binaries or in a way that favored one text over the

other. They argued that readers can find links between the canonical text and retelling in ways that bring new perspectives to old stories and create meaningful conversations. This perspective informed my work by encouraging me to think about ways educators can find links between the two texts and how students can engage in critical conversations around the similarities and differences.

Miskec (2013) argued that many adaptations rely too heavily on the canonical text, which in turn privileges the canonical text as the exemplar. She argues that while many YA adaptations have connections to the Western literary canon, it is important to stop positioning YAL as simply a bridge to the classic, but rather see the YA text as a chance to engage in new and critical conversations. In thinking about the implications for this study, Miskec's (2013) work informed my thinking around how teachers and teacher educators can introduce retellings to students. Educators must be intentional in positioning the YA text as a text worthy of study on its own instead of only discussing it when relating the text to its canonical counterpoint. Miskec (2013) asserts we must ask *why* an author chose to rewrite a canonical text, especially when "an author's reconstruction of a canonical adult story for a teen audience adds into the mix a critical context" (p. 81). This is important in considering why YA authors choose to omit or add plot elements, change settings, or change the race of the characters (e.g., having Black and Mexican American characters in Sharon Draper's *Romiette and Julio*). Understanding how the YA text is in dialogue with the canonical text, but also seeing the text as its own work of art and worthy of literary merit without depending on the canonical text, fosters critical conversations and breakaway from the literary traditions of the canon.

Blay and Brown (2019) discuss how there are many text-to-text connections to the Western literary canon through a variety of retellings and multimedia resources. They suggest teachers look outside of traditional texts and turn to vlogs and movies to acknowledge connections to the canon in an effort to engage students (e.g., the movie *Mean Girls* can draw parallels to *The Crucible*). They acknowledge that “many culturally and linguistically diverse youth may consider canonical texts less relevant to their lived experiences” (Blay & Brown, 2019, para. 2.) and encourage teachers to find diverse materials to pair with “classic” texts. Sheahan and Dallacqua (2020) turned to a graphic novel, *Yummy*, by BIPOC author Greg Neri, when they were teaching *Hamlet* in their course. Paired together, students had important conversations comparing privilege across texts and locating instances of power (Sheahan & Dallacqua, 2020). Importantly, many retellings of canonical texts are being written by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) authors with BIPOC main characters, in stark contrast to the white authors and stories privileged in the canon.

It is also important to acknowledge that Shakespeare, himself, is a reteller of stories. He retold *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*, a poem by Arthur Brooke as a principal source for his play (Green, 2000). Additionally, Brooke’s poem is said to be a retelling of an Italian novella by Matteo Bandello (Green, 2000); therefore, *Romeo and Juliet* is, in and of itself, a retelling of star-crossed lovers across time and place. This history is especially relevant given how this dissertation focuses on how BIPOC authors retell Shakespeare’s text and how themes are transformed across setting and time.

Focusing on How *Romeo and Juliet* is Taught

As this dissertation focuses on *Romeo and Juliet* and how it is retold, it was important to consider the different ways *Romeo and Juliet* is taught in secondary ELA classrooms. Many educators are required to center Shakespeare in their curricula, and many also enjoy teaching the Bard. In Hill's (2020) article for *English Journal*, she extols the virtues of teaching *Romeo and Juliet*. In response to a student who asks why they have to read such old stories that aren't relatable, Hill (2020) writes:

These stories— the comedies, the tragedies, and the poems— actually have everything to do with us, and that is the genius of Shakespeare. His ability to immerse us in reality through art, to create characters so complex and interesting that we swear they are sprung forth from our own minds, to magically conjure worlds from mere words, and to also remind us that words are, in fact, not so mere is why his work is still relevant to our students. (p. 31).

Hill (2020) goes on to stress how all students can relate to *Romeo and Juliet* as characters and offers choral reading as an effective strategy for engagement. This positioning of *Romeo and Juliet* as relatable raises the question of relatable for whom? As there are no BIPOC characters in *Romeo and Juliet*, can we assume BIPOC readers will be able to find a mirror in the play as Hill (2020) does?

Adams (1995) also emphasizes the relatability of the play for a variety of reasons, stating that the “story of young love and family discord has timeless appeal” (p. 424) and that “*Romeo and Juliet* is part of a body of cultural knowledge that is important for students” (p. 424). Again, this begs the question of whose culture? Important to which students? This assumption of

cultural knowledge is grounded in whiteness, as the canon was created by white males (Williams, 1997; Tyson, 2015; Toliver & Hadley, 2021) and purposefully excluded BIPOC voices (more about the selective tradition that formed the canon in the next section).

Ressler (2005) discusses the tension between wanting to teach *Romeo and Juliet* in a way that can deeply “challenge the multitude of stereotypes that pervade society” (p. 53) and replacing canonical texts with authors who have been historically marginalized. As Ressler (2005) describes this tension, she proposes educators teach *Romeo and Juliet* in a way that challenges the ideologies of centering heterosexual romance. Ressler (2005) signaled a more critical way of thinking and framing *Romeo and Juliet* when juxtaposed to the approaches in the preceding paragraphs. Ressler (2005) asks students to examine the ways homoerotic and misogynic language is centered in Shakespeare’s play and to imagine Romeo and Juliet as lesbians. The purpose of this “gender-bending revision of the fiction [is] to balance the male homoerotic passages we have read and to give questioning or sexual- and gender-minority women opportunities to feel included” (Ressler, 2005, p. 55). At the conclusion of the article, Ressler (2005) suggests educators must “read against” (p. 56) canonical texts in order to create opportunities for all students to be engaged in texts that have historically erased their experiences. Ressler’s (2005) article takes the central topic of the play, love, and asks students to challenge the normative lens through which relationships are written in canonical texts. Ressler’s (2005) pedagogical suggestions felt, to me, like a positive shift in demonstrating how readers can use *Romeo and Juliet* in their classrooms with a critical lens.

Groenke (2021), like Ressler (2005), takes a critical approach in Malo-Juvera et. al’s (2021) edited book *Shakespeare and Young Adult Literature: Pairing and Teaching*. She invites

educators to pair *Romeo and Juliet* with *If You Come Softly* (Woodson, 1998) and examine the theme of forbidden love to “consider the connections that exist between prejudice, hatred, and violence” (Groenke, 2021, p. 2). Groenke (2021) advocates for students to explore microaggressions in both texts. She suggests students examine how microaggressive language is directed towards Jeremiah because of his Blackness in *If You Come Softly* and towards women in *Romeo and Juliet*. She positions students to take a critical stance towards both texts while making connections between them. This study informed this dissertation because it is the only scholarship I found on how to critically pair *Romeo and Juliet* with a YA text. Groenke’s (2021) article provided a model of how to discuss both texts without privileging the whiteness of *Romeo and Juliet* or position the YA text as a scaffold.

Commonly, educators focus on how the ideology of love is represented in the play or justify teaching *Romeo and Juliet* because love is a “universal theme” (again, universal for whom?). While *Romeo and Juliet* has been critiqued for the way it positions women, privileges heterosexual relationships, and represents adolescents as impulsive, this dissertation hopes to add a critique of how it normalizes whiteness.

Whiteness of the Western Literary Canon

The whiteness of the Western literary canon can in part be explained by the “selective tradition” as defined by Williams (1977): “an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a preshaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification” (p. 115). By having committees of white males (like the Committee of Ten from NEA) advocate that specific texts by white authors be taught in secondary schools, the Western literary canon became a body of work that was selected to be intentionally white and

exclusive. As Williams (1997) notes, “certain meanings and practices are selected for emphasis and certain other meanings and practices are neglected or excluded” (p. 115). While white-Anglo male perspectives were emphasized while forming the Western literary canon, literature that told stories about BIPOC were neglected and excluded from becoming a part of the canon.

Tyson (2015) also notes how the Eurocentric definition of universalism helped shape the canon and marginalized Black authors in a way that excluded them and their stories. Tyson (2015) defines Eurocentrism as “the belief that European culture is vastly superior to all others” (p. 347). By extension, the Eurocentric definition of universalism supports the claim that “literary works have been defined as great art, as ‘universal; – relevant to the experience of all people – and included in the canon only when they reflect European experience” (Tyson, 2015, p. 347). Therefore, only stories and authors who presented stories with white European influences and in the style of European literary traditions were deemed “great” enough to be part of the Western literary canon. The definition of universalism from a Eurocentric perspective is inherently racist, as it enforces white cultural hegemony and fails to ask who the experiences presented are universal to. The Western literary canon privileges white authors and stories over literature that represents BIPOC lives and stories despite the lack of diversity and engagement the canon has to offer (Bissonette & Glazier, 2015; Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Butler, 2017; Daniels & Zemelman, 2004; Gallo, 2001; Johnson et. al, 2017; Kirkland 2013).

Toliver and Hadley (2021) remind us how great Black writers like Toni Morrison and James Baldwin were affected by the selective tradition and excluded from the literary canon and prestigious awards like the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize. Toliver and Hadley (2021) recount a letter that forty-eight Black writers penned condemning the fact that Morrison and

Baldwin were not adequately recognized for their literary genius. The letter “was also a critique of the canon, a jarring reminder that only certain works and certain people are considered important enough to be canonical. In this way, the letter called forth the fact that the single supreme authority that ruled over our literary and philosophical standards was an empire of white writing and thought” (Toliver & Hadley, 2021, p. 2). While the letter was written in 1988, Toliver and Hadley (2021) explain how debate about who belongs in the Western literary canon is not new. For decades, whiteness has been privileged in the canon, effectively marginalizing writing by BIPOC authors and affecting whose work gets read in secondary classrooms today. Toliver and Hadley (2021) ask the important question: “canonical for whom?” (p. 2). The selective tradition of the canon answers that question with an overwhelmingly white collection of stories authored by white males.

Influence of the Whiteness of the Canon

The texts in the Western literary canon help construct the narrative that white stories should be privileged over BIPOC stories. As Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) put it, “Literature does not simply *reflect* race and racism in American society; literature has played a role in *constructing* race and racism in American society” (p.7). If the literature in the Western literary canon were to accurately *reflect* race in American society, the canon would include BIPOC authors who reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity found in US classrooms (deBrey et al., 2019; Hussar & Bailey, 2013). When BIPOC authors remix the Western literary canon, they are reconstructing this narrative and saying the canon doesn’t just belong to white readers and writers. However, through the “selective tradition” and perpetuation of racist ideologies, the literature in the canon has *constructed* a racist narrative of whiteness privileged in ELA

curricula. By relying on tradition as a rationale to teach canonical texts, ELA teachers can reinforce “the status quo of centuries of racism” (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019, p. 56). The texts included in the Western literary canon only provide a white-authored perspective of the world, therefore rendering stories of BIPOC invisible.

In her series of lectures at Harvard University entitled *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison (1992) points out how American literature is defined by whiteness and promotes invisible racial ideologies:

just as the formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral fragility at its heart, so too did the literature, whose founding characteristics extended into the twentieth century, reproduce the necessity for codes and restriction. (p. 6)

By calling literature in the canon “great” and “classic” when the only stories told privilege white authors and stories, the codes and restrictions Morrison (1992) references are reproduced. Even when racism is not a central theme in a novel (e.g. *Of Mice and Men*), Morrison (1992) posits that there is an underlying racist presence in “classic” American literature. White characters are seen as saviors (e.g. Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*) to the Black characters, or their social status is shown in relation to Black characters (e.g. George is respected more than Crooks in *Of Mice and Men*). Black characters are used as foils to help develop white characters and are often depicted in racist and stereotypical ways. Whiteness is propped up by Black characters who are used to center whiteness in texts.

DuBois (1927) wrote about the struggles Black authors faced when trying to publish authentic portrayals of African American life: “White Americans are willing to read about

Negroes, but they prefer to read about Negroes who are fools, clowns, prostitutes, or at any rate, in despair” (p. 276). DuBois’ and other Black authors’ struggles getting published help explain why Black characters seen in the stories in the Western literary canon are often racist portrayals. The Black characters in the canon were stereotypically written into plotlines by white-Anglo men— not Black authors writing about their own experiences. Brooks (2009) contends that through this purposeful exclusion of Black stories being published, “publishers had the power to affirm and perpetuate the selective tradition that stereotyped African Americans” (p. 129). While much of Brooks’ (2009) research focused on how the selective tradition affected children’s literature, the selective tradition of literature in the Western literary canon also helps to construct racism and perpetuate white supremacy through the stories told.

As the Western literary canon is deeply entrenched in school curricula, it can act as a way to reinforce white supremacy in schools. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) explains that “critical race theory sees the official school curriculum as a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script” (p. 18). School curricula that rely heavily on the whiteness of the Western literary canon only serve to emphasize that white stories are valuable and perpetuate stereotypical portrayals of BIPOC. When BIPOC characters and stories are told in the canon and reinforce stereotypes, it affirms what Swartz (1992) wrote about non-emancipatory narratives of BIPOC. He cautioned that non-emancipatory narratives fail to provide authentic representations of people of color, continuing to frame them as “other,” and that these narratives often fail to address systemic racism and inequities (Swartz, 1992). As all curricula is racialized, “literature curriculum teaches lessons about race and racism” (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019, p. 7). The lessons students are being taught through exclusive

reading of the Western literary canon are those of racism and white supremacy. Students who identify as BIPOC are stripped of the opportunity to see authentic portrayals of their lives through the literature in the canon.

Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) discussed the importance of representation in literature, which raises concerns when thinking about the whiteness of the Western literary canon. Bishop (1990) wrote:

Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience.

Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (p. ix)

As the Western literary canon is overwhelmingly white, BIPOC students may have limited opportunities to find a “mirror” in the literature they read from the canon. There are many mirrors for white students to see themselves reflected in, as teachers continually utilize the canon in their instruction. Bishop (2012) also wrote that denial of such mirrors for some students suggested “that books and literature, while often pleasurable, were in some sense apart from them” (p. 9). The omission of BIPOC’s experiences from the Western literary canon suggests to students that BIPOC stories are not worthy of being told in “great literature.” Toliver (2018) draws on Bishop’s (1990) metaphor of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors to note how doors can be “locked, when there [a]re misrepresentations or omissions of specific groups” (p. 2). Through extension of Toliver’s (2018) analysis, this would mean the sliding glass door of the Western literary canon is “locked” through the omission of non-white characters throughout.

When BIPOC authors remix the Western literary canon, these stories may “unlock” the doors that were previously locked by white authors.

While there are “mirrors” for white students to see themselves reflected in throughout the Western literary canon, it’s important to investigate how those mirrors reinforce stereotypes that reinforce white privilege, reinforce racist ideologies in our society, and lock the sliding glass door on BIPOC students. Schey and Blackburn (2019) posit that literature can also function as a doorframe, “comprised of ideologies, values, and practices,” and these frames influence “readers’ understandings of what they experience, see, and find in reading a book” (p. 31). If we think of the Western literary canon as a “frame” using Schey and Blackburn’s metaphor, the ideologies, values, and practices reflected in it only serve to reflect white experiences for readers to find. The white-authored mirrors and constructed frames provided in the canon only present one specific portrayal of American life, one that is neither equitable nor inclusive.

Larrick (1965) wrote that “nonwhite children are learning to read and to understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them” (p. 63). Cook and Amatuucci (2006) describe how students recognize this omission from canonical literature. They reference an example of a student in Amatuucci’s class asking her why there were no Black people featured in the text they were reading and in the corresponding photo they were analyzing. Students who read the white stories of the Western literary canon are being sent the message that the “American life” that’s privileged is the white American life. Tchudi and Mitchell (1999) warn, “to present only one point of view says to our students that other views are not worthwhile and valued” (p. 159). The near invisibility of the experiences of BIPOC in the Western literary canon can be harmful to students’ identity work and self-affirmation. However,

pairing the canon with additional texts such as YAL can work as a way to allow students to find “mirrors” and “unlock doors” in other ways. Pairing the canon with YA can be especially effective when the pedagogical strategies accompanying the pairings ask students to critically interrogate the canonical text.

Conclusion

This literature review addresses how racism permeates many aspects of our society, and specifically secondary ELA curricula that privileges white canonical texts over diverse literature. It is significant to understand how the Western literary canon got formed and adopted into school curricula, how it persists today, and the ways in which it is being adapted through contemporary YA retellings. As students benefit from learning and reading about diverse cultural experiences, it’s important to understand why those experiences aren’t represented in the canon, but also how pairing YA and the canon could be a way to mitigate that tension.

This dissertation builds on the work of African American scholars, like Wanda Brooks (2009), who have used CRT to analyze children’s and YA literature. Brooks (2009) used three tenets of CRT to discuss racial complexity in Mildred Taylor’s (2001) novel, *The Land*, and provided implications for educators. Brooks (2009) found the novel created a counter-story against the “white-male normativity of property ownership and endemic racism explicated in CRT” (p. 42). By using CRT as an analytical tool, Brooks (2009) was able to identify how the novel pushed back against institutionalized racism through the protagonist’s journey to acquire 400 acres of land. Brooks (2009) demonstrated how “CRT as a tool for literary analysis enables a foregrounding of racial issues applicable to a wide range of young adult historical fiction” (p. 42). She identified three key reasons as to why using CRT to analyze literature is useful for

educators and researchers: 1) it helps the readers understand racism from the perspective of the oppressed; 2) through focusing on property ownership, readers are able to identify a tangible effect of racism; and 3) it helps readers make connections between the past and the present (Brooks, 2009). Using Brooks' (2009) work as a model for this dissertation was helpful in understanding how to apply CRT to analyses of canonical and YA texts. Brooks' (2009) article informed my analyses as I looked to see how she applied CRT to *The Land* (Taylor, 2001). When I was writing up my analyses and using CRT as an analytical lens, I found myself consulting and re-reading Brooks' article to understand how she used CRT in a literary analysis. I noticed she honed in on specific tenets instead of trying to apply all 5 major tenets of CRT to a text, which helped me focus my analyses as well.

Schieble (2012) also used CRT, along with critical literacy and critical whiteness, to discuss the representation of whiteness in the YA novels *The Absolute True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and *Speak*. Schieble (2012) advocates that while replacing or pairing the overwhelming whiteness of canonical texts with YA texts is important, it's imperative to bring a critical lens to YA texts as they also draw attention to systems of power. This dissertation also draws inspiration from Dowie-Chin et. al (2020) who used Critical Race Media Literacy (CRML) to analyze the YA novel *The Hate U Give* and the film adaptation of the text. These scholars compare the two versions of *The Hate U Give* and use CRML to discuss how changes in the film version whitewashed the original story written by Angie Thomas. The authors discuss how *The Hate U Give* was originally written as a counter-story to highlight the #BlackLivesMatter movement, but changes in the film "serve to blame the victims of police violence for their own predicament" (Dowie-Chin et. al, 2020, p. 137). This dissertation draws on their research as I do similar work

critically analyzing adaptations of texts through a CRT lens. I used Schieble's (2012) and Dowie-Chin et al.'s (2020) work to better understand how to use CRT as a lens through which texts can be critiqued. Dowie-Chin et al.'s (2020) work also helped me think about how to critique pairings, as their work was similar in considering how one text was transformed for another purpose. This influenced my implications as I thought about how educators can position comparing *Romeo and Juliet* and the YA texts in this dissertation.

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas and Amy Stornaiuolo (2016)'s work is also similar to the goals of my dissertation, as they used CRT to discuss how *restorying* texts can provide counter-stories for adolescents who do not find themselves represented in texts. While their analysis did not focus on how *authors* restory existing texts, they do discuss how teachers could ask their students to *restory* a text, which might "include shifting canonical works into current settings" (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016, p. 318). This shift in time and place is seen throughout all the YA texts included in my dissertation. When comparing the YA texts, Thomas and Stornaiuolo's (2016) work helped me better understand how the YA authors restory *Romeo and Juliet* in terms of contemporary settings and racialized identities of the protagonists. Thomas and Stornaiuolo (2016) also discuss how many adolescents use racebending to change the race of white characters in order to imagine themselves into a rewritten narrative. The adolescents focused on in Thomas and Stornaiuolo's (2016) piece "are responding as they witness people's lived identities being represented, misrepresented, or erased" (p. 330) by writing or imagining themselves into the story. The texts analyzed in this dissertation all use racebending to change the race of Romeo and Juliet from white characters to characters of color. Considering how the authors restory *Romeo and Juliet* and racebend the characters can help understand how the YA

remixes may act as counterstories to the hegemonic whiteness of the Western literary canon.

Using CRT as a critical lens is one way to highlight systems of privilege and oppression in both canonical and YA texts to help readers draw connections between the past and present.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This dissertation is anchored in three guiding research questions and a comprehensive literature review. A critical comparative content analysis (CCCA) was used to guide an analysis of five texts: one canonical text and four YA retellings of the canonical original. The analytic framework of CRT guided analysis of the texts, specifically helping to highlight the race-based differences between each text and what these might mean. This chapter details how the methodology of a CCCA and the analytic framework of CRT was employed in my analyses.

Roots of Critical Comparative Content Analysis: Content Analysis and Critical Content Analysis

The method of critical comparative content analysis (Sulzer et al., 2018) used in this dissertation builds on the methods of content analysis and critical content analysis (CCA). Content analysis is a broad term that encompasses how researchers analyze and make inferences from texts in a society (Krippendorff 2003; Nueundorf, 2002; White & Marsh, 2006). While content analysis became a popular methodology in the United States in the 1950's, Krippendorff (2003) traced the history of content analysis back to the 17th century when religious scholars analyzed newspapers for controversial content. This trend of analyzing newspaper content continued in the US with researchers analyzing the amount of space specific topics were allocated in newspapers (Neuendorf, 2002). Content analysis made its way into the field of children's literature with researchers first analyzing how often cultural groups were represented. Then, content analysis moved into using more qualitative methods, like using theoretical frameworks to interpret what messages the texts were conveying (Galda et. al, 2000; Short,

1995). Content analysis has evolved from quantitative ways of counting the number of times a specific phenomenon is represented to qualitative ways of analyzing what a text says.

In a content analysis, texts are analyzed using a variety of processes, such as coding, interpreting themes, and identifying patterns. Interpretations in a content analysis are dependent upon the researcher as the instrument and the context of the study “because the purpose for the reading influences the meanings that are constructed as research findings” (Short, 2017, p. 4). As the researcher is the one who decides the context of the study and research questions, Short (2017) argues researchers can take a critical stance to extend content analysis to *critical* content analysis. By adopting a critical stance, researchers who use CCA as a method read with the intention of identifying power structures and inequities in their selected text set (Rogers, 2004). Researchers do this through applying critical lenses, such as CRT, critical whiteness, or critical disability studies, in their analyses of texts. Short (2017) outlines the method of *critical* content analysis in her co-edited book with Johnson and Mathis:

decide on a research question, read deeply within a critical frame, explore context and related studies, use theoretical tenets to frame close readings, examine power and agency, revisit theory and texts to develop themes, and select passages reflecting themes to use in analysis. (p. 7)

The specific focus on a critical frame is what differentiates CCA from the umbrella term of content analysis, as researchers hone in on power structures represented in a text set. In CCA, the critical lens is the basis of the study, and the critical frame is prioritized throughout the entire process, from conceptualizing the research questions through analysis. The researcher is the instrument who is prioritizing the critical frame so the researcher must be aware of their own

biases and how those biases might affect their interpretation of a text through a lens. I worked to mediate this in the study through the racialized reader response journaling (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019) so my personal and emotional reactions to the text could be captured in a journaling form. This allowed me to separate my personal thoughts about the texts and intentionally consider my racial positioning through Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides's (2019) tool. I consistently returned to my research questions to guide my analyses and the tenets of CRT to make sense of the differences between the paired texts.

In Johnson et. al's (2017) book on CCA, Schall (2017) analyzed the representation of same-sex marriage in children's picture books, Wilson (2017) examined how sexuality was constructed in three YA novels, and Sung et. al (2017) unpacked how immigration was represented in four award-winning middle grade novels. The authors and work featured in Johnson et. al's (2017) book demonstrate how, through CCA, researchers can use critical lenses to analyze power, equity, and representation in text sets. Sulzer et. al (2018) built on the work of critical content analysis and content analysis to further develop their method of critical *comparative* content analysis (CCCA), which will be used for this study.

Critical Comparative Content Analysis

While critical content analysis (CCA) has been established as a methodology that locates and analyzes social constructs within a text set (Johnson et. al, 2017; Short, 2017), CCCA builds and extends these methodologies by highlighting the *differences* between two or more texts (Sulzer et al., 2018). Critical comparative content analysis is a newer framework developed by Mark Sulzer, Amanda Thein, and Renita Schmidt (2018) to emphasize the *comparative* differences between texts and how these differences are presented to the intended reader and

across different audiences. CCCA is a recursive process that builds on the interpretations of the *differences* between texts rather than analyzing a sole text or text set for specific concepts. Sulzer et. al (2018) describe CCCA's distinction from CCA:

While critical content analysis names ways in which constructs such as gender, race, coming-of-age, sexuality, and immigrant youth, among others, are represented in texts (see, e.g., Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017), the *comparative* piece of CCCA begins with the premise that these constructs are represented differently to different audiences. (p. 7)

Connected to this dissertation, the construct of race in the analyzed texts, for example, is inherently represented differently to an adolescent audience, as the remixes by BIPOC authors begin with a change in race, or race-bending, of the protagonists in their stories.

The comparative differences between texts are important for this dissertation. Many canonical texts were written with adult protagonists, and as YA authors write and adapt these stories for youth, CCCA helps to explain the differences represented in adaptations for an adolescent audience compared to an adult one. Miskec (2013) argues that differences are imperative to look at when comparing adaptations of canonical texts by asking *why* an author chose to rewrite a canonical text, especially when “an author’s reconstruction of a canonical adult story for a teen audience adds into the mix a critical context” (p. 81). As I looked to see how BIPOC authors rewrote *Romeo and Juliet*, and how these stories might act as counter-stories, examining the differences *as differences intended for an adolescent audience* was important.

An important part of CCCA is understanding the role of the “implied reader” or implied audience (Iser, 1978) in the comparison. Thein et. al (2019) call this “*at-ness*... the idea that

language is directed at someone” (p. 155). Authors of a text write with a specific audience in mind when they are adapting or retelling a story. Sulzer et. al (2018) emphasize the importance of recognizing audience: “The differences between texts when the presumed audience/reader changes are the basis of comparison in CCCA” (p. 7). This study also started with that basis of comparison, as the YA authors who have rewritten texts in the Western literary canon have done so for an audience of adolescent, rather than adult, readers.

Using CCCA as a framework assumes there will be inherent differences between the texts as the YA author changes the intended audience. When a canonical text is “adapted for and directed *at* a youth audience, CCCA offers a process for critical consideration of this *at-ness* quality of the language” (Thein et al., 2019, p. 155, emphasis in original). This offers a way to analyze how a text is crafted to create a reaction from a particular audience or reader.

To get to the *at-ness* of the language, I considered what the YA adaptation adds or omits from the story when the author rewrote it for an adolescent audience. When considering the language in canonical texts, I considered how BIPOC authors rewrite canonical texts and how their text was changed and directed *at* a youth audience. Sulzer et. al (2018) compared chapter titles, headings, and plot points when developing the framework of a CCCA and I adapted their method to fit this study. I did not compare chapter titles and headings because that would not be relevant to the remixes features as they did not rewrite their narratives as a play and rename acts and scenes. However, I did follow Sulzer et. al (2018) method of comparing plot points to notice differences. I also added in comparing the setting, time period, and character descriptions along with noticing how themes were adapted between text to add another level of comparison. This CCCA analytic process was tied to the CRT tenet of counter-story, as I tried to understand *how*

BIPOC authors rewrote a text from the Western literary canon and how the YA texts might act as counter-stories. Considering how BIPOC authors might encourage discussion about race, power, or privilege in their adaptations was important in identifying *how* the authors rewrote the canonical text in new ways.

Additionally, my analytic frame of CRT helped reveal the ideological assumptions about race the BIPOC authors of the texts either challenged or reified as they changed the *at-ness* of the language in the story. Ideological assumptions appeared in the way both Shakespeare and the BIPOC authors explicitly described the race of characters or assumed a default white stance in their writing. Many YA scholars have examined how authors create stories that perpetuate normalized ways of thinking (Aukerman et. al, 2019; Trites, 2000). CRT helped me analyze authorial ideologies and normalized ways of thinking in regards to race, inviting me to consider, What are the authors presenting as “normal?” What do they want their implied audience to notice and how is their writing perpetuating those ideas? Nodelman (2008) examined how YA authors often write their narratives with lessons they believe adolescents need to hear. Again, CRT helped me analyze the lessons surrounding race that are forwarded in both the classic texts and retellings. As the YA authors are changing the *at-ness* of the remix, I asked, What ideologies are they either removing, adding, or challenging?

Thein et. al (2019) offer a set of questions that can be used to guide a CCCA:

- What are the differences between texts?... For two texts, differences could involve added or omitted words, scenes, or even organizational features (e.g., a glossary) that might appear in one text and not another.

- What do we see when we look across the differences? Differences between texts are rarely random but rather have some underlying pattern.
- What do the differences mean? (p. 155).

Especially related to the last question, Thein et. al (2019) poses the question, “what do the differences mean” (p. 155). To answer this question in my text set, I used my analytic frame of CRT to help interpret the data. Critical race theory (CRT) as an analytic frame lends itself to the methodology of CCCA, as Thein et. al (2019) emphasize how CCCA “approaches differences with a sense of criticality” (p.155). Below, the process of CCCA I used and the analytic framework of CRT are discussed.

Author Interviews

An important part of my methodology and analysis was reading author interviews to understand their ideologies and intentions while writing their remix and around writing about race in general. Prior to reading the YA text, I googled to find author interviews using the name of each author, book title, and the words “author interview.” I also reviewed each author’s website to see the resources they had on their website related to their book and any interview material on their website. If authors did not have specific interviews about the retelling they wrote, I read other interviews they gave, op-ed pieces they may have written, and watched YouTube clips of interviews. As a white woman trying to interpret the words of authors of color, I used this to ensure I had as much context around each book and author as possible. Short (2016) advocates that within a Critical Content Analysis (CCA) researchers should “explore context of texts” (p. 7) and as CCCA builds on CCA I believed incorporating this step would add another layer of information to my analysis. Throughout my writing I went back to the

interviews to check my analysis, not only seeking to confirm my initial thinking, when I was using CCCA and CRT to analyze the differences between the texts. It was a recursive process of reading the YA text, comparing it to the canonical text, and re-reading the author interviews to check my analysis. Although I read the interviews before reading the YA text, I found myself circling back to them often while reading the YA text and writing. Reading the interviews may have influenced my interpretations of the texts as I had ideas about the author's intent prior to reading their novel. In my findings I wove in pieces of author interviews to demonstrate how I referenced them in my analysis.

Connors and Rish (2015) note that YA texts center ideologies that “can position adolescents as agentive, or they can reinforce the status quo” (p. 23) and that YAL “is not ideologically neutral” (p. 24). As I worked my way through my analyses, I considered how ideologies made themselves clear in the differences between the texts. The author interviews helped me further understand what ideologies the authors might be presenting about race, racism, or whiteness in their text.

Analysis

Guided by CCCA, I first read *Romeo and Juliet* and then each of four YA retellings (see text titles below in data sources) three times. As the YA texts are the remixes of the canonical text, I used *Romeo and Juliet* as my starting text, focusing on differences that appear between the original canonical text and the four YA retellings.

In my initial round of reading, I read for *plot and character references* between the original canonical text and each retelling. As I read *Romeo and Juliet* for the first time, I wrote chapter summaries, using both direct quotations and my own summary notes. Then, I read author

interviews about the YA retelling prior to reading the text. As I read each YA retelling, I also generated plot summaries using direct quotations and my own notes. After I finished reading each YA text, I compared the summaries of the canonical text and each YA text, looking for differences between the two. I then highlighted plot and character references that differed in each pairing and created a table of differences. In the table, I included plot points and characters that were included in both the canonical original and the retelling but that the YA author altered (e.g., changing the race of the main characters), as well as noting omissions or additions by the YA author.

At the end of my first round of reading, I generated a list of *literary themes* that were addressed in both *Romeo and Juliet* and each YA retelling. I re-read the retellings a second time and created a chart with page numbers for direct quotations that correlated with each theme. I repeated the same process of creating a table of differences between each text for themes as I did for plot, characters, and setting. This process helped determine what was changed between each novel for an adolescent audience and what the authorial intent and ideologies presented were.

I then re-read each YA retelling a third time, looking specifically at the differences through the analytic framework of CRT (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Adams, 2002). I used inductive coding (Saldaña, 2016) to identify and highlight any and all phrases connected to elements of CRT. I organized the codes in a codebook and looked to form categories and themes informed by my analytic frame of CRT.

Below is a step-by-step summary of this full analytic process:

1. Read starting text (*Romeo and Juliet*) and wrote chapter summaries, including plot, setting, and character points.

2. Read YA author interviews about their retelling.
3. Read a YA retelling and completed the same chapter summary process.
4. Compared plot, character, and setting differences between the canonical original and the YA retelling by making a table of differences.
5. Generated a list of literary themes for both the canonical original and the YA retelling after the first round of reading.
6. Re-read the YA retelling and completed the summary and table process focusing on literary themes in both the canonical original and the YA retelling.
7. Re-read the YA retelling by applying a CRT lens to note differences (characters, plot, theme). To do this, I paid attention to the differences found and used inductive coding when re-reading the YA retelling (Saldaña, 2016) before creating categories and themes.

Below, the analytic framework of CRT is discussed.

Analytic Framework: CRT

The analytic framework used in this study was Critical Race Theory (CRT). While Critical Race Theory (CRT) originated in legal studies (Bell, 1995), it is now a tool that is often used to understand the role race plays in education (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harris, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Scholars and activists who use CRT are interested in “studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 4). Understanding these relationships can help explain how systemic racism serves to privilege white people at the expense of BIPOC (Bell, 1995). In the field of education, CRT can help educators think critically about how curricula can act as a “master script” of white

supremacy in our classrooms and school systems (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Critiquing curricula using CRT is especially relevant when considering the place of the Western literary canon in secondary ELA classrooms and how race, racism, and power are positioned within the canon. With CRT's explicit on how race and racism function in society, CRT can help uncover how racism helped form the Western literary canon and how educators can have critical conversations with students about the intentional erasure of BIPOC narratives.

Critical Race Theory was used as an analytic framework to identify and study “the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 4) at work within the selected texts to make sense of the differences between the canonical original and YA retellings. The five main tenets of CRT were used to help analyze the role race plays in the differences between the texts: permanence of racism (racism is normalized and endemic); counter-story telling; interest convergence, whiteness as property; and critique of liberalism (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn, 2002; Milner, 2007; Tate, 1997).

To account for my positionality as a white woman, I reviewed author interviews where the authors discuss the works about which I wrote and read scholarship by scholars of color who write about the same authors. This added to my limited perspective of understanding as a white woman analyzing race in both a canonical text that centers whiteness and YA retellings by BIPOC authors. I also kept a journal, using the racialized reader response questions referenced in Chapter One (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019), to develop and maintain awareness of how my racial identity shapes my interpretation of the texts.

I acknowledge that the intersections of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class are important pieces of identity and play a large role in who has power in society. However, this dissertation centers on race, examining how YA authors who hold BIPOC identities center race specifically when retelling a text from the Western literary canon. As Tyson (2015) notes:

Think of each theory as a new pair of eyeglasses through which certain elements of our world are brought into focus while others, of course, fade into the background... Clearly we must restrict our focus in a way that highlights certain elements and ignores others, just as the close-up camera crystallizes whatever it frames and renders the rest a blurred background. (pp. 17-18)

In this way, I used CRT to crystallize the way BIPOC YA authors center race, and race only, in their retellings. While other elements, like adolescent characterization, feminist critiques, or critiques of the normalization of heterosexuality, “fade into the background” (Tyson, 2015, p. 17), this approach allowed me to have a clear focus on race, racism, and power. As the Western literary canon is an overwhelming white space, I chose to focus in on the identity marker of race to understand how YA authors disrupt the normalization of whiteness and racism through their novels and whether and how their novels act as counter-stories to the white hegemony of canonical texts.

History of CRT

Critical Race Theory is a descendent of Critical Legal Studies (CLS) and radical feminism developed in the 1960’s and early 1970’s (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critical Race Theory built on CLS’s argument that there is not one correct outcome to a legal case because of the way facts can be interpreted and who holds authority. A main tenet of CLS was that language

in traditional legal discourse only serves to reinforce hegemony and the dominant social class in society. However, critics of CLS posited that CLS did not focus enough on race. Lawyers, scholars, and activists realized that advances towards social and racial justice from the Civil Rights Movement had either stopped or were being rolled back (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Han & Laughter, 2019). For example, Derrick Bell (1980; 2005) critiqued the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision and noted that although the case appeared to overturn racial oppression, power still remained with the white, upper-class people.

CRT also builds on the work of feminist scholars who highlighted the relationship between power, social roles, and domination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Delgado (1987) suggested that CLS equated racism and classism in a way that favored class over race, while Crenshaw (1988) critiqued CLS for not analyzing the power of systemic racism enough and called for intersectional analyses when looking at discrimination. Crenshaw (1988) critiqued court cases where the court did not recognize that Black women could be discriminated against on the basis of both sex and race. Crenshaw (1988) explains intersectionality as the way multiple identities can compound and create obstacles for marginalized groups of people. CLS did not account for the compounding of inequities, which Crenshaw (1988) saw as a major flaw. When recounting the critiques of CLS, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) note, “A movement that has no theory of race and class is apt to seem increasingly irrelevant” (p. 95). The lack of emphasis on racial discourse and the hegemonic power of racism helped form CRT, as CRT seeks to understand the structures of privilege and oppression in relation to race through five main tenets.

Tenets of CRT

Throughout its inception, there have been five main tenets that scholars generally agree can be identified as components of CRT. The tenets which will be discussed below and that I've identified as most relevant to my study include: *permanence of racism (racism is normalized and endemic)*, *counter-story telling*, *interest convergence*, *whiteness as property*, and *critique of liberalism* (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn, 2002; Milner, 2007; Tate, 1997).

Racism is Normalized and Endemic

Delgado wrote that “racism is normal, not aberrant in American society” (1995, p. xiv), and this tenet of CRT highlights the systemic and institutionalized nature of racism in the United States. The consequences of racism are widespread and ingrained in society, maintaining whiteness as the norm (Milner 2007). The concept of racism being normal makes racism difficult to acknowledge and address because it is so ordinary (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Delgado and Stefancic (2012) note that because of the normalized and invisible presence of racism, “‘formal’ conceptions of equality, expressed in rules that insist only on treatment that is the same across the board, can thus remedy only the most blatant forms of discrimination, such as mortgage redlining” (p. 8). This ignores the everyday experiences BIPOC face as a result of racism and white supremacy that is ingrained in our society. Bell (1992) asserts that racism is a permanent fixture in the daily lives of Americans. Because racism is so “enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). This tenet of CRT serves to highlight the invisible ways racism is woven into society. For the purpose of my study, this tenet can help make visible the racism prevalent in canonical texts

and how YAL texts may or may not push back against racism in present day society. This tenet also serves to highlight how racism is endemic in public school curricula through the continued emphasis on the Western literary canon. While reading, I noted all instances where racism and whiteness are presented as the norm in society. Differences between the novels demonstrating the casual way racism is ingrained in society was highlighted and annotated as I re-read.

Whiteness as Property

White people have long benefitted from unearned privileges of whiteness and actively maintain whiteness through policies, practices, silences, and inactions (Harris, 1993; Leonardo, 2004; McIntosh, 1998). Historically, “Only white possession and occupation of land was validated and therefore privileged as a basis for property rights. These distinct forms of exploitation each contributed in various ways to the construction of whiteness as property” (Harris, 1993, p. 1716). As Harris (1993) explains, there are privileges associated with being born white, materialized in the form of owning property, that create long-lasting inequities and perpetuate systemic racism in the U.S. According to Ladson-Billings (1998), whiteness as property allows white people the

rights of disposition, rights to use and enjoyment, reputation and status property, and the absolute right to exclude— make the American dream of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” a more likely and attainable reality for Whites as citizens (p. 15).

White people enjoy the property of whiteness as an attribute and privilege in society to the detriment of BIPOC who are not afforded the same unearned privileges.

Whiteness as property can be seen in the field of education through the ways ELA classes historically reinforce racism and privilege whiteness through the texts that we teach and the ways

that we teach them (Borsheim-Black et. al, 2014; Baker-Bell, 2020; Cridland-Hughes & King, 2015; Johnson et. al, 2017; Sarigianides & Banack, 2021). If we think of the Western literary canon as “property,” it helps explain why educators claim that reading the canon will help students develop cultural capital and collective understanding of white culture. Educators use the same reasons of “reputation and status” that Ladson-Billings (1998) discusses above as reasons to uphold and continue to teach the texts in the Western literary canon. The belief that accessing the Western literary canon will enable students to access the “property” of the canon privileges whiteness through the majority white stories told.

White characters dominate the Western literary canon, leaving the stories of BIPOC untold. The omission of BIPOC people in curricula was noted by Larrick (1965) who wrote, “nonwhite children are learning to read and to understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them” (p. 63). The blatant disregard for cultural diversity in the stories told in classrooms has been noted by many scholars for years (Bissonette & Glazier, 2016; Dyches 2018a, 2018b; Dyson & Genishi, 1994; Fox & Short, 2003; McNair, 2008). The We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) movement was founded in 2014 in part to address these inequities found in school curricula (Mabbott, 2017). Whiteness dominates school curricula and the Western literary canon as property in many secondary ELA classrooms. This tenet can be used to illuminate the ways the Western literary canon reinforces whiteness as property and the ways YAL can push back. Differences between the novels demonstrating the ways in which whiteness is demonstrated as property either through actual property ownership or cultural capital was highlighted and used to help interpret differences as I re-read.

Counter-storytelling

As a tenet of CRT, counter-stories are “a kind of medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 53). In this sense, counter-stories critique the systemic racism that persists in the daily fabric of life in the United States. Counter-stories also give voice to stories that are otherwise ignored, untold, or dismissed as not fitting the dominant ideology of whiteness. Counter-stories capture and forward the life experiences of marginalized groups either through oral storytelling or stories shared through a written text. Ladson-Billings (1998) asserts that the stories of “ordinary people” (p. 13) often fail to have their stories told in the canon of literature, but these purposeful omissions do not make these stories any less valuable or important. We see this in the Western literary canon being taught in secondary ELA classes, as stories of culturally diverse people living ordinary lives are not included or are portrayed in stereotypical ways. Delgado (1990) argues it’s important for POC to be able to tell their stories, as they have life experiences that can speak directly to the structures of racism in our society. By using counter-storytelling:

critical race theorists are attempting to interject minority cultural viewpoints, derived from a common history of oppression, into their efforts to reconstruct a society crumbling under the burden of racial hegemony. (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 13)

Counter-storytelling will be a useful tenet in analyzing the differences between YA texts and canonical texts. The YA text may function as a counter-story to the canon by providing opportunities for minoritized voices to be heard in traditionally white normative spaces. BIPOC voices may disrupt the normalization of whiteness in the Western literary canon and serve as a counter-story to this normalization as BIPOC authors are writing characters of color into the

canon. The explicit naming of race and positioning BIPOC protagonists in canonical retellings can provide an opportunity for BIPOC students to have stories that provide a mirror for them in ways the Western literary canon may not.

The tenet of counter-storytelling helped me identify the differences between YA texts and canonical texts through the ways the YA texts by BIPOC authors write minoritized voices into a space that prioritizes white, male voices. As the YA texts selected for this study were written by BIPOC authors and feature BIPOC characters, the tenet of counter-storytelling was used to identify if and how the YA texts push back against dominant narratives of whiteness presented in the Western literary canon. I annotated places where I saw differences in the YA text pushing back against dominant narratives.

Interest Convergence

Interest convergence theorizes that progress towards equity only occurs when changes benefit the racial majority (Bell, 1980, 1992; Guinier, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1999). In Bell's (1980) article, he defines interest convergence as:

The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites. However, the fourteenth amendment, standing alone, will not authorize a judicial remedy providing effective racial equality for blacks where the remedy sought threatens the superior societal status of middle and upper-class whites. (p. 523)

Bell (1980) elaborates further to explain that racial justice will not occur if the progress being made will harm values that are important to middle-upper class white people. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) note that interest convergence still holds true because “racism advances the

interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class whites (psychically)” (p. 9); therefore, there is little reason for white people to eradicate racism unless it benefits them in some form.

An example of interest convergence was explained by Ladson-Billings (1998) when Arizona did not observe Martin Luther King Jr. 's birthday for state employees because they said it was too costly a holiday to observe. People protested, and organizations like the NFL and NBA said they would refuse to hold events in Arizona. Ultimately, only when major corporations boycotted was the decision reversed because of the potential negative financial impact. In this example, the state's interest to increase or maintain potential revenue converged with the interests of the African American community to observe Dr. King's birthday, which is the only reason the decision was made (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

In this dissertation, interest convergence may be helpful in understanding the implications of pairing canonical texts with YA remixes, including whether or not supplementing the Western literary canon with YA remixes by BIPOC authors is a form of interest convergence. By pairing the texts, instead of replacing texts from the Western literary canon, the canonical text is too often regarded as the mentor text against which the YA adaptation is measured (Miskec, 2013). When educators position “the YA adaptation of canonical literature as a ladder upwards,” this brings students “into a space that privileges the canonical (adult) text” (Miskec, 2013, p. 76). When pairing texts, it is imperative to consider whether and how the BIPOC remixes are being used to lead students towards understanding the canon as the ultimate goal of instruction. If the goal of pairing a YA and canonical text is to have students appreciate and understand the canonical text, rather than critique the Western literary canon, this could be an example of

interest convergence when pairing texts. It could be interest convergence because whiteness and the perceived cultural capital of the canon (Glaws, 2021) would still be getting privileged by using narratives of BIPOC characters as scaffolding towards the canon. This implies that understanding the canon is the ultimate goal, which positions the white stories of the canon as more valuable. Additionally, not replacing canonical texts with by BIPOC authors and pairing texts instead is an example of interest convergence in and of itself. By pairing texts, the canon and the whiteness of the canon is still afforded space in ELA curricula. Removing canonical texts wouldn't serve to benefit the racial majority (Bell, 1980) so pairing texts can seem like a move towards equity while still benefiting the racial majority of white people who perceive the canon as valuable. As interest convergence focuses more on a societal critique, it may not be found within the pages of a YA text or a canonical text, but rather in thinking about how bringing pairings into curriculum is an act of interest convergence.

To utilize this tenet as I read, I asked myself: Are white characters ultimately benefiting from helping BIPOC characters? Do their interests converge? When white characters appear to be making efforts towards social justice, but do so at their own gain, this could be an example of interest convergence. However, interest convergence is generally understood as a social analysis and may not be found in the pages of a text. This tenet truly proved helpful when thinking about the implications of this dissertation: Is the proposed pairing of the YA text and canonical text a form of interest convergence to uphold the whiteness of the Western literary canon? Or does the pairing critique the white supremacy at work in the Western literary canon?

Critique of Liberalism

Critical Race Theory challenges the notion that liberalism is an acceptable way to address racial inequalities in our society. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) define the framework of liberalism by explaining: “Many liberals believe in colorblindness and neutral principles of constitutional law. They believe in equality, especially equal treatment for all persons, regardless of their different histories or current situations” (p. 26). Liberalism promotes colorblind ideologies and advocates for equal rather than equitable treatment of all people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). When discussing laws and legal processes, critical race theorists often draw connections between the critique of liberalism and interest convergence, as laws often reinforce the privilege of people in power who create them. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) provide the example of how hate speech targeted at minoritized groups is often protected under the First Amendment, but wealthy people will find an exception to this and sue for defamation. In this example, everyone is supposed to have “equal rights,” as purported by many liberals with a colorblind mindset, but minoritized groups often are not afforded the same protections as wealthy, white people. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) make the distinction between equality and equity and criticize liberals who advocate only for equality, inviting us to, “Think of how that system applauds affording everyone equality of opportunity but resists programs that assure equality of results” (p. 29). This can be seen in resistance to programs such as affirmative action or allocation of public school funding. Critical race theorists want to make visible colorblind ideologies and how the assumption that everyone has equal rights and opportunities is actually harmful in the pursuit of equity for BIPOC. This tenet was useful in reading canonical and YA texts that address or promote ideas like colorblindness or meritocracy. I asked myself: Do any of

the characters in the book subscribe to colorblind ideas? Do the characters promote equity or equality? This helped critique liberal ideas present in either the canonical or YA texts.

Data Sources

Selecting canonical texts. To select the canonical text for this study, I conducted a search to find studies reporting which texts educators commonly teach in secondary ELA classrooms. The last national study was conducted by Applebee (1989), who provided a list of the top ten books commonly taught in public schools (see Table 4 on Appendix p. 173). I then cross-referenced Applebee's (1989) findings with smaller, more recent studies by Bushman (1997), Stallworth et. al (2006), Stotsky et. al (2010), and Glaws (2021) to find commonalities across lists.

Glaws (2021) conducted the most recent study and found similar results to Applebee (1989) in that teacher participants reported the following texts as most frequently used in their school settings:

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald (listed 15 times), *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare (listed 14 times), *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller (listed 13 times), *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (listed 11 times), and *Night* by Elie Wiesel (listed 11 times). (p. 24)

Across studies, *Romeo and Juliet* appeared on every list as a canonical text. This is unsurprising, as the CCSS reference Shakespeare explicitly in grades 9-12 as part of the standards for reading literature.

After cross referencing all survey results, I created a preliminary list of canonical titles that appear to be regularly taught in schools and began to explore which of these have YA

adaptations, including *Lord of the Flies*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Macbeth*, *The Crucible*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Selecting YA texts. To begin searching for YA adaptations of these canonical texts, I conducted a Google search using the title and a variety of search terms, including “YA adaptation, retelling, remix, inspired by, written by BIPOC authors.” The search resulted in lists that highlighted possible YA retellings, but the results were not explicit to BIPOC authors at first. As I read through the general results of multiple blog posts, Goodreads lists, and recommended pairings from professional organizations like NCTE (Stephan, 2019), I focused on results that were aimed at YA readers and explicitly designated as retellings or remixes. This led me to eliminate such popular YA titles as *All the Bright Places*, by Jennifer Niven or *Eleanor and Park*, by Rainbow Rowell because although the main characters are thought of as “star-crossed lovers” like *Romeo and Juliet*, these texts were not explicitly marketed as *Romeo and Juliet* remixes. From the lists of retellings, I only included titles written by BIPOC authors. This eliminated many possible pairings, as the only retellings I found for *Macbeth*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *The Crucible* were written by white authors. Ultimately, I found four retellings explicitly inspired by *Romeo and Juliet* written by BIPOC authors:

- *Street Love* by Walter Dean Myers
- *If You Come Softly* by Jacqueline Woodson
- *Romiette and Julio* by Sharon Draper
- *These Violent Delights* by Chloe Gong

Plot Summaries of Selected Texts

Short plot synopses of the selected texts are provided below.

Romeo and Juliet. A play set in Verona, Italy, revolving around a feud between two families, the Capulets and the Montagues. Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet fall in love with each other and are destined to be star-crossed lovers as a result of the feud between their families. As Romeo and Juliet plan to be with each other and escape Verona, a series of unfortunate events unfold, leading to the death of both characters.

Street Love. Written as a modern-day *Romeo and Juliet* set in present day, Harlem, NY. Damien is a straight-A student headed for Brown University who falls in love with Junice, a girl whose mother has just been incarcerated for selling drugs.

If You Come Softly. Set between Brooklyn and Manhattan, NYC, this contemporary retelling of *Romeo and Juliet* centers on the stories of Jeremiah and Ellie. Jeremiah is a Black teenage boy who attends a fancy prep school in Manhattan. He often feels he doesn't fit in until he meets Ellie, a white Jewish girl at school. As their relationship develops, so do the societal tensions surrounding their inter-racial relationship.

Romiette and Julio. Remaining close to the canonical original, this text centers on adolescents Romiette Cappelle and Julio Montague who face opposition directed at their relationship. Romiette is African American, and Julio is Hispanic, and the Devildogs, a local gang, do not approve of their interracial relationship. When the Devildogs threaten them, Romiette and Julio come up with a plan to escape the gang's threats and influence.

These Violent Delights. Set in Shanghai in the 1920's, this retelling focuses on Juliette Cai and Roma Montagov. They come from opposing gangs, the Scarlet Gang and the White Flowers, who have fought for centuries. As the gangs continue to fight and deaths stack up on both sides, Juliette and Roma try to figure out a way to work together to end the feud.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explained how a Critical Comparative Content Analysis (CCCA) was used to guide an analysis of the five selected texts for this dissertation. The steps of a CCCA are outlined as pertains to this dissertation in an effort to make clear how I compared the texts selected. I modified the method of CCCA from Sulzer et al. (2018) to include comparisons between characters, setting, time period, and theme as well as incorporating YA author interviews into my analysis. Adding a layer of including author interviews to my analysis helped provide context around authorial ideologies that were present in the texts. Additionally, the analytic frame of CRT was discussed with the guiding five tenets.

Understanding the history of CRT and how it works to uncover the racist and invisible power structures at work in our society to maintain white dominance gives context as to why pushing back against the Western literary canon is so important in secondary ELA classrooms. The tenets outlined in CRT can help educators and students name the systems of power at play in the canonical texts while recognizing how contemporary YA retellings may push back against white hegemony. It is critical to understand how race, power, and privilege intersect in the texts students are taught, and CRT provides an analytic lens that can help uncover those dynamics.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

Across my analyses, findings demonstrated that the YA authors transformed themes (e.g. star-crossed lovers and/or individual versus society) from *Romeo and Juliet* through changing the antagonists in the stories. All the authors chose to remix star-crossed lovers as a theme while others added themes (e.g. colonization) and some remixed multiple themes found across both texts (e.g. both star-crossed lovers and individual versus society). All authors also modified time and place to be set in contemporary settings. Theme was the constant thread that connected the YA texts with *Romeo and Juliet* and the analytic framework of CRT allowed me to understand how the YA authors added new dimensions to themes to include commentary on race and whiteness. Three out of the four texts (Woodson, Draper, and Gong) included critiques of racism and whiteness whereas the fourth text (Myers) intentionally excluded discussion of racism in a conscious effort to center Black characters in a narrative not focused on racism. All authors changed the race of the protagonists in their narrative to include BIPOC characters with the exception of Jacqueline Woodson keeping one protagonist as a white character to create the circumstance of star-crossed lovers through an interracial relationship. Across all texts, the YA authors offer opportunities for adolescent readers to engage in critical discussions around the new perspectives they offer on the original text.

Throughout this section the findings are organized by pairing each YA novel with *Romeo and Juliet* one-by-one. I explain how the YA author was influenced by Shakespeare's text to highlight the connections between the two texts and make clear how the YA text is a retelling. This influence is then explored further to understand how the YA authors changed the retelling, and their authorial intent in doing so, drawing on CRT to help understand the differences

between the two texts. Each pairing analysis ends with a summary of findings and possible implications for readers and educators, which are discussed further in chapter five.

Romeo & Juliet Remixed as If You Come Softly

When looking across chapter summaries (note: in *Romeo and Juliet*, I used Act and scene summaries as “chapters”), it became clear to me that there was no direct correlation between the two plots of the novels. There is no equivalent in Woodson’s novel to the famous balcony scene or the masquerade ball in *Romeo and Juliet*. As plot was not the common denominator between the two texts and it was clearly not what Woodson set out to rewrite, I went to the words of Woodson herself to see how she discussed *If You Come Softly* as a remix of *Romeo and Juliet*. In several interviews and in her own writing, Woodson has specifically referenced *Romeo and Juliet* when discussing her novel. In the new preface to *If You Come Softly*, Woodson wrote, “Twenty-two years ago I sat down to write a retelling of Romeo and Juliet. I wanted to write the love story set in the present and asked myself— If they were alive today, who would they be?” (Woodson, 2018, n.p., emphasis in original). Woodson took the themes of *Romeo and Juliet*, star-crossed lovers and the individual versus society, and retold those for a modern audience. The words of Woodson influenced how I focused on the themes of star-crossed lovers and individual versus society as I read and compared the two stories. As Woodson continuously referenced rewriting a love story as the basis for *If You Come Softly*, I first focused on the star-crossed lover theme in my reading of her text and the canonical original. Woodson honed in on a “love story” like Romeo and Juliet’s, one doomed to end in tragedy, but complicated the love story through Ellie and Jeremiah’s interracial relationship.

To achieve this complicated exploration of an existing theme, Woodson changed the race of the characters to feature an interracial couple and changed the antagonistic element of the story from a family feud to systemic issues fueled by racism. In doing so, she challenges the normalization of whiteness in a canonical love story by being explicit about Jeremiah's Blackness and the ways in which race affects how he moves throughout society and how it functions in a romantic relationship. In Woodson's own words, "As I was writing it [*If You Come Softly*], I came across some lines from *Romeo and Juliet* and realized this story was a modern-day Romeo and Juliet. The enemies to Jeremiah and Ellie's love are racism, police brutality and people's general stupidity" (Woodson, n.d., para. 13).

Critical Race Theory helped guide my analyses of *If You Come Softly* and *Romeo and Juliet* by highlighting 1) the different ways each text positions the challenges of love as star crossed lovers, 2) the differences in character descriptions as counter-story, and 3) the different ways each text addresses the theme of the individual versus society. My findings are briefly discussed below and then expanded upon in specific sections for each. By racebending and restorying (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016) one of the main characters and rewriting Romeo as Jeremiah, a Black male, Woodson's text addresses my second research question through the way *If You Come Softly* comments on racism and white normativity when compared to the canonical version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Through this change, Woodson provides explicit commentary on the ways whiteness operates, and harms, Black males in society. Additionally, through centering Jeremiah's Blackness, *If You Come Softly* addresses my third research question: do these remixes act as counter-stories to disrupt whiteness in the original canonical text? Although Woodson's text does not have a happy ending, she writes Jeremiah with pride for his Blackness and centers

Black excellence in her text. The explicit focus on Jeremiah's Blackness stands in stark contrast to the whiteness of *Romeo and Juliet* and can act as a counter-story to the erasure of characters like Jeremiah from Shakespeare's text and the canon overall.

An example codebook (see Table 6 on Appendix pg 174) demonstrates how I coded when re-reading the Woodson's novel alongside the canonical original, looking at the differences between how Shakespeare and Woodson addressed the idea of star-crossed lovers and individual versus society. I used inductive coding to create codes connected to the themes addressed in both novels and then used tenets of CRT help me analyze the differences between texts.

Love's Opposing Forces

Woodson's authorial intent to change the antagonist of the story to systemic issues fueled by racism is demonstrated in nuanced ways through the text. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the antagonist to the forbidden romance is clearly the family feud between the Capulets and the Montagues. When thinking about my research question around how authors of color retell a text, in this case *Romeo and Juliet*, from the Western literary canon, Woodson does this by using the same themes as the canonical text but disrupting them in terms of race. Woodson does not rely on plot at all when retelling Romeo and Juliet's story and rewriting the characters as Jeremiah and Ellie. Woodson moves the time period and the setting of *Romeo and Juliet* to be contemporary New York City. The only clear link between the two texts are similar themes, rewritten with a twist from Woodson, and interviews Woodson gave about how she considered *If You Come Softly* to be a retelling.

Woodson Centers Racism as Love's Opposing Force

In Woodson's retelling, she explicitly changes the antagonist from Shakespeare's text, a family feud, to racism. While both sets of protagonists have obstacles they encounter when pursuing their relationship, Woodson's focus on how racism is a pervasive and overwhelming societal obstacle is clear when comparing the antagonists between the two texts. To begin exploring how Woodson retold *Romeo and Juliet*, I compared the differences between the ways the two authors address love's opposing forces throughout the two texts. The prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* explicitly references the centuries old grudge between the two families as the catalyst to Romeo and Juliet's suicide. Juliet asks Romeo to "Deny thy father and refuse thy name" (Shakespeare, 1597/2003. 2.2, 34) so they can be together, as "'Tis but thy name that is my enemy" (Shakespeare, 1597/2003. 2.2, 38). In contrast, the explicit naming of race and racism in *If You Come Softly* is what creates the circumstances of "star-crossed lovers" for Jeremiah and Ellie.

The differences between *Romeo and Juliet* and *If You Come Softly* are stark here when contemplating the endemic nature of racism. CRT asserts that race is a social construction, but one that cannot be ignored, as it permeates all facets of society. This is demonstrated through the explicit naming of race in *If You Come Softly* and lack of racial discourse in *Romeo and Juliet*. Juliet asks Romeo to cast aside his family name to be with her because their only enemy is his name linking him to their family feud, whereas neither Jeremiah nor Ellie can simply remove the systemic barrier of racism as their obstacle. CRT details how racism permeates all facets of society, from individuals to institutions, and Ellie and Jeremiah cannot deny racism compared to how Juliet asks Romeo to "deny his father." While Romeo's choice to "refuse thy name" would

certainly have consequences, it is something that Romeo *could* do; however, Jeremiah and Ellie cannot in contrast refuse the racism that permeates the fabric of the society they live in.

CRT helps us understand that those who do not face the endemic nature of racism and do not have to see the world through a lens of racism have one less barrier to overcome in their relationships. As white people, Romeo and Juliet both benefit from the normalization of whiteness and race as a social construction. While Romeo and Juliet worry about their families finding out about their relationship, their race does not play a factor in their fear compared to how Ellie and Jeremiah worry about telling their families they are in an interracial relationship. The social construction of race works in Romeo and Juliet's favor, as their whiteness is the dominant identity marker in society and does not work as an opposing force to their love in the same way Jeremiah and Ellie face. Whiteness is normalized as the dominant identity marker by Shakespeare, and Romeo and Juliet do not have to think about their racial identity as they make decisions about their relationship.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare has Juliet challenge the ideology of hatred as an opposing force to the love she and Romeo share, but in the context of their family feud. Juliet notes, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose/ By any other word would smell as sweet" (Shakespeare, 1597/2003, 2.2, 43-44). Here she seems to think of the decades-long feud between their families as inconsequential. Juliet recognizes there is no sense in hating someone simply for their family name—a luxury Ellie and Jeremiah do not have when considering their obstacle is racial identity. Dismissing racism as inconsequential is not something Ellie and Jeremiah can do as opposed to Romeo and Juliet. Romeo and Juliet thinking critically about their family feud could have meant that they used their privilege to leave Verona together, or that they might have

used mediation through characters like Benvolio or Mercutio to come to a truce between the families. In other words, Romeo and Juliet would not have to mitigate the perils of disclosing an interracial relationship in a permanently racist society; they would have to confront their own immediate communities and social hierarchy specifically. Comparatively, Ellie and Jeremiah can't do that with an entire society. They do not have the privilege of trying to mediate the challenges in their relationship because racism is embedded in the bedrock of the world they live in. It's not a localized problem that could have a solution; it's a systemic problem fueled by white supremacy. Racism plays no role in tearing apart Romeo and Juliet, while Woodson intentionally centers it as a conflict in Ellie and Jeremiah's relationship as an ideology they challenge.

Woodson addresses the ideology of endemic racism in society and how it affects interracial relationships, demonstrating how Ellie is forced to hide her relationship with Jeremiah from her family. She reveals to him that she has not told them about him by saying:

'I used to think my family would accept anybody... no matter what color they were. I'm not so sure of that now'... I had not spoken to Anne again. Maybe I was afraid of that too— afraid to find out that she didn't like the *idea* of me and Miah together. And what was at the heart of it all— that was the scariest part. 'If they have it in them to not like someone because of their color— then I might have it in me.' (Woodson, 1998, p. 163-164)

Woodson's authorial intent in how she references racism as an enemy to Jeremiah and Ellie's relationship is demonstrated through this scene as Woodson shows how deeply engrained racism is in society and how generational racism is taught in families. Ellie worries that while dating

Jeremiah, even though he is Black, she may have it engrained in her through the teaching of her family to judge people based on their race.

Jeremiah also worries about telling his family that he is dating a white woman. When he contemplates telling his father, he gets nervous because of a conversation they had where his dad said, “Thing about white people... they don’t know they’re white. They know what everybody else is, but they don’t know *they’re* white” (Woodson, 2018, p. 134). Jeremiah’s dad provides this critique of whiteness as the default lens through which white people see the world so they don’t have to critically think about their own identity, whereas Black people know that they’re Black. This was coded as “star-crossed lovers” because Jeremiah was considering telling his dad about Ellie, but when his dad critiques whiteness, he changes his mind. This quote reminds the reader that race is an opposing force for Jeremiah and Ellie and an obstacle to their love. The critique provided by Jeremiah’s father aligns with how Romeo and Juliet do not have to consider their race as they move through the world. The way Woodson rewrites Romeo and Juliet’s love story to center Ellie and Jeremiah and the ways racism affects their relationship is important for young readers to see. Not only does it disrupt the whiteness of Shakespeare’s original play, but the novel also shows how racism is not situated in the past, highlighting the reality that today’s adolescents must grapple with the effects of endemic racism.

Additionally, this restorying of Jeremiah’s and Ellie’s love narrative can disrupt the ways whiteness dominates school curricula and functions as property in many secondary ELA classrooms. In ELA curricula, whiteness is property, as stories of white protagonists are told far more often than those of BIPOC. Woodson’s text demonstrates how Black narratives are valuable and can push back against the whiteness that serves as property in the Western literary

canon. She takes a text, *Romeo and Juliet*, that is solidly entrenched in the canon and whiteness, centers a Black protagonist and uses the same theme of star-crossed lovers in complex and nuanced ways. If educators were to replace *Romeo and Juliet* with *If You Come Softly*, or use *Romeo and Juliet* as a compliment to Woodson's text, this would disrupt the ways in which only whiteness is seen as valuable property in curriculum through centering Blackness instead.

How Ellie's Whiteness Contributes to Love's Opposing Forces

A striking example of Woodson disrupting the theme of star-crossed lovers and drawing attention to the ideology of endemic racism is through Ellie's relationship with her sister, Anne. Anne holds a non-dominant identity as a lesbian and has experienced bias because of her sexual orientation. Ellie describes, "When Anne first came out, Marion [their mother] hit the roof. But by then, Anne was already living in San Francisco, so there wasn't a whole lot Marion could do" (Woodson, 1998, p. 51). Given the strength of their relationship, Ellie expects Anne to be excited for her when Ellie reveals she met a boy at school who she likes—and she is. However, when Ellie reveals to Anne that Jeremiah is Black, the ways in which racism is normalized and endemic are demonstrated through Anne's response. Anne espouses racist views to Ellie in a way that demonstrates she is comfortable with the way racism is prevalent in society because as a white person, she does not have to deal with the consequences of race as a social construction. When Ellie first reveals Jeremiah's racial identity, Anne does not respond, and Ellie describes the "air between us getting weird" (p. 55). Anne then admits she is surprised to hear Jeremiah is Black. Ellie challenges Anne by pointing out that Anne was excited for Ellie before Ellie revealed Jeremiah was Black. Anne replies:

I can be surprised and excited at the same time. Geez. I just never thought about it— you know.... I just never thought about it for myself. Or for anybody else in our family, really. That's all. I don't think it's a bad thing. I just think to have a boyfriend or a girlfriend from a different race is really hard.... I have to be a big sister for a moment and say don't do something just 'cause you're mad at Marion or want to be radical.

(Woodson, 1998, pp. 57-58)

I coded this as an example of “star-crossed lovers” and then used CRT to understand how race and racism work as opposing forces to love. Even as Anne holds a non-dominant identity, she demonstrates bias towards another minoritized group by telling Ellie it would be difficult to be in a relationship with someone from a different race. Woodson reveals how deeply racism is entrenched and normalized in society by presenting Anne's prejudice towards Jeremiah because he is Black. Anne implies that being in an interracial relationship is “radical” and that Ellie may be dating Jeremiah as a way to get back at their mother for abandoning them. This demonstrates the normalization of racism by Anne implying Blackness is a threat to their mother. CRT helps us understand that racism is so permanent and ordinary in society that Anne can use Jeremiah's Blackness to describe how Ellie might upset their mother through the sheer fact of Ellie dating a Black male. Anne tries to rationalize Ellie being in an interracial relationship as something besides love by suggesting anger towards their mother as an excuse for Ellie dating Jeremiah. Anne is not worried that Ellie is dating in general; she is only worried that Jeremiah is Black, demonstrating how permanent racism is in society. If Jeremiah was white, Anne would not have expressed concern that having a boyfriend of the *same* race would be “really hard.” She makes it a point to discuss their different races.

This is a turning point in Ellie's relationship with Anne. After this, they don't speak for a long time. This exchange stands in contrast to the reactions to declaration of love made by Romeo and Juliet. Friar Lawrence critiques Romeo for moving on so quickly to Juliet after he proclaimed he loved another woman named Rosaline, saying "Young men's love then lies/ Not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes," (Shakespeare, 1597/2003. 2.3, 67-68). However, these lines reveal no sense of racial tension. Romeo does not have to think about revealing the race of Juliet because whiteness is normalized, and he does not have to deal with the prejudice that accompanies an interracial relationship.

Following the conversation with her sister, Ellie begins to reflect on the way that racism shows up in her family, drawing attention to the endemic nature of racism and a critique of liberalism. She recalls:

Anne and I were walking through Central Park when this black guy started running toward us. I frowned, remembering how Anne had screamed, and grabbed me. When the guy got up close, we realized he was a jogger, not a mugger or anything, and Anne had turned red with embarrassment... Would Anne have reacted that way if the guy had been white? (Woodson, 2010, p. 69)

In this passage and others, the normalization of racism and whiteness are explicitly called out by Woodson through Ellie's critical reflections. When Ellie's mom says, "All people have suffered. So why should any of us feel like we're better or less than another?" (Woodson, 1998, p. 70), perpetuating colorblind ideologies with the sentiment that everyone is equal and has suffered the same and forwarding the assumption that racism is a thing of the past, Ellie begins to think about the hypocrisy of her family and the absence of Black people in their lives. She wonders, "Why

weren't they playing golf with Daddy on Saturdays or quilting with Marion on Thursday nights? Why weren't there in our world, around us, a part of us?" (Woodson, 2010, p. 70). Ellie both questions why whiteness is normalized in her life and provides a critique of liberalism through her family's colorblind attitudes.

Ellie's reflection challenges colorblind ideologies when she reflects to herself directly after this conversation with her mother and wonders, "where were they then— these black people who were just like us—who were equal to us?" (Woodson, 1998, p. 70). Using CRT as an analytic frame helps make visible the colorblind ideologies that Ellie's mother subscribes to in *If You Come Softly* and how Ellie learns to recognize these ideologies as wrong. Ellie's mother situates racism as a problem in the past, a liberal idea according to CRT, instead of acknowledging it as a current problem. Through Ellie's character development and her learning, it's important for readers to see how she reflects and recognizes liberal ideologies from her family members. Ellie's learning could provide a model for readers to recognize liberal ideas that are perpetuated in society today or by their loved ones as Ellie does with her mother.

The way Ellie recognizes how colorblind and racist ideologies are perpetuated in her family contribute to the overarching theme of "love's opposing forces." The ideologies her family holds cause Ellie to delay in telling her family about Jeremiah because of his Blackness. In an interview, Woodson describes Ellie as a strong character, noting that her "strength lies in her ability to think critically about the world she's growing up in. At the point when the story opens, she's beginning to see the hypocrisy around her — especially in her own family" (*Girls of Summer*, n.d, para. 5). Using CRT as an analytic frame helps to understand how Woodson's text continually demonstrates the endemic nature of racism and provides a critique of liberalism as

Ellie challenges the ways in which whiteness is normalized by her family through colorblind ideologies.

Characterization as Counterstory: Centering Jeremiah's Blackness

As counter-stories give voice to experiences that are otherwise ignored, untold, or dismissed as not fitting the dominant ideology of whiteness, the way Woodson draws attention to Jeremiah's Blackness works to disrupt the normalization of white characters in canonical texts. Woodson's authorial intentions as a disruptor of normalized whiteness are clear as she continually discusses Jeremiah's Blackness in both the text itself and her interviews; in this way her explicit naming of Blackness can function as a counterstory to the erasure of Black stories in the canon. Shakespeare doesn't name whiteness in his text most likely because of the historical time and setting of the play. Readers would assume whiteness; however, this not naming of race, of whiteness, contributes to the normalization of whiteness as default in literature (Smith, 2016). It's clear that Woodson's authorial intent was to explicitly discuss race as an important factor of identity, whereas Shakespeare's characters use the normalization of whiteness to account for their racial identity. Shakespeare's authorial intention may have been to discuss familial tension rather than racial tension in his play, but whiteness as a racial identity is not named or discussed throughout *Romeo and Juliet*. When comparing the two texts through a CCCA, the ways in which whiteness was normalized through not naming Romeo and Juliet's race was very clear when reading how consistently Woodson centers race in her text. Woodson explicitly drawing attention to Jeremiah's Blackness, and changing the race of Shakespeare's white protagonist to a Black protagonist, can work as a counter-story to the lack of Black narratives told in the Western literary canon and stands in stark contrast to the normalization of whiteness in *Romeo and Juliet*.

There are many instances throughout the story in which Jeremiah describes loving his Blackness and love for his family, which can serve as a counter-story centering Black joy (Stone, 2020) since the Western literary canon intentionally erased Black experiences through the selective tradition (Williams, 1997). The first sentence of the novel opens with “Jeremiah was Black. He could feel it. The way the sun pressed down hard and hot on his skin in the summer... He felt warm in his skin, protected. And in Fort Greene, Brooklyn— where everyone seemed to be some shade of black— he felt good walking through his neighborhood” (Woodson, 1998, p. 5). This stands in stark contrast to *Romeo and Juliet* where race is not mentioned anywhere in the play. Jeremiah consistently references Blackness throughout the text as seen here when he reflects on a memory of when “his father had taken him to see a film about the Black Panthers— all those Afros and fists raised in the air. Jeremiah smiled. He wished his grandmother had heard them shouting *Black is beautiful*” (Woodson, 1998, pp. 7-8). Readers do not have to assume Jeremiah’s racial identity because Woodson is consistent and explicit about discussing Blackness throughout her text. When compared to the characterization in *Romeo and Juliet*, the nurse gives the most comprehensive physical description of Romeo when she states:

You know not how to choose a man. Romeo! No, not he, though his face be better than any man’s, yet his legs excels all men’s, and for a hand and a foot and a body, though they be not to be talked on, yet they are past compare. (Shakespeare, 1597/2003, 2.5, 39-42)

While the nurse comments on how Romeo’s face and legs are more handsome than other men, she does not provide any indication of race. Shakespeare’s ideologies of race are demonstrated in how whiteness is normalized throughout the play. Race is not mentioned, but in

an absence of racial markers, white is assumed to be the default (Smith, 2016). While young adult texts offer the affordance of often consulting the words of the authors through interviews to gain further knowledge about their authorial intent, there are no interviews with Shakespeare that can be used. As *Romeo and Juliet* was set in Verona, Italy, and race was never mentioned, I assumed both protagonists to be white and of Italian descent. This assumption is reified through several film adaptations where white actors play Romeo and Juliet (Zeffirelli, 1968; Luhrmann 1996). Romeo and Juliet do not have to discuss the race of each other throughout the text as they both are white people in a society where whiteness is normalized. Jeremiah on the other hand explicitly acknowledges his race throughout *If You Come Softly*, which creates a counterstory to the hegemonic whiteness and white narratives centered in the stories encapsulated in the canon, *Romeo and Juliet* included.

Comparing the Individual Versus Society Theme Across Texts

As I looked across this pairing and identified themes, both texts addressed the individual versus society. On Woodson's website, she wrote that an enemy of Jeremiah and Ellie's relationship was "people's general stupidity." This helped guide my analysis as I looked for how "people acted stupidly" in society and towards Jeremiah and Ellie. As I read, I looked for the ways people interacted with and reacted to Jeremiah and Ellie as individuals and when they were together in society. In thinking about what Woodson meant by people's stupidity, I looked for examples where people could display biased thinking, stereotyping, or unfair treatment of Jeremiah and Ellie as adolescents. This was influenced by Woodson saying that "racism" and "police brutality" were also enemies to Jeremiah and Ellie's relationship; therefore, I connected people's general stupidity to concepts, like biased thinking, fueling racism and police brutality.

As I knew that Woodson drew on original themes from Shakespeare's play, I looked for how other people could be enemies to love in *Romeo and Juliet*. I turned to the questions guiding my CCCA to understand the differences between the way the theme was presented in both texts. I wanted to know how Woodson changed the theme of the individual versus society in her retelling and what ideologies her change represented.

Pervasive Whiteness and Racism in Society

In *Romeo and Juliet*, "society" tells Romeo and Juliet they cannot be together because of the importance of honor and loyalty to their families. During *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet's father has arranged a marriage for her to another man named Paris. When Juliet tells her father that she loves Romeo and will not marry Paris, he replies that he will drag her to the church if she refuses: "To go with Paris to Saint Peter's Church/ Or I will drag thee on a hurdle thither" (Shakespeare, 1597/2003. 3.5, 153-155). Juliet tries to resist societal expectations that her father can arrange a marriage for her and that she will obey his wishes. Her father notes, "I think she will be ruled/ In all respects by me. Nay, more, I doubt it not" (Shakespeare, 1597/2003. 3.4, 13-14). Juliet's father expects blind obedience to him and their family wishes, a societal expectation for women (a feminist lens might be able to provide an incisive critique of the way women are positioned in *Romeo and Juliet*, but that is outside the scope of this study). Perpetuation of dominant societal values and norms is paramount in *Romeo and Juliet*, as Juliet tries to push back against what is expected of her in marriage through dominant societal expectations. Looking at how the theme of the individual versus society is presented in *Romeo and Juliet* through a lens of CRT helps crystallize the normalization of whiteness. While Romeo is judged unfit to marry Juliet because of his family name, race is not a factor in this decision. While

Romeo and Juliet face many challenges around gender and class as they pursue their relationship, their challenges are unrelated to race. Both families are white and of Italian descent so there is no racial tension for society to place an as obstacle for Romeo or Juliet to resist. In comparing the two texts, this difference highlighted how Woodson offers a new perspective on the challenges in relationships to adolescent readers in her retelling of *Romeo and Juliet*.

When Jacqueline Woodson discussed writing *If I Come Softly*, she described what she wanted young people to understand from the novel, saying:

I kept asking myself ‘What would be different if *Romeo and Juliet* was being written today?’ But when I was younger, I was also deeply affected by the death of Edmund Perry—an African-American boy who was attending prep school and while home on break, was shot by cops. (Woodson, n.d., para. 3)

The death of Edmund Perry mirrors the death of Jeremiah, as Jeremiah is shot by police when he is walking through the park. Woodson (1998) writes:

Jeremiah didn’t know that they had been looking for a man. A tall, dark man. If he had known, he would have stopped when the shout came from behind him... And then he was falling, grabbing for the ball but falling, falling, and losing control. (p. 171)

Woodson intentionally centers the ideology of endemic racism and how this causes police brutality through dehumanizing Black boys and seeing Blackness as a threat (Johnson, 2018) when she writes Jeremiah’s death scene. Jeremiah discusses the regular and persistent ways he must battle society seeing him as a threat through recounting a memory about his father, which foreshadows his death:

Ever since he was a little boy, his father had always warned him about running in white neighborhoods. Once, when he was about ten, he had torn away from his father and taken off down Madison Avenue. When his father caught up to him, he grabbed Miah's shoulder. *Don't you ever run in a white neighborhood*, he'd whispered fiercely, tears in his eyes. Then he had pulled Miah towards him and held him. *Ever*. (Woodson, 1998, p. 143)

Jeremiah's father is trying to tell a young Jeremiah that a Black man running in a white neighborhood can easily be seen as a threat. Blackness often equates to danger in situations that are not dangerous. A young Black child should not be in danger when running, but readers can sense the fear from Jeremiah's father, as Woodson (1998) describes how he holds Jeremiah close and has tears in his eyes. Jeremiah is in a repeated battle against society to not automatically be seen as a threat or dangerous because of his Blackness. The permanence of racism engrained in society allows for these hateful ideologies to perpetuate and places Black people in harm's way while completing everyday tasks. The effects of the perpetuation of dominant societal values and the way whiteness is normalized are demonstrated through Jeremiah's death. Whiteness is valued and normalized in society, whereas Blackness is not and is instead considered a threat, which ultimately leads to Jeremiah being shot. In the scene where Jeremiah's father warns him against running in a white neighborhood, Jeremiah tells his dad "Times are different" (Woodson, 1998, p. 143) but then reflects to himself that "He knew his father was right. Knew by the way people eyed him and Ellie when they walked holding hands. It scared him sometimes. Those white boys making fun of them had scared him" (p. 143). Jeremiah ultimately knows that Blackness is seen as a threat, and perceived through a deficit lens, as he reflects on how white strangers judge his

relationship with Ellie. The fact that the police were looking for a Black man, and just assumed Jeremiah was the person in question because he was running while Black helps show how racist ideologies fuel police brutality. The ideology of whiteness being normal drives the people's actions, and in the case of Jeremiah's death it drove the actions of the police, demonstrating how ideologies can cause harm when they are grounded in racism.

Normalized Racism for Jeremiah

Woodson leads up to Jeremiah's death by having Jeremiah recount the multitude of ways he must battle societal expectations of racism throughout his life. The analytic frame of CRT helps remind us that race is a social construct that enables whites to profit off of the unequal treatment of Black people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Jeremiah is affected daily by the social construct of race and how society sees him through a deficit lens. For example, Jeremiah gets transferred into Ellie's history class after initially being placed in a remedial class at their private, extremely white, prep school, Percy Academy. Talking to Ellie he says:

Like what made them think I needed remedial anything. Nobody tested me. Nobody asked me. They just threw me in it then looked surprised when I knew it all. I mean, it makes you wonder—is it my *hair*? He smiled... Or the melanin thing? (Woodson, 1998, pp. 75-76, emphasis in original)

The assumptions made by the administration at Percy demonstrate the endemic nature of racism as they judged Jeremiah's intelligence based on his Blackness.

Racism is engrained in our educational systems and is an ordinary and permanent component of society, as explained by tenets of CRT. The endemic racism that perpetuates disparities in our schools and classrooms sends the message to Black students that their race is a

predictor of their intellectual capability. Administrators assumed Jeremiah must need a remedial class because he is Black. The normalization of racism allowed the administration to make this judgement without a second thought to test Jeremiah into his academic placements. As Jeremiah is recounting this instance to Ellie, she reflects, “The world was like that a long time ago. But it wasn’t like that anymore, was it?” (p. 76). As Woodson (1998) has explained in interviews, Ellie’s strength lays in her ability to critically view the world around her. Here, Ellie is beginning to realize the endemic nature of racism and how engrained in the fabric of society racism is. Her understanding of the normalization of racism continues to develop throughout the novel and her relationship with Jeremiah.

Throughout *If You Come Softly*, Woodson (1998) intentionally draws attention to the various messages that society sends young Black men about their race. In the beginning of the novel, Jeremiah recounts a childhood memory where his grandmother tells him to stay out of the sun as she would say, “*Don’t want you to get too black*” (p. 6, emphasis in original). In this scene, he contrasts his grandmother saying not to get too Black with how “free inside his dark skin” (Woodson, 1998, p. 6) he felt when he was hanging out with his friends. His father sends Jeremiah messages of Black pride, “*Miah, you’re a black man. You’re a warrior*” (Woodson, 1998, p. 8, emphasis in original), and at first Jeremiah wonders what war he is fighting, but when Jeremiah sees a commercial of a monkey playing basketball he notes:

He knew then, the war was all around him. It was people and commercials trying to make him feel like he didn’t even matter, trying to make him feel like there was something wrong with being black. (p. 8)

Woodson's (1998) language of the war being "all around him" (p. 8) speaks to the endemic, hegemonic nature of racism. CRT reminds us that racism is an ordinary and permanent feature in society, so ordinary that racist television commercials are allowed to air and perpetuate harm for Black viewers.

Woodson also modernizes the story and traces some Black history along the way to demonstrate the endemic nature of racism (e.g. the colorism of his grandmother versus his father's Black pride discourse shows that his family has had to think about race for generations, and still does). This is not family versus family, which feels like individual versus society for *Romeo and Juliet*. *Romeo and Juliet* may feel societal expectations that they stay loyal to their family name and not be together because of their family feuds; however, if their families formed a truce their conflict would be solved. There is potential for the societal expectation for *Romeo and Juliet* to hate one another to go away if their families decided to end their feud. This stands in contrast to *Jeremiah* because it really is him versus all of the racism normalized in society. *Jeremiah* cannot get people together to form a truce like *Romeo and Juliet* could have attempted. Racism is engrained in the fabric of society, and *Jeremiah* must endure both micro and macro-aggressions as he moves through the world. Woodson consistently calls attention to the ideology of the normalization of racism in society through *Jeremiah's* character. Addressing the theme of the individual versus society through providing an incisive critique of the ways *Jeremiah* is forced to endure endemic racism proves to be an important difference in the ways Woodson and Shakespeare address this theme. See table 7 on page 176 for more examples of how Woodson transforms theme.

Conclusion

When comparing the differences between *Romeo and Juliet* and *If You Come Softly*, a CCCA helped me answer my research questions. Research question one asks, How do authors of color retell a text, in this case, *Romeo and Juliet*, from the Western literary canon? Woodson does this through restorying the race of Jeremiah in opposition to the whiteness of Romeo and using the same themes as *Romeo and Juliet* but altering the themes to center on race. When thinking about research question two, Do these texts critique whiteness or racism compared to the white normativity prevalent in *Romeo and Juliet*?, it's clear there is an explicit focus on race in *If You Come Softly*. In several interviews, Woodson has referenced racism as an important topic to center in her retelling compared to the problems Romeo and Juliet had to face in their love story. She chose to comment on the endemic nature of racism, police brutality, and white privilege as she thought about what ideologies her text would present to readers. For research question three, Do these remixes act as counter-stories to disrupt whiteness in the original canonical text?, Woodson's decision to alternate narration between Jeremiah and Ellie and center Jeremiah's Blackness and all the complicated ways he feels about his racial identity serve as a disruption by elevating the Black voices that the canon marginalizes. Woodson gives voice to a young Black male as one of the main protagonists of the story, providing a counter-story to the normalization of whiteness in the Western literary canon.

For readers, thinking about new ways the theme individual versus society can be conceptualized is important through the way Woodson shows how the perpetuation of dominant ideologies in society can affect individuals. Because of the normalization of whiteness and racism, the police in *If You Come Softly* have pre-conceived notions of Jeremiah, which

ultimately lead to his death. The ideals society holds can be dangerous to an individual, which is what *If You Come Softly* helps reader understand. Ideologies are not just values people hold, but they influence actions and can have life-threatening consequences for Black males like Jeremiah. Having adolescent readers understand the theme of individual versus society and the ways societal values can harm individuals is important and valuable.

Romeo & Juliet Remixed as Street Love

Upon completing a CCCA for *Street Love* and *Romeo and Juliet*, it was clear that Walter Dean Myers transformed setting, characters, and theme to reflect Shakespeare's play (see Table 8 on Appendix pg. 177) but did not rely on plot. Following the story itself, the publisher provides paratextual "extras" at the back of the text, including an interview from Myers (2006) where he acknowledges he took inspiration from Shakespeare and that he wrote his "first draft of *Street Love* completely in iambic pentameter" (p. 141) because he noticed that adolescent girls often spoke in a cadence similar to pentameter. Myers' whole text is written in verse to celebrate and honor the Black literacies he heard while talking to Black youth. As Myers (2006) continued to write *Street Love*, he "loosened up the verse with some rap elements" to better reflect the language "you hear so often in juvenile detention centers" (p. 142). With Shakespeare as the inspiration for the lyrical nature of the text, Myers (2006) also specifically references wanting to "write a love story that took place in the inner city" (p. 139). The idea of a love story was paired with inspiration he took from reading a news article about a woman who went to jail for drug possession while having four children. Myers took both ideas, a love story and curiosity about what happens to children placed into foster care or social welfare agencies, to create the character of Junice and the circumstances that create conflict for her love story with Damien.

While Myers kept the theme of forbidden love or star-crossed lovers the same as in the original text, that was the only tie to *Romeo and Juliet*. Therefore, when looking at my first research question: How do authors of color retell a text, *Romeo and Juliet*, from the Western literary canon?, it was clear that the *how* was in taking the theme of star-crossed lovers and transforming it into a contemporary setting with Black characters. Findings from this pairing demonstrated how Myers wrote his characters as a counter-story to the lack of Black narratives in the canon, and publishing in general, and that he intentionally did not include critiques of racism or whiteness in *Street Love*. Myers' lack of racial critiques acted as a counter-story to the trauma narratives Black readers often have to endure when reading about Black stories in literature. The centering of Black characters in *Street Love* and the strength Myers writes into them provides a counterstory for readers.

Characters as Counterstory

Myers did not give many interviews specifically about writing *Street Love*, but he gave many about writing, race, and the publishing industry in general. To prepare for comparing *Street Love* with *Romeo and Juliet*, I read multiple interviews and opinion pieces he wrote. This included his 2014 piece in *The New York Times* titled, "Where Are All the People of Color in Children's Books," where Myers discusses the importance of representation in literature for readers of color. Myers (2014) notes he intentionally writes about and for people of color, saying, "I realized that this was exactly what I wanted to do when I wrote about poor inner-city children — to make them human in the eyes of readers and, especially, in their own eyes" (para. 14). Myers' authorial ideology to disrupt whiteness in stories for young people is clear and intentional in his writing of *Street Love* and echoed in multiple interviews he gave throughout his

lifetime. This context was important to have when comparing *Street Love* and *Romeo and Juliet*, as it can help explain the racial differences between characters and help address my third research question: Do these remixes act as counter-stories to disrupt whiteness in the original canonical text? *Street Love* does act as a counter-story to disrupt whiteness prevalent in *Romeo and Juliet* by centering two strong Black characters in Junice, who refuses to fall victim to her circumstances, and Damien, who is portrayed as a “bright, articulate boy” (Myers, 2006, p. 139).

Myers’ intentional moves to disrupt whiteness and center Blackness in *Street Love* are evident in how he describes the characters. The first time Myers (2006) writes about Damien, he is described as “young and proud and Black” (p. 2), and Junice describes herself as having a “dark face” (p. 22). There are consistent references to each character’s Blackness throughout the text, from either the characters themselves or others. Myers’ authorial intent to provide representation in literature for adolescents of color helps position *Street Love* as a counter-story, as he recognizes the importance of representation of Blackness in stories about subjects other than racism or slavery. Myers (2014) talks about how many adolescents say they loved his books, “They have been struck by the recognition of themselves in the story, a validation of their existence as human beings, an acknowledgment of their value by someone who understands who they are” (para. 11).

Blackness is celebrated throughout *Street Love*, evidenced, for example, when Junice’s mother describes Junice’s long “brown thighs” (Myers, 2006, p. 43) as beautiful. Black teens reading *Street Love* can see “a validation of their existence of human beings” (Myers, 2014, para. 11), which relates to the definition of how counter-stories provide voice to stories typically erased. Thinking about my research question and how counter-stories give voice to experiences

that are otherwise ignored and untold, the emphasis Myers places on Blackness helps position *Street Love* as a counter-story for Black youth. *Street Love* provides a mirror for Black adolescents who had not yet been able to see themselves reflected in love stories especially when compared to the default white lens of *Romeo and Juliet*. When *Romeo and Juliet* is centered in ELA curriculum as the only love story, it sends the message that white students are worthy of seeing their lives and love represented in the curriculum while ignoring the stories of Black youth. Myers reverses this by centering Black adolescents in a story of young love.

Writing Strength into Junice

Considering how the centering of Black characters could be seen as a counter-story to the normalized whiteness of *Romeo and Juliet* and the erasure of Black people in the canon, I highlight how Myers writes Junice as a strong Black female protagonist in contrast to Juliet as the default white female lead. During the writing process, Myers (2006) spoke to a group of teenage girls at a local school who advised him to ““Make her strong or leave her alone”” (p. 140) when writing the female character in a love story. Black female readers may be able to see themselves reflected in Junice, one who Myers (2006) purposely wrote to be “strong and knowing” (p. 140). Junice also demonstrates intellect, bravery, and strength, despite her mother’s incarceration and her own resulting responsibilities to take care of her younger sister. Junice is the antithesis of Juliet: Juliet has familial wealth, white privilege, and lives with both parents. The nurse describes some of Juliet’s privileges in life saying:

Marry, bachelor,/ Her mother is the lady of the house,/ And a good lady, and a wise and virtuous./ I nursed her daughter that you talked withal./ I tell you, he that can lay hold of her/ Shall have the chinks. (Shakespeare 1597/2003, 1.5, 111-115)

Here we see that Juliet's mother is described generously, and Nurse notes that whoever marries Juliet will be wealthy (as "chinks" denotes the sound of coins being banged together). When directly comparing the two characters, Junice has a mother who is in jail, does not have a relationship with her father, and does not have the privilege of generational wealth. Despite these circumstances, Junice proves to be strong and resolved to take care of her younger sister and provide a happy life for them both. Juliet's strength in *Romeo and Juliet* comes through the defiance of her parents' wishes to be with Romeo. Junice faces larger problems than Damien's mother not liking her. Junice is much more focused on advocating for herself and her sister to be kept out of the foster care system than she is of her relationship with Damien. Junice says, "all I'm asking/ Is for the chance to be stronger/ Than the women in my family have been" (Myers, 2006, p. 94).

Junice's world does not revolve around Damien like Juliet's world revolves around Romeo. Readers can see Juliet's immediate allegiance to Romeo when she says, "And all my fortunes at thy foot I'll lay/ And follow thee my lord throughout the world" (Shakespeare, 1597/2003. 2.2, 147-148). However, Junice first rebuffs Damien's advances, asking him why he wants to get coffee and then asking him "some other time?" (Myers, 2006, p. 32). In this way, Myers creates a strong character in which his Black readers may see themselves, their sisters, mothers, friends, or cousins. While Junice faces many difficulties, Myers never portrays her as helpless or even hopeless. When talking to her caseworker, Junice believes in her own strength and has no trouble expressing this to her caseworker as a rationale for not sending herself and her sister into foster care. Junice consistently displays strength and believes she can overcome her circumstances: "*Damien, I am Street, we will make it... Damien, I am Street, I plan to survive*"

(Myers, 2006, p. 134, emphasis in original). Junice's actions demonstrate her strength as she moves to Memphis to provide a better life for her and her sister. The positioning of Junice as a strong and intelligent Black protagonist creates a counter-story for Black readers who may be accustomed to seeing characters like Juliet--wealthy white girls, positioned as the protagonist in a love story. Through Junice's character, Myers sends the message that no matter how difficult your circumstances may be, you are worthy of love. He notes that, "*Street Love* is my way of recognizing that the human spirit is no less noble because it lives in the inner city" (Myers, 2006, p. 145).

Omitting Racism as Counterstory

Myers' authorial intent to disrupt the stories told about Black people can also be seen in the *lack* of commentary on race or racism throughout *Street Love*. When comparing the difference between *Street Love* and *Romeo and Juliet* through my analytic lens of CRT, I did not find anything that aligned with the tenets of CRT. This helped answer my second research question: Do these texts critique whiteness or racism compared to the white normativity prevalent in *Romeo and Juliet*? The answer when thinking about *Street Love*, was no. *Street Love* does not critique whiteness or racism throughout the entirety of the text. Race is a central focus in the text, as mentioned above, as Myers centers Blackness in his story; however, racism and whiteness are not topics explored in the story. Race and racism do not drive the plot or conflict in *Street Love* as compared to the other texts in this dissertation. Thinking about the other texts and how they center racism in explicit ways helped me come to the conclusion that *Street Love* does not critique racism or whiteness as a whole. While I recognize that race and racism affect the ways the characters must move through their worlds, this was not a focus Myers explored. For

example, Junice's mother is incarcerated and I understand that the carceral system is unjust and disproportionately affects Black people through systemic racism (Alexander, 2010), but Myers does not bring this to his readers attention throughout the text. The racism that the carceral system is rooted in (Alexander, 2010) undoubtedly affected the trajectory of Junice's life as well as her mothers; however, Myers does not make this explicit for his readers. Comparing *Romeo and Juliet* with *Street Love* only highlighted how Myers centered two strong Black adolescents in a love story compared to the white normativity of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Throughout the entirety of the novel, there are only two instances where Blackness is seen as a negative: when Junice gets searched at the jail while visiting her mother and says the guards were "Reminding me that I am Black/ That I am lesser" (Myers, 2006, p. 78) and when her mother asks why Junice was "chasing White Girl dreams" (p. 19). Besides those two lines, and even in those scenes, Myers does not explore those topics further. Therefore, I was unable to say that the text as a whole critiques racism or whiteness. While looking at the differences between *Street Love* and *Romeo and Juliet* through the analytic lens of CRT, I was not able to identify instances of racism as endemic, a critique of liberalism, whiteness as property, and interest convergence in the differences. While a reader could possibly extrapolate to think about the endemic nature of racism in relation to how Junice's mother is incarcerated and the carceral system is unfair and unjust to people of color (Johnson, 2018), Myers does not explore this in his text at all. He does not even allude to the inequities in the carceral system, so making this jump in my analysis would be a far leap. In Myers' (2014) interview, he says, "And what are the books that are being published about blacks?... In them, we are always struggling to overcome either slavery or racism" (para. 19) and that the publishing industry has a long way to go. This made

me contemplate how the lack of critiques of racism or whiteness, writing a story in which Black teens are experiencing their first love, is a counter-story in and of itself.

In *Street Love*, Myers uses the theme of forbidden love, seen in *Romeo and Juliet*, but the circumstances that make their love forbidden are unrelated to race or racism. Damien's mother does not want him to be with "some low child" (Myers, 2006, p. 45), which is how she describes Junice, and this certainly could be looked at through an intersectional lens of class and classism, but Myers omits commentary on racism (unlike Woodson's *If You Come Softly*). Myers was intentional in writing a love story where two young Black protagonists are hopeful about being together and what love can conquer. At the end of *Street Love*, Damien and Junice run away to Tennessee together, and Damien says, "Love makes me/Brave and without love I'm made/Nothing" (Myers, 2006, p. 130).

Looking at my three research questions together, I was able to determine that Myers rewrote *Romeo and Juliet* by focusing on the theme of adolescent star-crossed lovers and centering Blackness in his text. He did not rely on plot to rewrite the canonical text, but rather drew inspiration from Shakespeare's language and retelling of a love story. Myers did not provide a critique of racism or whiteness in his text, which in turn could be considered a counterstory by not perpetuating a trauma narrative for Black youth in literature. Myers disrupts the pervasive whiteness in *Romeo and Juliet* through wholly centering his text on Black characters, which serves as a counterstory to the life experiences of Black adolescents so often left untold in canonical literature.

Disrupting *Romeo and Juliet* and centering Black adolescents as a counterstory to the whiteness that acts as property in the Western literary canon is valuable for adolescent readers.

Myers not only disrupts the whiteness that blankets the entirety of *Romeo and Juliet* by omitting white characters from his narrative, but he also centers Black characters who do not have to overcome racism as a plot device. This is beneficial for readers of all races to see that Black narratives do not have to be centered in racism or slavery (Myers, 2014; Stone, 2020) and that Black adolescents can be centered in a love story.

Romeo & Juliet Remixed as Romiette and Julio

Draper's (1999) novel clearly drew inspiration from Shakespeare's canonical text by remixing the name of the play from *Romeo and Juliet* to *Romiette and Julio*. The names of the protagonists are similar to those in Shakespeare's version, including an explicit connection of Julio's last name as Montague (see Table 9 in Appendix pg. 177 for character comparisons). Draper (1999) further connects Julio's last name back to Italy, the setting of *Romeo and Juliet*, by having him explain his name:

My family is from Mexico, but Montague is an Italian name. Some Italian count, hundreds of years ago, who was running away from trouble with some king, ended up in Mexico, got married there, and it has been our family name ever since. (p. 35)

At the end of the novel, when Romi and Julio are missing, a police officer asks, "You don't think they tried suicide like in the Shakespeare story, do you?" as he recognized the similarities between the protagonist's names. While Draper's text does not rely on parallel plot points, she intentionally brings up Shakespeare throughout the text. In the beginning of the novel, there is a scene in an online chatroom where adolescents are discussing how they had to read *Hamlet* in school, and one teen writes "Shakespeare is stupid" (p. 35), and Romi replies "It's not so bad" (Draper, 1999, p. 43). Here Draper alludes to the tension of adolescents being required to read

Shakespeare and not finding it relevant, noting there may be some redeeming qualities of his works through Romi's reply. The "it's not so bad" aspect of Shakespeare's play and theme of star-crossed lovers seems to have been one of the inspirations behind Draper's retelling of *Romeo and Juliet*.

When considering my research question that aimed to explore how Draper (1999) rewrote *Romeo and Juliet*, analysis revealed that she rewrote the protagonists to be Black and Hispanic, updated the setting to be situated in the United States, wrote in a mix of English and Spanish to emphasize culture, and used racial tensions, rather than a family feud, as the obstacle to Romi and Julio's relationship. Through altering the obstacle in Romi and Julio's relationship to be racism, Draper (1999) provides a strong critique of the roots of endemic racism. Draper (1999) also wrote her protagonists to be Black and Hispanic as a counterstory to the whiteness of the publishing industry and to address the need for representation in literature for students of color (Parnassus, 2014; Zoobean, 2021).

Representation Matters: Writing Black and Latino Characters into Shakespeare

When I could not find any interviews Sharon Draper gave explicitly about writing *Romiette and Julio*, I scoured her website for resources and read general interviews to gather insight into Draper's authorial ideologies and intentions. In a conversation with Parnassus Bookstore (2014), the interviewers asked Draper if it was wise to raise children to be "race blind" (para 7), to which Draper replied:

Race is a reality in today's world. We cannot be blind to it... When I write novels, I'm fully aware of who my readers are (kids of ALL races) and what issues these readers

might face, simply by being teenagers. So I try to be inclusive in character descriptions...

We need to discuss race, and we can do it through great literature. (para 8-10)

Draper addressed the liberal ideology of colorblindness, although the interviewer called it race-blind, rejecting the notion that colorblindness is beneficial to anyone. Therefore, I knew she made an explicit effort to avoid race evasive discourse in her writing. After reading Draper's comment about how we need to discuss race, I compared how she described the race of her characters with how Romeo and Juliet were described. As discussed previously (see section on *If You Come Softly*), there are little to no physical descriptions of either Romeo and Juliet, and they are written as default white. Shakespeare normalizes whiteness in his text by having it be the lens that lays over every character and their actions. Draper explicitly disrupts that. Draper's authorial intent when she says she wants to be inclusive with her character descriptions is apparent through how she describes the protagonists in *Romiette and Julio*. Draper weaves an incredible amount of cultural pride into both Julio and Romiette as characters. This is important for readers to note as oftentimes BIPOC characters are written through a lens of trauma or deficit in literature (Myers, 2014; Stone, 2020). Draper's intent to write characters who embrace, and celebrate, their racial identity not only pushes back against the erasure of BIPOC lives in the Western literary canon, but pushes back through positive representation. Readers for whom Romi and Julio may open doors into another experience are able to see Black and Latinx characters written with pride and joy— something that solely reading the white narratives of the canon does not offer.

Romiette Written as Black Royalty

When Draper (1999) first introduces Romi to her readers, Romi says, “I am brown, like the earth, tall and slim like a poplar tree, and outspoken like the wind on a stormy day” (p. 4). That is the second sentence in the second chapter of the novel, so it is clear Draper wanted to establish Romi’s race right away. Although “brown” could be interpreted as many different races, Draper clarifies that Romi means Black on the next page. Even just saying “brown,” however, alerts the reader right away to the fact that Draper is not normalizing whiteness or writing with a default white lens like Shakespeare did in his text. Romi continues to describe herself and her family with joy and pride, especially when talking about her mother:

My mother’s name is Lady. I think black folk have the most creative names for their children. We don’t bother with ordinary names like Sandy and Mary... She is six feet tall, with very short dark hair, dark skin, and a figure better than mine... She walks like an African queen. Grandpa told me that we are direct descendants of African Kings, and when I see my mama walk, I believe him... I like being connected to royalty. (pp. 7-9)

This distinct positioning of her mother, herself, and their Blackness as royalty provides a positive mirror in which Black students can see themselves reflected in *Romiette*. Romi’s mother owns a boutique of African artifacts, cloth, and imports, and Romi reflects on how the store has influenced her:

It was here that she learned of all the African tribes— those of the past who established great kingdoms long before European kingdoms began, and those of the present who lived and worked with great dignity and pride. It was here that Romi had heard the wondrous folktales of the storytellers. (Draper, 1999, p. 100)

Draper doesn't just describe Romi as Black, she builds on Romi's Blackness to include pride in Romi's culture and heritage. Draper includes little details throughout her text, like Romi's screen name Afroqueen, that also demonstrate Romi's pride in being Black. Readers know how important Romi's history is to her, and Draper never presents Blackness through a lens of trauma— a narrative told too often in YA (Myers, 2014; Stone, 2020).

When comparing the characters from *Romeo and Juliet* to *Romiette and Julio*, cultural pride does not seem to have been a consideration for Shakespeare. Juliette's mother is described as "a good lady, and a wise and virtuous" (Shakespeare, 1597/2003. 1.5, 112). When comparing this to the description of Romi's mother above, we see a stark contrast given the joy and love inherent to Romi's description of her mother and her Blackness. While no characters in *Romeo and Juliet* are explicitly described as white, Draper's writes with intention to make race clear from the opening pages of her novel. We do not have to wait to learn that Romi is Black, and immediately after learning Romi's race, readers get the aforementioned beautiful description of her mother. Draper's intentions as an author to center positive portrayals of Blackness continue throughout the book when describing Romi and her family.

Looking at the differences between the characters of Juliette and Romiette and Juliet and Romeo through a CRT lens, I determined each instance of racial pride Romi displays to be an instance of counter-storytelling. While Shakespeare's play does not include the lives of Black folx, and the Western literary canon intentionally silenced non-white voices through the selective tradition, Draper highlights Blackness with joy in contrast to the lack of Blackness in *Romeo and Juliet* and erasure in the canon. Through Draper's explicit focus on race, especially when compared to Shakespeare's text, this can serve as a counterstory in the way Delgado and Stefaniec

(2017) explain it: “Engaging stories can help us understand what life is like for others and invite the reader into a new and unfamiliar world” (p. 49). Draper’s story can not only provide a mirror for Black readers; it can also provide an invitation for readers of other racial groups to understand one family’s Black experience. Draper’s text serves as both a window and a mirror (Bishop, 1990) to affirm the experiences of Black readers often left untold and to cultivate understanding for readers of other racial groups.

Julio: Embracing His Hispanic Heritage

Draper does not give a physical description of Julio, but instead starts his first chapter with Julio describing his feelings of loss for his Hispanic culture resulting from a move from Corpus Christi to Cincinnati. Julio notes:

Thinking about home made his anger return... No soft, warm ocean air, no soft Hispanic flavor here. Just about everybody in Corpus Christi spoke English and Spanish fluently. Most of the people there had relatives in Mexico, across the Rio Grande. The music on the radio, the conversations on the bus, even the breezes that blew there had Spanish melodies floating from them. Here, everything was different. Julio muttered to himself, “May as well have *No habla español!* posted in large *gray* (of course) letters on every dull brown building here.” (Draper, 1999, p. 17)

Throughout Julio’s chapters, Draper has Julio speak in both English and Spanish, disrupting not only the white normativity in Shakespeare’s play, but the emphasis on white mainstream English in ELA classrooms (Baker-Bell, 2020) and in the canon as whole. For example, Julio compliments Romi by saying, “*Hola, Romi. I like that outfit. You look like a beautiful flower—una flor hermosa!*” (Draper, 1999, p.170). Being bilingual is an integral part of Julio’s identity, a

piece of his characterization that Draper centralizes in her attempt to tell a story that differs in important ways from the canonical original.

Julio's Mexican American identity is important to him, as shown through the details that Draper provides in establishing his character. Julio's screen name is Spanishlover, a small detail that reinforces how important language and culture are to him. When Julio and Romi first meet in a chatroom, Julio tells Romi about himself, saying, "I'm from Texas. I like Tejano music, refried beans, and guacamole. But I also like pizza, German chocolate cake, and sauerkraut... I can play two instruments and speak two languages... My whole family is from Mexico" (Draper, 1999, pp. 46-48). Tejano music is typically music that fuses influences from Mexico and the United States, which is one of the first details that Julio tells Romi about himself emphasizing his love for being Hispanic. Julio even talks about missing having community when telling Romi, "At my old school, it was about eighty-percent Hispanic" (Draper, 1999, p. 68) compared to their school in Cincinnati where he feels like he's the only Hispanic student at school.

In Shakespeare's text, there are no instances in which Romeo, unlike Julio, embraces his heritage or culture. A large part of Romeo's identity is linked to his family name and denying that name to be with Juliette, as seen in these lines: "By a name/ I know not how to tell thee who I am./ My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself/ because it is an enemy to thee./ had I it written, I would tear the word" (Shakespeare, 1597/2003. 2.2, 53-57). Romeo's identity revolves around what it means to be a Montague in contrast to Julio's identity as a Hispanic male. Julio's identity is inextricably linked to being Hispanic much more than Romeo's identity is linked to his name. Romeo quickly tells Juliet he would change his name to be with her. Through his actions in telling Juliet he would deny his name, it can be assumed that Romeo's identity isn't tied to being

a Montague. Being a Montague is something Romeo is willing to part with in order to be with Juliet and he does not reference his familial name as an important piece of who he is. This stands in contrast to Julio who consistently talks about how important it is to be Mexican-American. When Romeo offers to cast off his last name to be with Juliet, “had I it written, I would tear the word” (Shakespeare, 1597/2003. 2.2, 57), it also highlights the differences in circumstances between the two texts because Julio cannot change his racial identity for love.

How Representation Acts as Counterstory

The rich descriptions of Blackness, Black culture, and Hispanic culture that Draper brings to the world of Romi and Julio helps answer my third research question regarding whether this text acts as a counterstory to the white normativity of *Romeo and Juliet*. I consider *Romiette and Julio* a counterstory because of the emphasis Draper places on embracing Romiette’s Blackness throughout the novel, along with her acknowledgement of the importance of representation. On her website, Draper recalls reading the *Dick and Jane* in first grade series, noting that at the time, “it never occurred to me that this family did not represent my own... It was all I had” (para. 15). Now as an adult and writer, Draper reflects on those experiences reading solely white centric texts and consciously writes characters of color into the texts she published, like *Romiette and Julio*. In an interview with Zoobean (2021), Draper offered this reflection on the importance of representation in literature saying:

Books should reflect the reader. When I was growing up, there were no fiction books for kids who looked like me... I'm glad that more books exist now so that every reader can be reflected and illuminated in the text. (para. 13)

Romeo and Juliet does not provide a mirror for kids who look like Draper or identify as Latinx like Julio. Therefore, Draper's (1999) remix provides more opportunities for non-white readers to be "reflected and illuminated" in her text compared to Shakespeare's play. The intentional effort Draper put into writing joyous descriptions of Romi's African culture and Julio's love of Hispanic culture speaks back against the silencing of minoritized groups that the whiteness of the Western literary canon created and continues to perpetuate (Williams, 1977). Delgado and Stefaniec (2017) note that "stories can give them [minoritized groups] a voice and reveal that other people have similar experiences" (p. 51). Draper's retelling does exactly that—gives voice to Black and Latinx experiences whereas Shakespeare's play, and the Western literary canon as a whole, cannot. The whiteness of the canon is so pervasive that having Draper retell *Romeo and Juliet*, a text solidly entrenched in the canon, and center African and Hispanic cultures with such rich descriptions and joy was important to note when determining that *Romiette and Julio* acts a counterstory to the canon.

Racism as an Obstacle to Love

Draper (1999) alerts readers that she is drawing on Shakespeare's text throughout her writing by explicitly referencing the star-crossed lovers' connection between the two texts. Julio asks Romi:

"Did you notice that our names are almost like the ones in the play, only backwards? Do you think that means something? Are we destined for doom or romance? Or is it just weird?"

Romi grinned, glad that Julio had noticed too. “Yeah I recognized our names. It’s impossible not to! I think it’s an awesome coincidence. Who knows what it means for us? I guess time will tell— or maybe fate.”

“Who knows. The kids in that story both ended up dead, didn’t they? From gang wars, sort of.”

“It was families, not gangs, in Shakespeare. Scary enough and close enough to give me chills, though.” (pp. 106-107)

This exchange highlights how Draper takes the theme of star-crossed lovers fated for doom from *Romeo and Juliet* and updates it to center on a more contemporary reference to gangs in *Romiette and Julio*. The romance between Romi and Julio is the major driving factor in the plot of the story and therefore the theme I concentrated on in my analysis. The obstacle Draper creates for Romi and Julio is the opposition others offer in response to their interracial relationship. One gang, The Family, also called The Devildogs, is comprised of Black males, and they do not approve of Romi’s decision to date a Hispanic male. Throughout the novel, these gang members make this clear throughout the novel, through physical intimidation, verbal assault, threats, and physical violence, demonstrating how the seed of racism causes Romi and Julio to be star-crossed lovers. Changing the obstacle of star-crossed lovers to racism instead of a family feud, based on social class and an ancient grudge like *Romeo and Juliet* face, allows Draper to critique the tension between Black and Latino racial groups in the late 1990’s, and a CRT lens can help show how white domination pits minoritized groups against each other (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017; Literte, 2011).

In the beginning of the novel, Draper builds the tension between Romi and Julio and The Devildogs by describing examples of intimidation through non-physical violence. In one such instance, Romi and Julio are eating lunch together, and The Devildogs come and stand around their table and stare at them before walking away. Shortly after school, a girl from school visits Romi at her mom's store and starts asking her questions about "the Puerto Rican" (Draper, 1999, p. 102) boy Romi was eating with. While Romi clarifies and says, "He's not Puerto Rican, he's Mexican. Actually, he's Texan. He's from Corpus Christi" (Draper, 1999, p. 102), the girl makes it a point to respond that it was weird to see her sitting with someone who is Spanish when Romi has always shown Black pride through her clothing and jewelry. This exchange implies tension between Black and Hispanic racial groups in their community and school. Before the girl leaves the store, she says to Romi, "Ain't nothin' to me. Some other folks, now— they might care" (Draper, 1999, p. 103), alluding to the fact that The Devildogs care that Julio is Hispanic. Romi relays this conversation to Julio later that night on the phone, and he says, "Romi, why do you think they were threatening you? Me, I can understand. Why you? They're black, you're black. Makes no sense to me" (Draper, 1999, p. 108). Romi replies, "Well, the only thing I can think of is they don't like it 'cause you're *not* black. They don't know me very well, but they know my mom is big into African culture and I work at her store" (Draper, 1999, p. 108). Draper continues to set up Romi and Julio's obstacle to love, the difference between their racial identities, as the novel progresses and she builds on the two protagonists being star-crossed lovers.

White Domination Harming Minoritized Groups

When looked at through a CRT lens, we can identify how the tension that escalates between Romi and Julio and The Devildogs based solely on their interracial relationship stems

from the endemic nature of racism. Literte (2011) notes that the fact that “Blacks and Latino/as often perceive one another through the lens of White-originated stereotypes gives credence to the argument that White dominance involves not only subjugating minority groups, but also pitting them against one another” (p. 479). Starting from the beginning of Draper’s novel, we see the Black gang pitting themselves against Julio. Members use racist slurs calling him a “wetback” (Draper, 1999, p. 56), and tell him they don’t want him “takin’ over our territory” (Draper, 1999, p. 56). The racist sentiments expressed by The Devildogs are grounded in white domination as stereotypes (ex. using a racial slur to define Julio and implying that he is an illegal immigrant) and “are embedded in the minds of one’s fellow citizens and, indeed, the national psyche” (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017, p. 34). The members of The Devildogs have internalized the racist notions whites hold towards Latinx peoples and use those stereotypes to justify opposing Julio and Romi’s relationship.

As the text continues, the tension builds, and Julio and Romi are physically threatened by The Devildogs. In comparison to *Romeo and Juliet*, Romi and Julio have their relationship out in the open, which allows The Devildogs to target them. Romeo and Juliet find ways to see each other in secret, as seen in these lines, “How camest thou hither, tell me, and wherefore?/ The orchard walls are high and hard to climb,/ and the place death, considering who thou art,/ If any of my kinsmen find thee here” (Shakespeare, 1597/2003. 2.2, 62-65). This secrecy allows them to avoid being targeted like Romi and Julio are. Juliette reiterates that their familial names that are their obstacle to love in contrast with the racism Romi and Julio face. While Romi and Julio are walking down the street, The Devildogs drive alongside them, get out, and threaten them while holding guns. They use racist language towards Julio and say “Stay away from Romiette,

or we'll hurt you. That's a promise. And Romi, if you continue to hang with Tex-Mex here, we can't promise to protect you anymore" (Draper, 1999, p. 178). Prior to this scene, Draper already established that The Devildogs are prejudiced against Julio because of his racial identity and the ways in which white supremacy pits minoritized groups against each other. In this scene, she has the tension escalate through threats and physical violence, with the scene ending with a member of The Devildogs pushing Romi to the ground.

While Draper's text doesn't center white characters, whiteness, or the Black-white binary, it provides a very explicit critique of how racism between minoritized groups can be damaging. Draper's text points to how racism is normalized and entrenched in our society and stems from white supremacy. Delgado and Stefania (2017) explain it this way:

Binary thinking, which focuses on just two groups, usually whites and one other, can thus conceal the checkerboard of racial progress and retrenchment and hide the way dominant society often casts minority groups against one another to the detriment of each. (pp. 81-82)

Romi recognizes how it doesn't make sense for The Devildogs to be racist against Julio. Romi expresses this when an old friend comes into her mother's store to warn Romi:

"The Devildogs don't want to hurt you, 'cause you're one of the sisters on the list. You always dressed like a sister, and hung with the sisters, so there was no problem. But now you're about to get cut off the list. And that's dangerous... I'm trying to get some basic stuff into you black head. And never forget— it is black," Malaka reminded Romi. "If you get cut off the list, you got no protection... That Mexican got no chance"

"What did he ever do to you? Or to anybody black" Romi asked in disbelief.

“Nothing. We just don’t need no foreigners around here mixing it up with the sisters.”

“He’s not foreign! He was born in this country just like you were!”

“Doesn’t matter. We don’t want him here.”

“You’re treating him just like the whites treated us! Don’t you think that’s a little

stupid?” Romi asked, trying to appeal to Malaka’s sense of reason. (Draper, 1999, p. 137)

Here, Draper (1999) hearkens back to the roots of endemic racism, noting how whites treated Black people with prejudice and discrimination and how The Devildogs use that same logic to target Julio. Romi seems to recognize there is nothing useful in using the same racist logic that whites used to discriminate against Black people to create conflict for her and Julio. Whiteness protects Romeo and Juliet in Shakespeare’s text as they are allowed to move through their world without fear of their racial identity. In the beginning of the text, Julio is cornered in the school bathroom by a member of The Devildogs because he is Hispanic. While Romeo and Juliet fear their families finding out about their relationship, race is not a complicating factor in their obstacle to love, or the ways in which they move through Verona. In Draper’s text, both Romi and Julio must fear for their safety because of the endemic nature of racism, causing The Devildogs to target them for their relationship.

Julio makes the same connection to racism being rooted in whiteness when on the first day of school, a member of The Devildogs calls him chico and asks if he is lost. Julio says, “That ‘Chico’ comment made him tense and irritated. Anglos at home used that name as a put down” (Draper, 1999, p. 24). In this way, The Devildogs use the same racist microaggressions of name calling that white people used against Latino people in his community. Stemming from white supremacy and white superiority (Delgado & Stefania, 2017), the Black characters in Draper’s

text pit themselves against the Hispanic protagonist. Even though whiteness is not centered in *Romiette and Julio*, the ways whiteness works to maintain domination through interminority racism is shown through the Black-Hispanic binary. This binary is a detriment to both Black and Hispanic people because it won't help them "work together to confront the forces [white supremacy] that suppress them all" (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017, p. 84).

Through *The Devildogs* and their actions towards Romi and Julio, readers can see a connection to the endemic nature of racism through this rationale from Delgado and Stefanic (2017):

each disfavored group in this country has been racialized in its own individual way and according to the needs of the majority group at a particular time in its history. Few blacks will be yelled at and accused of being foreigners... Few will be told that if they don't like it here, they should go back where they came from. (p. 79)

In *Romiette and Julio*, we see the exact type of racism Delgado and Stefanic (2017) reference, with Malaka assuming Julio is a foreigner and saying *The Devildogs* do not want Julio here. Both Romi and Julio seem to understand there is no benefit for *The Devildogs* to pit themselves against Julio in the same ways whites did to Black people, but the internalized white domination embedded in the nation's psyche, is the major conflict in Draper's text.

The disruption of star-crossed lovers through inter-minority racism is valuable for readers to be able to critique. Draper disrupts the binary thinking that usually focuses on whites and one other group (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017) by removing whiteness from her text. Through using CRT as an analytic frame, it can help readers to see how racism harms minoritized groups when they pit themselves against each other. A conversation around this, and how this racism stems

from white domination, would be useful for adolescents to make sense of the world around them. Draper also disrupts the normalization of whiteness in *Romeo and Juliet* through the absence of white characters in her play. It would be valuable for readers to consider how, even without white characters, *Romiette and Julio* can still be used to understand how whiteness functions in society.

Romeo & Juliet Remixed as These Violent Delights

From the title of *These Violent Delights*, it is clear that author Chloe Gong drew inspiration from Shakespeare's play. The title harkens back to Friar Lawrence's famous line, "These violent delights have violent ends" (Shakespeare, 1597/2003. 2.6, 10), alerting readers who are familiar with *Romeo and Juliet* of the connection. Even if readers don't immediately recognize the line from *Romeo and Juliet*, Gong includes the full quote in the epigraph in *These Violent Delights*. Gong's website describes *These Violent Delights* as an "imaginative *Romeo and Juliet* retelling set in 1920s Shanghai, with rival gangs and a monster in the depths of the Huangpu River" (Gong, n.d., para. 1). Additionally, since *These Violent Delights* was a *New York Times* Bestseller, there were many more interviews I could read where Gong references the connection to *Romeo and Juliet*. In an interview with Hedlund (n.d.), Gong notes:

The first sprig of the idea was that I wanted to write a blood feud story... Then that seemed to come across as an innocent, star-crossed lovers' story. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that this sounds like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*... I thought it would be more interesting to lean right into doing a *Romeo and Juliet* retelling. (para. 1)

From the title to the characters, it is clear Gong pays homage to *Romeo and Juliet*, but it is also abundantly clear that Gong does not rely on the plot from *Romeo and Juliet*.

In her novel, the romance between Juliette and Roma started before the novel began, with Juliette beginning the story by recounting their relationship and the way Roma betrayed her. The novel is set four years after their secret relationship ended. Now, circumstances are forcing them to reconcile and work together to defeat a madness that is taking over Shanghai, which rekindles their attraction to each other. Therefore, the whole premise from Shakespeare's text of *Romeo and Juliet* meeting each other and falling in love at first sight is immediately dispelled upon reading Gong's first chapter.

Additionally, Gong's novel includes a science fiction aspect, with a monster invading the city and spreading a contagious epidemic that forces people to rip their own throats out. Trying to figure out what the monster is and how to defeat it creates the circumstances that bring Juliette and Roma back together. Gong talks about removing plot parallels in an interview with Baugher (2020), which helped me focus my analysis on characters and themes, which is what Gong calls the "heart" of the story:

Earlier drafts had entire plot echoes from the play that I pulled out—references to original events that all had to go. They were darlings I was sad to kill, but to me, a retelling is about interpreting the heart of the story in a new way, so I couldn't let my attachment to the original plot get in the way of the story I was weaving together. (para. 23).

Gong reimagines the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* to include strong female characters and to comment on colonization.

Transforming Theme and Characters

When comparing *Romeo and Juliet* to *These Violent Delights*, it was clear the influence Shakespeare had on Gong's work. The character names are similar, although changed to reflect Chinese and Russian surnames, for example. However, Gong transforms the main themes from the play and adds a critique of colonization (see Table 10 on Appendix 178).

Characters as Counterstory

In a trend noted across all of the remixes in this dissertation, authors used racebending (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016) to rewrite the white characters of *Romeo and Juliet* to characters of color, and Gong is no exception. In an interview with Penn (2021), Gong talks about the importance of representation in literature:

I first got the idea for a *Romeo and Juliet* meets 1920s Shanghai story because I wanted to write about two families caught in a blood feud and the inherent tension that comes with trying to fight against that... But I also wanted to see myself represented in the type of angsty heroines who got to star in those fantastical stories. (para. 6)

Thomas and Stornaiuolo (2016) note that when adolescents rewrite stories to include characters of color, they “are responding as they witness people’s lived identities being represented, misrepresented, or erased” (p. 330). This is exactly what Gong did with *These Violent Delights*. She wanted to see a Chinese character centered as the angsty heroine in a love story, and when she could not find one already written, she wrote it herself.

Looking at the character of Juliette through a CRT lens, helps to interpret how racebending (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016) a character can result in a counterstory that pushes against the hegemonic whiteness of the Western literary canon and texts from centered in the

canon. Gong selected *Romeo and Juliet*, a text commonly found on required reading lists, and part of the overwhelmingly white Western literary canon to retell and explicitly critique whiteness. While the original canonical text is overwhelmingly white, and *Romeo and Juliet* barely get physical descriptors because of the default white lens (as noted earlier), Gong's intentions to disrupt whiteness are demonstrated through writing a strong Asian protagonist to offer a counterstory. Gong stated:

Her character [Juliette] is carving a place not only for herself within her own world but in our world too as representation for Asian teens who are tired of being relegated to a stereotype while the YA heroines who are admired never look like them. (Baugher, 2020, para. 27)

Throughout the text, Gong centers Juliette's race not through physical descriptors but rather through language and cultural pride. Juliette speaks in Chinese, and Gong does not provide translations, which deemphasizes white mainstream English. Connected to culture rather than language, Juliette also critiques the changes her family and friends have made to accommodate Westerners:

Before Juliette left, their dining table had been round, as Chinese tables rightfully should be. She suspected they had switched it up only to appeal to the Western visitors who came through the Cai house for meetings, but the result was messy. (Gong, 2020, p. 32)

Readers can feel Juliette's pride in Shanghai and in being Chinese throughout the novel through Gong's writing. Juliette talks about the way women all over Shanghai wore "qipao" (Gong, 2020, p. 9), noting that "the design was a blend of Western flamboyance with Eastern roots, and in a city of divided worlds, the women were walking metaphors" (Gong, 2020, p. 9). Juliette,

however, does not wear a qipao and rather dresses as a figurehead for the Scarlet Gang in a red flapper gown.

Thinking about how Juliette's story functions as a counterstory, we can examine how her character gives voice to experiences that are otherwise ignored, untold, or dismissed as not fitting the dominant ideology of whiteness when compared to the original text of *Romeo and Juliet* and the Western literary canon as a whole. As a tenet of CRT, counter-stories are "a kind of medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 53). Given the setting and time period of *Romeo and Juliet*, the experiences of Asian peoples are not included, which may make sense looking at when the play is contextualized; however, looking at the Western literary canon as a whole and the way the canon was intentionally shaped to exclude non-white voices, Gong's text pushes back against the dominant narrative of whiteness found throughout the canon. Gong notes the racial oppression Asian adolescents face when reading YA novels filled with racism and stereotypes, which she wanted to disrupt when writing Juliette. In an interview with Phillip (2020), Gong said, "I've also always sought stories set in Shanghai because I love the city, but I read in English and the only stories written in English I could find either exoticized the locals or were just plain racist" (para. 10). By setting *These Violent Delights* in Shanghai, Gong was able to center a strong, Asian female character who would not be exoticized or relegated to stereotypes— a reversal from what she could find in current literature. Juliette serves as a counterstory to the racism Asian characters often experience in YA novels as well as the erasure of Asian lives in the Western literary canon overall.

Juliette's Agency as Counterstory

A key difference between Juliette Cai and Juliet Capulet is the amount of agency Gong gives Juliette over her choices throughout the novel. This decision by Gong was intended to disrupt racist and stereotypical ideologies that Asian characters are often subjected to in writing. Gong states, “Juliette Cai is East Asian, one of the few on the YA scene today, and I wanted her to have the agency and badassery that the classic white heroines of YA were afforded” (Baugher, 2020, para. 26). This reference to whiteness and how white characters hold property in the genre of YA reinforces the interpretation of Juliette’s character as a counterstory, as Gong carves out space for Juliette to have the “badassery that the classic white heroines” hold. Juliette has a reputation throughout the book as a ruthless leader as heir to the Scarlet Gang. This alone stands in opposition to Juliet, who is often characterized as quiet and obedient. Even though Juliet does possess inner strength and schemes against her parents to be with Romeo, Juliette is characterized as strong from the beginning of Gong’s novel.

An instance demonstrating Juliette Cai’s strength is when she is able to convince her parents to agree to a meeting between the Scarlet Gang and the White Flowers to try and stop the monster invading Shanghai. Usually, members of either gang would be shot on sight because of how deep their blood feud and hatred for each other run, but Juliette proposes they work together, and “despite how strongly she had believed in her argument as she was delivering it, she’d still received the shock of her life when her parents had actually *agreed*” (Gong, 2020, p. 183). Having her parents, the leaders of the Scarlet Gang, agree to a meeting with the White Flowers is astonishing given the context surrounding their feud with one another. The respect Juliette’s parents have for her opinion stands in opposition to Juliet’s parents who constantly

belittle Juliet and tell her she must obey them. They demand, “Hang thee, young baggage! Disobedient wench!/ I tell thee what: get thee to church o’ Thursday,/ Or never after look me in the face” (Shakespeare, 1597/2003. 3.5, 160-163). Throughout Shakespeare’s play, Juliet is consistently told what to do by her parents, Romeo, the Nurse, and Friar Lawrence. Friar Lawrence is the one who creates the plan for Romeo and Juliet to fake their own deaths, and Juliet obliges. While Juliet displays *some* agency in daring to attempt to be with Romeo against her parents’ wishes, she is not characterized as having full agency over her actions. Historically, this protection of Juliet could be connected to whiteness as white women often evoke “the damsel in distress” (Phipps, 2021, p. 84) and “the power of bourgeois white women’s tears was solidified in the modern colonial period, as ‘women’s protection’ became key to the deadly disciplinary power that maintained racialised and classed regimes of extraction and exploitation” (Phipps, 2021, pp. 84-85). As a young, white girl, Juliet’s family thinks they need to protect her which stands in contrast to how the Black, Latinx, and Asian characters in this dissertation are treated. The juxtaposition between Juliette Cai’s parents listening to and respecting her as a leader and Juliet Capulet’s parents dismissing her as a foolish child help support the counterstory Gong created through writing Juliette as a fierce character. Gong purposefully wrote Juliette Cai to be strong and powerful like white heroines in YA novels (e.g. Katniss Everdeen), and Juliette’s strength shines even brighter when comparing the two protagonists. Juliette’s agency as an East Asian woman can be seen as a counterstory to the lack of agency Juliet possess in Shakespeare’s text, but also as a counterstory to the hegemonic whiteness that pervades canonical and YA texts alike.

Critiquing White Entitlement

While comparing themes across *Romeo and Juliet* and *These Violent Delights*, it was clear Gong kept many of the themes the same. She kept the star-crossed lover theme, the major theme making up *Romeo and Juliet*. In an interview with Hedlund (n.d.), Gong stated, “With this book and the duology itself, and starting with *Romeo and Juliet*, I think the big theme is to choose love in a place of hate” (para. 34). When the theme of love was analyzed through a CRT lens, it did not reveal any racial critiques because racism was not an obstacle between Roma and Juliette (compared to how racism is in *If You Come Softly* and *Romiette and Julio*). Roma and Juliette’s obstacle to love was the blood feud between their families, and while Roma is Russian and Juliette is Chinese, this distinction never plays into keeping them apart. Additionally, analysis of the feud between the Scarlet Gang and the White Flowers never revealed racially motivated prejudice. However, critiques of racism are revealed through Gong’s addition of a theme focusing on the pervasive effects of colonization.

Romeo and Juliet does not include discussion on colonization; therefore highlighting how Gong’s (2020) retelling, with her focus on colonization, offers adolescent readers a new and different perspective from Shakespeare’s text is imperative to discuss. With Gong (2020) intentionally choosing to include discussion of colonization, diverging from *Romeo and Juliet*, it could challenge readers to take up critical discussions of whiteness as property. I assumed Shakespeare didn’t include discussion on colonization because of the way Verona thrived in the 13th and 14th centuries; therefore, the time and place of *Romeo and Juliet* influenced his authorial intent. Verona was not in the midst of being colonized in the same way Shanghai was in Gong’s retelling. Time and place influenced Gong’s (2020) retelling as she notes how in the 1920’s

“Shanghai was split: among foreigners... segment after segment being colonized” (p. 447).

When looking at the differences between texts and how Gong (2020) made changes for an adolescent audience, it's clear time and place influenced her authorial intent to add discussion on colonization in ways that weren't as relevant to the time and place of *Romeo and Juliet*. Using CCCA as a method highlighted important places the YA text made changes from the canonical text and how these changes could offer adolescent readers complicated ideas to research, discuss, and reflect on. Gong's authorial intent to discuss colonization and the negative effects it has on minoritized communities is clear, as her characters do not shy away from providing critique.

Gong (2020) explicitly calls out the association between whiteness and land with Juliette saying, “They [white men] believed themselves the rulers of the world – on stolen land in America, on stolen land in Shanghai. Everywhere they went– entitlement” (Gong, 2020, p. 166). Juliette's critique aligns with the critique offered by Harris (1993), who notes that when whites seized Native American land, it helped affirm white privilege through creating a system of property rights governed by whiteness. Juliette's quote directly refers to the stolen Native lands in America and how becoming rulers on stolen lands emboldened white people to steal land in Shanghai. Readers can see how whiteness acts as property as the novel continues, particularly with whites claiming physical land in Shanghai. At a party with French and British diplomats, Juliette reflects:

She thought it was preposterous that her father had to ask permission to run business on land their ancestors had lived and died on from men who had simply docked their boat here and decided they would like to be in charge now. (Gong, 2020, p. 165)

Relating to whiteness as property, Harris (2020) notes, “colonialism is a system of racialized domination and economic exploitation” (p. 8), which we see at work in *These Violent Delights* in the form of economic exploitation. The white foreigners require the people of Shanghai to come to them and ask permission to conduct business, their livelihood, on the land in Shanghai. The foreigners threaten the Scarlet Gang’s way of life, their way of making money, by using their whiteness as property and claiming space in Shanghai that the Scarlet gang must ask to use. Juliette tells her father how ridiculous it is that he had to ask permission to use their own lands, and he gravely replies that currently, “the most dangerous people are the powerful white men who feel as if they have been slighted” (Gong, 2020, p. 166). Harris (1993) notes that whiteness is not only linked with physical property but also “entitlements” (1792) and that “this construction [of whiteness] directs attention toward issues of relative power and social relations inherent in any definition of property” (1793). In this same example from the novel, we see the entitlement of whiteness shining through the foreigners who feel as though they have power over the people of Shanghai. As mentioned above, Juliette also critiques the entitlement of white men and their ruling on stolen lands noting, “It was the entitlement that drove these men forward” (Gong, 2020, p. 167). Entitlement, derived from the social identity of whiteness, created the circumstances for whites to claim land in Shanghai and Gong to critique whiteness as property throughout the text.

Gong sets up this critique early in her novel and builds on it throughout. Juliette’s cousin Rosalind notes, “No matter how much land we lose to the foreigners, gangsters are the most powerful force in this city, not foreign white men” (Gong, 2020, p. 57). Juliette’s reply is what alerts readers to a forthcoming critique; she says, ““Until the foreign white men start rolling in

their own artilleries” (Gong, 2020, p. 57). Juliette shows an awareness that “white men” will come and take what they want with force when they have the means. While the novel is situated in Shanghai, and Harris’ (1993) discussion of whiteness as property is situated in the United States, Gong’s text still draws parallels between colonization and whiteness as property. Juliette is consistently referring to how white people steal land and space, similar to how Harris (1993) conceptualized whiteness as being associated with property rights. Juliette follows her remark to Rosalind by recounting a memory from after she returned from the United States (her parents sent her away for safety after an attack on their family from the White Flowers):

On her first day back, she had paused outside the Public Garden, spotted a sign that read NO CHINESE ALLOWED, and burst out laughing. Who in their right mind would forbid the Chinese from entering a space in their own country? Only later did she realize it hadn’t been a joke. The foreigners truly thought enough of themselves to enforce spaces that were *reserved for the Foreign Community*. (Gong, 2020, p. 58)

Here the British and English were laying claim to public spaces in Shanghai through marking property as white only spaces. Harris (1993) explains, “Possession– the act necessary to lay the basis for rights in property– was defined to include only the cultural practices of whites” (p. 1721). We see this in action with the white foreigners defining the cultural practices of whites as the sole reason to exclude Chinese people from entering public spaces in Shanghai. Juliette explains that the white foreigners took these spaces by pouring money into local parks and bars so they felt entitled to create exclusionary spaces. This relates back to Harris’ (2020) assertion that “colonialism is a system of racialized domination and economic exploitation” (p. 8). Using

economic exploitation, white foreigners put money into the Shanghai community and felt they were entitled to property rights.

Individual Versus Society

By including the theme of individual versus society, drawing parallels between the canonical text and *These Violent Delights*, Gong was able to include stark commentary on racism in America. Juliette is sent to New York for safety after the White Flowers attack Juliette's family home. While in New York, Juliette experiences the endemic nature of racism in America for marginalized peoples. She recounts:

She had grown up with an eye pinned to the outside of every establishment before she walked in, searching for the segregation signs that demanded she keep out. She had learned to move out the way whenever a white lady in heels was coming down the sidewalk with her pearls, learned to fake meekness and lower her gaze in the event that the white lady's husband would note the slight roll of Juliette's eyes and yell after her, demanding to know why she was in this country and what her problem was. (Gong, 2020, p. 167)

The segregation signs highlight the endemic nature of racism in America through othering and excluding all peoples who do not hold the socially constructed identity marker of whiteness. Juliette is forced to confront the endemic nature of racism that has created systems to benefit whites, as she must be on the lookout for signs alerting her to where she is allowed to enter. The segregation signs also relate to whiteness as property, with white people claiming physical spaces solely for white people. This memory was coded as an instance of individual versus society because of Juliette moving out of the way of the white lady and Juliette's feigned

meekness. These actions are what was expected of a Chinese woman in New York in the 1920's as a product of racism and whiteness as property. Juliette acknowledges the expectations of society are for her to act inferior to whites, but as an individual, she tries to push back in small ways like through the roll of her eyes. The expectations of how society wants Juliette to act juxtaposed with the way Juliette wants to act highlight how the endemic nature of racism has an effect on Juliette's individuality.

Juliette also experiences the normalization of whiteness and the endemic nature of racism in American society when she explains to Roma that when she went to America, she changed her name to Juliette. She tells Roma:

The kids in New York made fun of me. They asked what I was called and then they laughed when I told them, repeating those foreign syllables back at me over and over again as if speaking it in song made it funny... My name was too Chinese for the West.
(Gong, 2020, p. 234)

The effects of the normalization of whiteness, names that sound white, caused Juliette to change her first name because of the “the mockery” (Gong, 2020, p. 234) she received. Here Juliette is forced to choose between her identity and individuality and societal expectations of acceptable names. The endemic nature of racism causes Juliette to shed a piece of her individuality to conform to the ideals of whiteness that perpetuate American culture. The long-standing effects of this are shown when Juliette reflects on how her cousins westernized their names (Rosalind, Kathleen, Tyler) but still are referred to by their Chinese names by her family while she is not. When she Westernized her name to Juliette in New York and returned to Shanghai, she internalized the racism and insisted everyone continue to call her Juliette. Four years later,

Juliette reflects on losing this piece of her identity with sadness. Because of the struggle Juliette endured as a Chinese individual in American society, a society that values whiteness, a piece of her identity is forever changed.

When juxtaposed with the whiteness of *Romeo and Juliet*, it becomes clear how whiteness protects Shakespeare's characters. Romeo and Juliet struggle with the societal expectations that accompany their names and the blood feud that goes along with it, but when Juliet asks Romeo to shed his name it is not because of racism. Juliet asks, "Deny thy father and refuse thy name/ Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn by love/ And I'll no longer be a Capulet" (Shakespeare, 1597/2003. 2.2, 34-36). While Romeo and Juliet struggle with their individual desires to be together, conflicting with societal demands that they be sworn enemies, they do not have to change their cultural identities at any point in the play like Juliette must do in order to stop being mocked in New York. Neither Romeo nor Juliet would be mocked for the pronunciation of their name. While Juliette is confronted with the endemic nature of racism in America, which causes her to lose a piece of her individuality in changing her name, society does not display the same racial prejudice towards Romeo or Juliet because of their whiteness. Romeo and Juliet do not have expectations to look down when other white people walk their way or act meek when interacting with white people as compared to society's expectations for Juliette. The normalization of whiteness that perpetuates society and the setting of *Romeo and Juliet* removes a barrier for the two protagonists in a way Juliette cannot benefit from.

Gong's Interpretation of Shakespeare

When looking back across Gong's retelling of *Romeo and Juliet* and considering research question one: How do authors of color retell a text, *Romeo and Juliet*, from the Western literary

canon?, Gong clearly drew inspiration from Shakespeare by using the same main theme of star crossed lovers and using similar character names throughout the text. Gong rewrote Shakespeare's text by focusing on a blood feud and love and then adding a completely new plot. However, the differences in how Gong wrote a strong East Asian protagonist as the counterpart to Juliet and her intentional critiques of colonization are important when comparing the two texts and looking at research question two to see if Gong included a critique of racism or whiteness. *These Violent Delights* explicitly and intentionally calls out the entitlement of white people in colonization and the endemic racism and othering minoritized people face when in America. The importance in the comparison is how Gong included strong East Asian characters whose stories act as counterstories to the erasure and stereotyping Asian characters are subjected to in canonical literature. The strength in Gong's characters and overall representation of Chinese characters and the setting of Shanghai act as a counterstory and answer to my third research question.

Gong's retelling is important in having conversations with adolescents because it opens opportunities to consider global issues like colonization. Gong not only disrupts the whiteness that perpetuates the Western literary canon and acts as property because whiteness is rooted in ELA curricula, but she gives a global perspective of how whiteness can be damaging. When compared to *Romeo and Juliet*, Gong's text allows for critical conversations to be had and places adolescents in empowered roles. Gong's text not only disrupts whiteness but disrupts conceptions of adolescence that could be a worthy avenue for teachers to explore.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

I began this study to try and understand how retellings of *Romeo and Juliet* by BIPOC authors differed from the original text and what those differences meant, racially, for readers. In a cultural moment when discussing race in classrooms across the nation is being banned (Stout & LeMee, 2021; Natanson, 2021), it seemed important to understand how BIPOC authors rewrote *Romeo and Juliet*— a text that centers whiteness, is regularly featured on required reading lists across the nation (Glaws, 2020), and reinforces the white hegemonic nature of the Western literary canon by characterizing Romeo and Juliet as default white. It was important to know what changes BIPOC authors made to the original text, if the retellings disrupted whiteness or critiqued contemporary racism, and if the remixes could act as counterstories to whiteness within *Romeo and Juliet*. Understanding how BIPOC authors changed the texts and the implications of their changes could help make explicit how educators can use and discuss these texts with their secondary students. This chapter discusses the findings relative to my research questions and provides implications for secondary ELA educators and as teacher educators.

Relying on Theme

What was clear across my analyses was that in retelling *Romeo and Juliet*, Woodson, Draper, Myers, and Gong transformed themes to link their work to Shakespeare's original. Not one author included parallel plot points; Gong indicated that she did originally, but then edited them out. This demonstrates the importance of the love story in retelling *Romeo and Juliet*. The authors are demonstrating that love is a theme that can transcend time and place from Verona, Italy to Bushwick, New York. The authors put different obstacles in place for the protagonists as they navigate their relationships, but all five texts in this dissertation used the feeling of falling in

love as an adolescent as a central theme. This is important because while not all themes can be considered universal, it seems the BIPOC authors are implying that stories about young love can cross the boundaries of race, culture, and time period. While not every text had a happy ending, *Romeo and Juliet* and *If You Come Softly*, the focus on how two young people can fall in love and attempt to overcome the obstacles put in their way was consistent throughout all the texts. The focus on creating a love story was clear throughout all the texts, as the romance between the two protagonists was what propelled the plot forward in each text. Every author took two adolescent protagonists and created circumstances that romantically brought them together and put obstacles in place, whether they be racism (*Romiette and Julio* and *If You Come Softly*), a family feud (*These Violent Delights*), or classism (*Street Love*), to complicate the romance. Three of the authors explicitly spoke about wanting to retell a love story (Gong, Woodson, and Myers), while interviews with Draper and Myers talked about the importance of representation and BIPOC characters not being only centered in trauma narratives. Reed (1993) advocated that pairing YAL and canonical texts can help students discover universal themes in both texts. While it is important to be critical of who the themes are universal to as the Western literary canon's definition of universality is grounded in whiteness, the texts in this study send a message that star-crossed lovers is a theme that can be universally retold. All humans are worthy of love and just as Myers reminds readers that "*Street Love* is my way of recognizing that the human spirit is no less noble because it lives in the inner city" (Myers, 2002, p. 145)—the texts in this dissertation remind readers that BIPOC deserve to be the protagonist in a love story. Readers of all racial backgrounds should be able to see a representation of themselves falling in love

through literature, which is what the authors in this dissertation attempt to rectify by retelling *Romeo and Juliet*.

While the one theme that was common across all five texts was star-crossed lovers, another commonly recurring theme was the individual versus society. The protagonists in *These Violent Delights*, *If You Come Softly*, and *Romiette and Julio* all struggled with their actions as individuals conflicting with the expectations of society. Both *If You Come Softly* and *Romiette and Julio* focused on the conflicts that society creates through endemic racism for interracial couples. Ellie and Jeremiah (*If You Come Softly*) consistently face microaggressions as they move through public spaces holding hands as a white and Black couple. Ultimately society's perception of Blackness as a threat (Johnson, 2018) is what causes police to shoot and kill Jeremiah as he is running through Central Park. Romiette and Julio face similar challenges as a Black and Latino couple being threatened by a Black gang in their neighborhood whose members do not approve of their relationship. They are routinely targeted and harassed by the gang that does not want Romi dating a Latino man. Both couples are confronted with societal expectations to be in homogenous relationships, an expectation fueled by racism, while dealing with conflicting desires as individuals to be together.

This finding related to how BIPOC authors retell *Romeo and Juliet* is significant in noting that theme, not plot, was not what made the canonical text important to the authors and fueled their retellings. All authors took themes from *Romeo and Juliet* and transformed them to fit contemporary settings with adolescent protagonists falling in love. If secondary educators are required to teach thematic units, these retellings can easily replace the original *Romeo and Juliet* as the focal texts, and educators can use Shakespeare's text as a supplement to compare and

contrast how the themes are written. Gong discussed retelling *Romeo and Juliet* and using the “heart of the story” (Baugher, 2020, para. 23) as the love between the two protagonists, which is what all the authors in this dissertation did.

Racebending Characters

All the authors in this dissertation rewrote the characters of Romeo and Juliet as characters of color, with the exception of Ellie (Juliet’s counterpart in Woodson’s *If You Come Softly*). In this way, whiteness was de-centered in all of the texts, especially when compared to the overwhelming whiteness of *Romeo and Juliet* and texts from the Western literary canon. Draper wrote representations of Black and Latino experiences, Myers centered Black adolescents, Woodson centered Blackness with Jeremiah and used whiteness to critique liberalism with Ellie, and Gong centered a strong Chinese female protagonist. Minoritized experiences are not represented well in the publishing industry, with only 12% of texts published in 2020 centering Black stories, 9% about Asian protagonists, and 6% about Latinx protagonists (CCBC, 2021). Gong is the only author in this dissertation whose text was published in 2020, and the CCBC notes diversity statistics only started to increase in 2014, meaning that when the other authors published their remixes, representations of minoritized experiences were even less available to educators and readers.

The centering of Black, Latinx, and Asian protagonists is important, as the authors aimed to give non-white readers a mirror to see their experiences reflected back upon them, and to write characters of color into canonical stories. Every author talked about the importance of racial representation in interviews, either specifically focused on their retelling or throughout their years of being a writer (Penn, 2021; Zoobean, 2021; Myers, 2014; Derhack, 2018). When

retelling a canonical text where whiteness is normalized and all of the characters are default white, it is important to recognize that BIPOC authors rewrote *Romeo and Juliet* to reflect members of minoritized communities whose experiences are often left out of literature. Not only did the authors rewrite the characters as Black, Chinese, and Latino, but they wrote these characters to have pride in their race and culture. The authors purposely pushed back on stereotypical descriptions and narratives of Black, Chinese, and Latinx protagonists by remixing white-centric *Romeo and Juliet*.

Critiquing Racism and Whiteness

Three of the four texts in this dissertation (*Romiette and Julio*, *If You Come Softly*, and *These Violent Delights*) intentionally centered critiques of racism and whiteness. While the fourth text, *Street Love*, did not include a critique of racism, this was intentional, as Myers (2014) noted wanting more texts where Black characters did not have to overcome slavery or racism and could just exist as young people in love. Woodson consistently talked about Jeremiah's Black pride and had him critique sociopolitical structures (e.g. putting him in remedial classes) that view Blackness as a deficit. Woodson also used her white character, Ellie, to critique colorblind and liberal ideologies that Ellie's family shared with her. Woodson's decision to end her story with police brutality as well as interviews in which she names racism as the antagonist in the story demonstrate that while she was retelling *Romeo and Juliet*, Woodson felt it was important to address the endemic nature of racism that pervades the United States in her novel. All of the problems in Jeremiah and Ellie's relationship are caused by racism, an important change from the blood feud that Shakespeare wrote. Similar to *If You Come Softly*, *Romiette and Julio*'s central conflict also revolves around an interracial relationship. Romi

explicitly ties the racism that she and Julio experience to whiteness by noting how they are treated in the same ways that whites used to treat Black people. The inclusion of interminority racism and tying the roots of racism back to whiteness are powerful in the way Draper critiques whiteness without centering white characters in her text. In interviews, Draper noted how race is a reality in the ways people move through the world and that literature can help people be better prepared to discuss and think about race. Through the explicit naming of the race of her characters and having them critique the racism they experience, Draper does not let the reader shy away from thinking about racism.

While *These Violent Delights* did not center racism or whiteness as a conflict in Roma and Juliette's relationship, Gong did provide critiques of whiteness through the colonization Juliette recognizes in Shanghai and racism through Juliette's time spent in America. Gong does not pull punches with statements like, "the most dangerous people are the powerful white men who feel as if they have been slighted" (Gong, 2020, p. 166), and noting that white men think they rule on stolen land. Gong consistently has Juliette critique how colonization is changing Shanghai in ways both small (e.g. fashion styles) and large (e.g. white men putting up no Chinese allowed signs). Gong has Juliette provide specific critiques of racism in America by having her recount memories of her time in New York where she experienced racism and othering by white people. *These Violent Delights* centers a strong Chinese protagonist who thinks critically about colonization and the ways racism in America shaped her identity. Readers cannot miss these critiques, as Gong does not hide Juliette's disdain for colonization and white foreigners, but rather has her voice her critiques in a straightforward manner.

Retellings as Counter-stories

Across all four texts in this dissertation, the retellings acted as counterstories to the white normativity prevalent in Shakespeare's text. All of the remixes centered characters of color as either both or one of the main protagonists, with *Street Love* and *Romiette and Julio* writing both protagonists as Black and Latinx, and *If You Come Softly* and *These Violent Delights* writing one Black and Asian protagonist respectively. Not only do the authors create counterstories to the lack of BIPOC lives in *Romeo and Juliet* and the intentional erasure of BIPOC lives from the Western literary canon, but they also offer positive portrayals of BIPOC characters. Myers (2014) intentionally wrote Junice to be a strong Black female character, and Gong (2020) wrote Juliette to have agency and strength rarely seen in East Asian characters (Baugher, 2021). Draper's (1999) text compares Blackness to royalty, and Woodson (2010) consistently describes Jeremiah feeling Black pride. The texts in this dissertation shine light on having racial pride in ways that the default white characters in *Romeo and Juliet* do not.

Authors disrupted the unnamed whiteness of characters in Shakespeare's text by being very explicit about the race and culture of the characters in the remixes. Toliver (2018) notes that "sliding glass doors" of literature can be locked when there are "omissions of specific groups" (p. 2). The selective tradition of the canon reinforces this locked door through the whiteness that perpetuates the canon and racism that fueled the selection of canonical texts, including *Romeo and Juliet*. The remixes of *Romeo and Juliet* written by BIPOC authors may "unlock" the door for Latinx, Black, and Asian readers that were previously locked by white authors.

Implications for Practice

Suggestions for Secondary Educators

Pairing *Romeo and Juliet* with any of the texts centered in this dissertation can be a way for teachers to center narratives by BIPOC authors in their curriculum when the Western literary canon is required to be taught. By pairing texts, educators may bring in narratives centering BIPOC characters to disrupt the whiteness of the Western literary canon. These narratives may act as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990) when students read non-white stories. These pairings can also accomplish what Muhammad (2020) refers to as “layering texts,” when “texts can support the mandated curriculum” (p. 147). Muhammad notes that by layering texts and bringing in multiple perspectives, “students have a better chance at academic and personal success” (p. 147). For educators whose curriculum mandates that *Romeo and Juliet* be taught, they can bring in these retellings and continue to layer on *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as other supplemental materials by BIPOC authors, to serve as counternarratives. Layering texts can help students “incite social critique” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 147) as they look across text sets to locate instances of power and privilege. For example, educators may wish to ask students to consider the whiteness of *Romeo and Juliet* when compared to characters like Damien, Julio, Romiette, Juliette, and Jeremiah and the barriers that get in the way of their love stories.

Subversive Rationales

As educators seek to disrupt the whiteness of the Western literary canon, they may have to do so in subversive ways. As there are countless bills being passed to restrict the teaching of CRT, the history of racism, and discussing privilege (Schwartz, 2022; Stout & LeMee, 2021; Natanson, 2021), teachers may find success in advocating for *Street Love* to be included in their

curriculum. Teachers may advocate bringing in Myers' text to address the Common Core State Standard RL.9-10.9, which invites students to "analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work," as a rationale for including *Street Love*. Teachers could provide a rationale that the students will study *Romeo and Juliet* alongside *Street Love* to meet the CCSS RL.9-10.9 by understanding how Myers transforms Shakespeare's work. Because Myers' text does not explicitly focus on racism, it may provide an avenue for teachers who are constrained by strict regulations in their districts. In this way, teachers can use *Street Love* to center Black protagonists in a love story compared to the white normativity in *Romeo and Juliet*. Teachers could also make a case for studying the language since Myers was inspired by iambic pentameter and comparing universal themes across the novels. If teachers want to discuss race and racism while teaching *Street Love*, they could have students research inequities in the carceral system given Junice's family situation. Because this critique is not made clear in the text of the novel, *Street Love* might have a better chance of approval for inclusion in curriculum.

Utilizing additional Common Core State Standards as a rationale for pairings could be especially useful when educators are looking to bring in YA texts to pair with canonical texts. RL.9-10.4 asks that students be able to:

determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

Students can look at how Gong (2020) used many languages from French to Chinese to English in *These Violent Delights* and what impact her word choices had on meaning and tone in

particular scenes where Juliette switched between languages. Students can compare the language in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Street Love* (or any text in this dissertation) to determine how the style of the author was dependent on “a sense of time and place.” Using *Street Love* as an example, students can discuss how Myers uses language to situate the text in a contemporary time period and regionally in New York. Students might even work in literature circles with all of the texts in this dissertation and compare language across texts. Does Woodson’s text, also set in New York, use similar language to Myers’ text? How does the language in Woodson’s and Myers’ text then compare to Shakespeare’s language?

Across all texts educators can address RL.9-10.9 which asks students to “analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work.” Focusing on this standard would provide a strong rationale for educators who wish to have students compare and contrast *Romeo and Juliet* and a retelling. Educators could ask students to make text-to-text connections and create charts comparing the characters, setting, and themes (much like this dissertation). Students could then identify how the author of a specific retelling “transforms source material” of Shakespeare to create a new text. Teachers could also use RL.9-10.2 to have students “determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text.” Students could identify the theme in each text (*Romeo and Juliet* and a YA remix) and then compare how the YA authors remixed themes from *Romeo and Juliet*. Using these standards would provide teachers with subversive rationales to bring in texts by BIPOC authors bolstered by the CCSS.

Discussion could be even furthered if educators wish to explore the history of *Romeo and Juliet* as it is in and of itself a retelling of star-crossed lovers across time and place. Shakespeare

retold a poem by Arthur Brooke, *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, as a principal source for his play and Brooke's poem is said to be a retelling of an Italian novella by Matteo Bandello (Green, 2000). After introducing students to this background knowledge, teachers may wish to have students engage in discussion around why authors "transform source material." Teachers can ask: What is the benefit of retelling a story with a new setting and, possibly, new themes? What new social perspectives can retellings bring to the text and what do the retelling by our BIPOC authors show? What themes are kept consistent across texts and how does authors transform those themes to make them fit a new time period and setting? The history of Shakespeare as a reteller is especially relevant given how educators can encourage students to analyze how BIPOC authors transform Shakespeare's text in nuanced and critical ways across setting and time.

While working with pairings in a classroom, it is important not to position the retelling as a scaffold towards *Romeo and Juliet*, but rather as a separate piece of literature worthy of study on its own. Toliver and Hadley (2021) remind us to avoid "situating diverse texts as support toward the sacred goal of canonical texts" (p.12). When educators only position the retelling texts as a scaffold to the canon, diverse books become "canonical allies that uphold the Eurocentric fortress" (Toliver & Hadley, 2021, p. 12). I would advocate for teachers to reverse the positioning of YA texts as scaffolds and instead center the retellings discussed in this dissertation and use excerpts from *Romeo and Juliet* to discuss the societal forces that cause the characters to see their love as "forbidden" for the sets of protagonists.

Suggestions for Teacher Educators

Teacher educators can introduce students to remixes featured in this dissertation to disrupt the white hegemony of the canon. Thinking pragmatically, teacher educators must reconcile the strong influence that the Western literary canon has on ELA curricula and the reality that their preservice teachers (PSTs) may enter schools that require them to teach from a list of canonical texts. In acknowledging that reality, teacher educators can bring ideas to their PSTs on how to disrupt whiteness and humanize students of color if they are required to teach texts from the Western literary canon. Teacher educators must prepare PSTs to teach canonical texts critically, and introducing the text pairings from this dissertation could be a starting point. Before introducing the pairing, teacher educators may wish to have PSTs explore the history of the Western literary canon to build an understanding of the pervasive whiteness the canon perpetuates.

After building an understanding of the history of the canon, teacher educators may wish to have their students read one of the remixes from this dissertation and *Romeo and Juliet*. As CRT is being banned from schools (Schwartz, 2022; Stout & LeMee, 2021; Natanson, 2021) and is a complex theory that need not underpin the exploration of these titles in public schools, teacher educators may wish to introduce their PSTs to a critical literacy framework for interrogating the canon and analyzing the text pairings. Critical literacy tries to disrupt what is accepted as the norm (Lewison et al., 2002), which lends itself well to disrupting how the Western literary canon is taught. While teacher educators could introduce their PSTs to CRT like used in this analysis, it would be more pragmatic to introduce critical literacy as a tool for disruption, as they can then bring critical literacy into their future classrooms.

Critical literacy extends reading comprehension to ask students to consider the connections between language, power, and the literature read in classrooms (Luke, 2012). Knowledge of important plot points from *Romeo and Juliet* and a retelling from this dissertation can serve as a foundation for teacher educators and PSTs to engage in discussion that offers different perspectives on the same theme. The purpose of critical literacy instruction is not to recite plotlines and character traits (Luke, 2012), but rather to think about how texts are never neutral as they are socially constructed. Modeling this way of thinking can help PSTs make sense of the sociopolitical systems (Vasquez et al., 2019) functioning within the texts themselves and in the creation of the Western literary canon.

After reading, teacher educators can have PSTs write a lesson plan focusing on the paired texts and questions central to critical literacy as posed by Luke (2012): “What is ‘truth’? How is it presented and represented, by whom, and in whose interests? Who should have access to which images and words, texts, and discourses? For what purposes?” (p. 4). This will provide PSTs with practice using critical literacy and paired texts with intentionality. Through a critical literacy lens, PSTs can plan lessons to focus on social issues across texts, including inequities between class, race, and gender, when discussing the paired novels. Planning discussions centering on social issues requires students to think in depth about the two connected novels and further their thinking by examining how/if the social issues are relevant to their own life or cultural context.

To build on preservice teacher’s (PST’s) knowledge of remixes, teacher educators can book talk other remixes of canonical texts by BIPOC authors, like *So Many Beginnings: A Little Women Remix*, by Bethany C. Morrow, *Debating Darcy*, by Sayantani DasGupta, and *Pride*, by

Ibi Zoboi. Teacher educators can also encourage students to look into retellings not written in prose. *Romeo and Juliet* has many graphic novel retellings, one of which features a diverse cast (Hinds, 2013).

Suggestions for Future Research

To extend the research from this CCCA, other remixes of canonical texts by BIPOC authors, like *So Many Beginnings: A Little Women Remix*, by Bethany C. Morrow and *Debating Darcy*, by Sayantani DasGupta, can be compared to their canonical counterparts. Banack (2021) published a CCCA comparing *Pride* by Ibi Zoboi (2019) to *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, but researchers can add to that with more recent retellings, such as DasGupta's (2022) title and *A Taste for Love*, by Jennifer Yen (2021). A CCCA using graphic novel retellings could be interesting as well, although considerations would have to be made for analyzing the text as well as the graphics against a canonical text that is solely written in prose (see Hinds, 2013 for a retelling of *Romeo and Juliet*). Furthering the research on how YA novels adapt canonical texts can either confirm or complicate the findings of this dissertation: Do other remixes adhere to plot points or only themes like this text set? Do all authors rewrite the protagonists as BIPOC? Do the more recent retellings act as counterstories to the hegemonic whiteness of texts from the Western literary canon? Future research could also even more closely examine author ideologies at work in the YA remixes. How do researchers make sense of the ideologies present in the texts while reading? This dissertation started to examine that through the use of author interviews, but leaned more on the stated intentions of the authors.

To build on CCCA's, research can also be done in classrooms with adolescents reading pairings of one of the titles from this dissertation with *Romeo and Juliet*. Researchers may wish

to see if students use the pairings to critique the whiteness of *Romeo and Juliet* or if they discuss the critiques of racism and whiteness in their remix and what other connections students make between the texts that were not mentioned in this analysis. This CCCA was heavily influenced by author interviews and using CRT as an analytic framework, but without those influences, it would be interesting to see how adolescents interpret the remixes on their own. A study could be designed where researchers help teachers get funding for the remixes through grants and then observe class discussions and interview students throughout the unit about their connections. Educational researchers can either work with secondary educators to co-plan a unit of study using critical literacy to discuss the pairings or distance themselves from the planning aspect. With a critical literacy framework, teachers would specifically be bringing up discussions of race and racism in the classroom and it would be revealing to know what students' responses are. In a study that was not co-planned and did not feature a critical literacy framework, researchers could see if the books themselves bring up discussions of race and racism for students without prompting from the teacher. Either way, bringing these pairings into a classroom would be an important next step in building on this CCCA and centering adolescent voices in research—the readers for whom the remixes were written.

Conclusion

The goals of this study were to demonstrate how BIPOC authors rewrote a canonical text and what those differences mean when looking at them through a CRT lens. Findings from this study suggest that BIPOC authors retold *Romeo and Juliet* to include positive portrayals of BIPOC protagonists in ways that act as counterstories to the normalized whiteness of *Romeo and Juliet*. All the authors indicated the importance of representation of BIPOC characters in

literature (along with a lack of representation in stories); therefore, rewriting a famous canonical text like *Romeo and Juliet* to de-emphasize whiteness is worth noting. A majority of texts included critiques of racism and whiteness, especially when compared to *Romeo and Juliet*, which does not consider race, opening opportunities for secondary teachers to have critical conversations with their students when comparing *Romeo and Juliet* and a remix.

As secondary and teacher educators evaluate their curricula, it is time we re-evaluate how we position the Western literary canon in our curriculum and what YA remixes by BIPOC authors can offer students. It is imperative to position the YA text as literature that is worthy of examination and conversation in its own right rather than simply as a scaffold to understand and privilege the whiteness of the canon. In a cultural moment when books are being banned and teachers are having their curriculum examined (Natanson, 2021; Stout, 2021), it is necessary to find creative ways to push back against white supremacist curricular demands. Incorporating YA remixes of canonical texts can open up avenues for students to lead conversations about sociopolitical topics and provide a way for educators to creatively subvert maintaining the status quo of whiteness that results when solely teaching the canon.

While the act of pairing texts in and of itself may be considered an example of interest convergence because the whiteness of the canon is still getting a place in school curricula, the reality is that teachers are too often required to teach from the canon and need tools to do it critically. Teacher educators and community stakeholders who believe in anti-racist education need to be advocates for the teachers in public school classrooms through running for school boards, political organizing, and supporting organizations like the National Coalition Against Censorship. Public school teachers cannot alone shoulder the burden of resisting the ways ELA

curriculum harms students of color. By rethinking the materials that we use in our classrooms, and who determines what materials get used, we take one step closer to creating a humanizing ELA curriculum.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. *Description of Novels Used in Muslim Unit*

Title	Summary
<i>Tasting the Sky</i> by Ibtisam Barakat (2016)	Set in Ramallah, Palestine, during the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War, this memoir describes the author's childhood experiences as a Palestinian refugee living on the West Bank.
<i>Shooting Kabul</i> by N.H. Senzai (2010)	A historical fiction novel revolving around Fadi's family who decide to leave Afghanistan and travel to the United States. As the family is leave, Fadi's sister accidentally gets seperated and left behind. Fadi is left to adjust to his new life in the U.S. while coping with grief and hoping his sister will be found.
<i>If You Could Be Mine</i> by Sara Farizan (2014)	A contemporary fiction novel where protagonist Sahar is in love with her best friend, Nasrin. However, love between girls is illegal in Muslim Iran while gender reassignment surgery is not. Sahar contemplates gender reassignment surgery as a way to keep her and Nasrin together.
<i>All We Have Left</i> by Wendy Mills (2016)	A contemporary fiction novel switches between 2001 and present day tells the stories of Jesse whose brother died when the Twin Towers fell and Alia, a Muslim teen whose story is connected to Jesse's brother. Alia's story helps Jesse let go of her deep resentment towards Muslim people.

Table 2. *Text Summaries of Literature Circle Books*

Title	Summary
<i>The Fault in Our Stars</i> by John Green (2012)	Centering on the relationship between two adolescents with cancer, one with a terminal diagnosis, this novel thematically connects to the “star-crossed lovers” seen in <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> .
<i>Romiette and Julio</i> by Sharon Draper (1999)	Remaining close to the original story, this text centers on adolescent Romiette Cappelletti and Julio Montague who face opposition about their relationship. Romiette is African-American and Julio is Hispanic, and the Devildogs, a local gang, do not approve of their interracial relationship. When the Devildogs threaten them, Romiette and Julio come up with a plan to escape from the gang's threats and influence.
<i>If I Come Softly</i> by Jacqueline Woodson (1998)	Set between Brooklyn and Manhattan, NYC this contemporary retelling of <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> centers on the stories of Jeremiah and Ellie. Jeremiah is a Black teenage boy who attends a fancy prep school in Manhattan. He often feels he doesn't fit in until he meets Ellie, a white Jewish girl at school. As their relationship develops, so do the societal tensions surrounding the inter-racial relationship between these two.
<i>Scribbler of Dreams</i> by Mary Pearson (2001)	Connecting thematically with another set of star-crossed lovers from the Malone and Crutchfield families who have feuded for generations. Kaitlin Malone falls in love with a Crutchfield boy

Table 3. *Commonly Taught Texts from Applebee (1989)*

Public Schools	Catholic Schools	Independent Schools
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i> 84%	<i>Huckleberry Finn</i> 76%	<i>Macbeth</i> 74%
<i>Macbeth</i> 81%	<i>Scarlet Letter</i> 70%	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i> 66%
<i>Huckleberry Finn</i> 70%	<i>Macbeth</i> 70%	<i>Huckleberry Finn</i> 56%
<i>Julius Cesar</i> 70%	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> 67%	<i>Scarlet Letter</i> 52%
<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> 69%	<i>Great Gatsby</i> 64%	<i>Hamlet</i> 51%
<i>Scarlet Letter</i> 62%	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i> 65%	<i>Great Gatsby</i> 49%
<i>Of Mice and Men</i> 56%	<i>Hamlet</i> 60%	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> 47%
<i>Hamlet</i> 55%	<i>Of Mice and Men</i> 56%	<i>Julius Cesar</i> 42%
<i>Great Gatsby</i> 54%	<i>Julius Cesar</i> 54%	<i>Odyssey</i> 39%
<i>Lord of the Flies</i> 54%	<i>Lord of the Flies</i> 52%	<i>Lord of the Flies</i> 34%

Table 4. *Ten Most Commonly Assigned Books in Applebee's 1989 Study*

Title	Author	Percentage
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	Shakespeare	84
<i>Macbeth</i>	Shakespeare	81
<i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>	Twain	70
<i>Julius Cesar</i>	Shakespeare	70
<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	Lee	69
<i>The Scarlet Letter</i>	Hawthorne	62
<i>Of Mice and Men</i>	Steinbeck	56
<i>Hamlet</i>	Shakespeare	55
<i>The Great Gatsby</i>	Fitzgerald	54
<i>Lord of the Flies</i>	Golding	54

Table 5. *Characters, Settings, and Theme Compared Shakespeare and Woodson*

	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	<i>If You Come Softly</i>
Character	Juliet Capulet, age 13, default white	Elisha "Ellie" Eiden: white, age 15, Jewish
Character	Romeo Montague, age unspecified, default white	Jeremiah Roselind. Black boy, green eyes, "dark skin" (p. 6), long locs, age 15
Setting	Verona, Italy. 13 th or 14 th century.	NY: Brooklyn (Jeremiah) and Upper East Side (Ellie's home and the school), 1990's.

Table 5 Continued

Theme	Theme of love star-crossed lovers forwarded by the feud between the Montague and Capulet families	Theme of love star-crossed lovers forwarded through an interracial relationship being harmed by racism and police brutality
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Table 6. *Example Codebook for If You Come Softly and Romeo and Juliet*

Example	Code	Category	Theme
“He nodded, loving this about her too—that in the little bit of time they’d been together, Ellie had come to see it, to understand how stupid the world could be sometimes” (Woodson, 1998, p. 131) *This comment is preceded by Jeremiah and Ellie getting strange looks as they walk down the street (microaggressions).	Star-crossed lovers	Race as an obstacle to love. Looking at this through a lens of CRT demonstrates normalized racism. The fact that race is an obstacle to their love demonstrates how racism is engrained in society for it to limit Jeremiah and Ellie’s relationship. Race is a social construction, but a permanent part of society.	Love’s opposing forces. Woodson uses normalized racism as an opposing force/antagonist to Jeremiah and Ellie’s relationship. Racism is endemic and natural as defined as a tenet of CRT and Woodson uses the way racism is engrained in society to work against Jeremiah and Ellie.
“I have been feasting with mine enemy... I bear no hatred, blessed man, for, lo, My intercession likewise steads my foe” (Shakespeare, Act 2, scene 3, lines 49-54)	Star-crossed lovers	Family as an obstacle to love (the absence of race here removes a barrier from Romeo and Juliet that Ellie and Jeremiah face and normalizes whiteness).	Love’s opposing forces. Shakespeare uses a longstanding family feud as the opposing force/antagonist in Romeo and Juliet’s relationship. CRT helps to interpret that whiteness is normalized and the characters/families do not worry about racism as the “enemy.”

Table 6 Continued

Example	Code	Category	Theme
“What was he doing here with all these with all these white boys around him? He stared at the mirror, lost. The girl in the hall. ‘She’s white too,’” he whispered, the words sinking in. (Woodson, 1998, p. 66)	Star-crossed lovers	Race as an obstacle to love (looking through CRT, we know racism is permanent in society so Jeremiah is realizing his attracting to Ellie could be an obstacle since she is white).	Love’s opposing forces. Jeremiah is setting up the fact that race will be the antagonist to their love. He feels out of place on the basketball team full of whites then acknowledges Ellie is white.
“They think you’re on scholarship?” (Woodson, 1998, p. 40).	Microaggression	Racism in society. CRT helps to understand the microaggression Jeremiah’s mom is asking Jeremiah about.	Individual vs. Society. Jeremiah’s mom is acknowledging that white people at his private school will assume he is of a lower SES status than them. A deficit view of Blackness is perpetuated in society and engrained in institutions. Jeremiah is constantly fighting against liberal ideas.
“I tell thee what: get thee to/ church o’ Thursday,/Or never after look me in the face:/Speak not, reply not, do not/ answer me;/My fingers itch” (Shakespeare, 1597/2003, 5.5, 162-165).	Familial expectations	Society expectations. In Romeo and Juliet’s society, women are expected to obey their parents and consent to arranged marriages. She is not to tell her father no as expected by him and by society as a whole.	Individual vs. Society. Juliet has expectations to obey her father and marry Paris when he tells her to. Race is not a factor in this arranged marriage. This normalized whiteness by Shakespeare is demonstrated by society only caring about familial obligations and not considering race.

Table 7. Thematic Differences

<i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (Shakespeare, 1597/2003)	<i>If You Come Softly</i> (Woodson, 1998)	Analysis
“From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,/ Where civil blood akes civil hands unclean./ From forth the fatal loins of these two foes/ A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life” (prologue).	“Two old women, walking arm in arm, eyed us. Jeremiah frowned, glaring at them. ‘Are you all right?’ one of the women asked me. I nodded... ‘They asked that ‘cause you’re with me, you know... If you were with a white boy, they probably would have just smiled and kept on going’” (p. 106).	As Woodson noted that the enemy to Jeremiah and Ellie’s love was racism, CRT helps us understand how racism is endemic. The white women here assumed Blackness equaled danger and dehumanized Jeremiah. This normalization of racism allowed the white women to feel like they had to ask Ellie if she was okay. The endemic racism of the world they live in is an antagonist to their love in a way Romeo and Juliet did not have to face. While their families feuded, keeping them apart, the race of either protagonist did not cause their love to be dangerous.
“So smile the heavens upon this holy act/ That after-hours with sorrow chide us not.” (act 2, scene 6, lines 132).	“he and Ellie had been walking along Fifth avenue holding hands when these white boys started acting stupid—saying stuff like ‘jungle fever’ and ‘who turned out the lights?’” (p. 136)	While Friar Lawrence worries about “the heavens” being angry about Romeo and Juliet intending to marry each other, Ellie and Jeremiah have to worry about both micro and macroaggressions (like seen here) they will encounter as they are in public together. The normalization of whiteness erases this concern for Romeo and Juliet in the same way that Jeremiah and Ellie cannot escape the endemic nature of racism when they are in public.

Table 8. *Characters, Settings, and Theme Compared Shakespeare and Myers*

	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (Shakespeare, 1597/2003)	<i>Street Love</i> (Myers, 2006)
Character	Juliet Capulet, age 13, default white	Junice Ambers, age 17, Black
Character	Romeo Montague, age unspecified, default white	Damien Battle, age 17, “young and proud and Black” (p. 2)
Setting	Verona, Italy. 13 th or 14 th century.	Harlem, New York. 2000’s.
Theme	Theme of love star-crossed lovers forwarded by the feud between the Montague and Capulet families	Theme of love star-crossed lovers forwarded through family disapproval (one-sided. Damien’s family disapproving)

Table 9. *Characters, Settings, and Theme Compared Shakespeare and Draper*

	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (Shakespeare, 1597/2003)	<i>Romiette and Julio</i> (Draper, 1999)
Character	Juliet Capulet, age 13, default white	Romiette Renee Cappelle, 16, “I have soft brown skin, dark brown hair, and light brown eyes like my dad” (p. 10).
Character	Romeo Montague, age unspecified, default white	Julio Montague, 16, describes himself as Mexican-American, Latino and Hispanic.
Setting	Verona, Italy. 13 th or 14 th century.	Cincinnati, Ohio. 1990’s
Theme	Theme of love star-crossed lovers forwarded by the feud between the Montague and Capulet families	Theme of love star-crossed lovers forwarded through the gang, The Family, disapproving of Romi and Julio’s interracial relationship.

Table 10. *Characters, Settings, and Theme Compared Shakespeare and Gong*

	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (Shakespeare, 1597/2003)	<i>These Violent Delights</i> (Gong, 2020)
Character	Juliet Capulet, age 13, default white	Juliette Cai, 19, Chinese, heir to the Scarlet Gang
Character	Romeo Montague, age unspecified, default white	Roma Montagov, 19, Russian, heir to the White Flowers gang
Setting	Verona, Italy. 13 th or 14 th century.	Shanghai, 1920's
Theme	Theme of love star-crossed lovers forwarded by the feud between the Montague and Capulet families	Theme of love star-crossed lovers forwarded through a blood feud between the Cai's and Montagov's
Theme	N/A	Effects of colonization demonstrated throughout the novel with Juliette grappling with how colonization has shaped Shanghai.
Theme	Individual vs. society. Romeo and Juliet struggle with if their identities are tied inextricably with their family name and the societal expectations that come with that.	Individual vs. society. Juliet struggles with being "too Chinese" for the West and "too Westernized" for Shanghai sometimes.

VITA

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