Instigators and Partners: Young Adult Literature's Role in Readers' Identity Formation

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Dedication

Dedicated to my students (once my kid always my kid) and especially my participants in this study—the magic of reading has only become more beautiful because of your curiosity, questions, vulnerability, and willingness to connect the act of reading with your own stories. Thank you for the privilege and honor of sharing both the classroom and our lives with each other. I love you all dearly. May you continue to find the stories and people that make you feel seen, known, and loved exactly as you are.

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Abstract

This instrumental case study explored self-identified YA readers' formative experiences with YAL and how their reading experiences contributed to their holistic identity. Using reader response theory, conceptualizations and varying layers of social imagination, and identity as theoretical foundations, the purpose of this dissertation is to inquire into YA readers' experiences and determine how they describe YAL's role in their sense of self over the course of their lives. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of transactions with YA texts have occurred with self-identified YA readers? Why have these transactions proved meaningful for the reader?
2. In what ways does reading YAL texts contribute to the identity making of self-identified YA readers?
3. What role(s) do reading YA texts play in the identity development of self-identified YA readers over time?

Through analyzing ten participants' written artifacts and interviews, findings from this study indicate that participants transacted with YA texts through five distinct experiences: connecting with characters, navigating emotions, learning about others and the self, affirming the self, and transporting into situations and experiencing new stories. From these transactions, participants indicated five varying contributions YAL had on their identity making process: reflecting for self-growth and integration, growing perspective taking and empathic skills, seeing and hearing the self to confirm identity, expressing one's voice and stepping into one's power, and engaging the world, standing up, and building community. Lastly, participants shared five differing roles YA texts have served over the course of their lives: formative role models, safe space for enjoyment and escape, instigator and partner in learning and growth, companion in

loneliness and emotional processing, and connector to social and career worlds. Through investigating these themes across participant data, findings suggest that reading YAL proves to be a process of identity work for readers.

Keywords: YAL, reader response theory, identity, social imagination, instrumental case study

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Stories that Shape Us

From a very young age, my head, heart, and soul were filled with stories from young adult literature (YAL). Whether it was the family reading of C.S. Lewis's (1950) classic *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* or my individual consumption of as many YAL books from the library as possible, my childhood and adolescence formed my identity as a reader through the steady access and exploration of the world through books. Called Matilda by my 8th grade history teacher, I read to inquire into questions and tensions of my inherited religious beliefs, escape the difficulties of growing up amid instability due to family illness, and imagine new ways of being within the world outside of what I knew. Through reading I had complete freedom to expand outside of myself and given boundaries.

As a millennial, some of my most formative experiences with YAL began with the *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1998) series. My grandparents gifted me the first novel when I was eleven years old and thus, I began to grow up with Harry, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, and many others as my friends. Being able to read a story where the protagonist was the same age as me and struggled to find his place of belonging in the world connected with many of the unnamed feelings and experiences I was having at the time. I escaped into this fantasy world to find a companion that knew loneliness and a desire to be understood. Through Harry and his friends' journey, I found comfort and hope which served as an antidote to the overwhelming uncertainty and responsibility I felt as the oldest of two siblings growing up with parents doing their best as one struggled with chronic illness. Reading this series provided a space for me to feel like I could be a strong willed, bookworm young girl at the same time as being a brave leader for myself and in partnership with others in a world that faced the unknown mysteries of complex conflicts

spurred by desire for power. It gave me endings that weren't always completely happy, but rather demonstrated the realities of loss, pain, and simultaneously undefeatable love, community, and beauty. I needed this lifeline to push past the pat "*everything happens for a reason"* lines and narratives given to me by well-meaning friends and adults. The bonds I formed with the characters as I grew up year by year having their lives as pathways to explore friendship, the nuanced understanding of good and evil, and the ways we can choose our own identity remain some of the most formative to my capacity for wonder, curiosity, empathy, love, and belief in something greater than myself. These stories provided deep healing, belonging, and space for me to grow.

Having such enriching and powerful experiences with one YAL series led me to pursue many other reading experiences. I traveled from the world of Hogwarts in my younger adolescence into District 13 of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) and the world of the *Divergent* (Roth, 2011) during my young adulthood. I found more empowered heroines to follow footsteps towards questioning issues of power, justice, identity, and who you can choose to become. Similarly, in realistic YAL I discovered characters asking the same questions of complicated faith and choices that aren't either "right" or "wrong." When I moved during my sophomore year of high school, I left the primarily Christian space I had grown up in and found myself in a beautiful community with diverse faiths, expressions of love, and adults who viewed adolescents as capable, agentic young adults. Based on my more isolated exploration of the world through books, I finally thrived in an environment that provided me opportunities to build connections and friendships with others not like me. At the same time, I found John Green's (2005) *Looking for Alaska* and again found a fictional companion to accompany me through the experiences of questioning my spiritual beliefs and grief of losing a friend. This novel helped me

consider that perhaps the simple answers for how to believe and what it means to be a "good" human don't always pan out. It made me question how I would change and grow from my imperfections, how to hold space for the unexplainable ways tragedy and human fragility break you open, and how to create a faith of my own that can encompass complexity.

Reader and Teacher: YAL in Classroom Spaces

These experiences with YAL considerably shaped who I was and am and certainly extended into my identity as an educator. My time in the classroom remains one the key reasons I still find this genre of storytelling as one that pushes its readers towards self-exploration, perspective taking, and nuanced questioning of the world around them. When I began teaching, the curriculum was relatively structured and confined to canonical, classical texts; however, I also began my teaching career in the push for 1:1 learning and project-based learning (PBL) design. These pedagogical pushes for student achievement gains offered the opportunity for me to incorporate YAL into the classroom setting. After listening to students beg for more relevant and engaging stories my first year, I developed a PBL for students to choose a YAL novel to read with a group and together form an argument about its "literary" quality. Students were excited and engaged in a way I hadn't seen before. They were stepping into reading in a new way that combined their personal interests as well as analytically diving deeper into textual themes, characters, and understanding of craft choices because they believed they could make a case to district leaders for these books to belong in their curriculum. After careful readings, my students did just that–they created insightful and intelligent presentations for the English curriculum leader. Through this project, my ideas for what the curriculum could look like shifted.

I began to incorporate YAL more within my yearly teaching units as paired readings or whole novel studies. I used YAL dystopian and speculative fiction with *Fahrenheit 451* and students' wonder and curiosity about power, media, literacy, and agency spurred deep conversations about questions similar to those I asked myself while reading YAL. John Lewis's (2013) graphic novel memoir *March* as well as Kekla Magoon's (2014) *How It Went Down* prompted readers to question issues of race, equity, and activism as well as who's story is centered in classroom spaces. Through these classroom discussions and individual student writing responses, I began to question why these YAL texts were seeming to move students emotionally and intellectually in different ways than the traditional Shakespeare and canonical novels of the traditional curriculum.

Based on this curiosity, I applied for a grant to purchase YAL literature circle texts to enhance student access to more independent reading novel choices. From this award, I was able to design a literature circle unit focused on student chosen social issues interests. The students chose several topics to explore such as police brutality, immigration, sexual assault, environmental crisis, and poverty. Within these topics, each student was able to read a different novel about the same chosen issue and independently respond as well as participate in group discussions. Through the group discussion, I had the opportunity to hear and observe students' thoughts and questions of each other that prompted shifts in individual reflections. Student writing expressed deepened awareness of the world around them, their own perspectives compared to others', and desire for embodied response to empathize and act on their learning. Watching these students learn, grow, and change over the course of their reading that unit ultimately led me towards my path to research reader responses to YAL. Anecdotally I could

witness these moments to my own life and my students' lives, but to learn the how and why from readers remains the goal of my research.

Purpose of this Dissertation

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore self-identified YAL readers' responses to YAL texts over the course of their reading lives to determine the transactions, roles, and overall identity influences YAL has had on their own understanding of who they are and are becoming. To focus these points of exploration, I utilized Reader Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1994;1995) as a theoretical framework to conceptualize how readers explained their momentary and long-term experiences with YAL texts. Additionally, within these conversations I relied upon the concepts of engagement (Ivey & Johnston, 2013), narrative transportation (Green, 2004), social imagination (Johnston, 1993) and narrative empathy (Keen, 2007) to deepen the connections between theoretical framing and empirical findings. In approaching the ways readers' responses proved formative or interconnected to their identity, I relied upon the theoretical understandings of identity as all-encompassing of an individual's contextual circumstances (Holland et al., 2001), dialogic relationship with the self and text (Bakhtin, 1981; Lysaker, 2006), and self-authorship, self-mediation, self-construction, or transformative self- revision process while reading (Ivey & Johnston, 2023; Rowe, 2019). I reviewed present literature, both theoretical and empirical, to better understand how my research questions built upon the body of research within the fields of YAL, literary criticism, and reading psychology to determine how readers' voices within my study can contribute and deepen the fields' understanding of a reader's experience both momentary and life-long, reading identity development, and influence of YAL on their wholistic understanding of who they are and are becoming.

Within the field of YAL, many teacher educators have sought to understand the empathic or transformative power YAL texts possess (Falter & Kerkhoff, 2018;Glenn, 2014; Ivey & Johnston, 2013; 2015; 2018; Neville, 2020; Wender, 2015); however, though these studies add incredibly important insights to understanding readers' interactions with texts, readers themselves do not explain how a text creates affective response—or emotional, mental, spiritual, experiential processes—that incorporates into long term meaning for their forming identities both inside and outside of the classroom context. As Rowe (2019) argued, examination of reading lives and the impacts of YAL stories on a reader over time needs more empirical study to determine: Can a story change who you are? Understanding the ways in which readers access, engage, and process various children's, middle grade, and YAL texts into meaning across their literate lives matters to the deeper questions about how the reading process and specific texts act upon readers to create transformative or formative learning and emotional experiences that shape readers' growing identities. Therefore, research focused on YAL literature and its importance and implications for readers in all spaces holds tremendous value to consider when deciding what stories matter, to whom, and how accessibility to readers, especially young adult readers, continues to be debated.

Research Questions

This dissertation was guided by the following research questions:

4. What types of transactions with YA texts have occurred with self-identified YA readers? Why have these transactions proved meaningful for the reader?
5. In what ways does reading YAL texts contribute to the identity making of self-identified YA readers?

6. What role(s) do reading YA texts play in the identity development of self-identified YA readers over time?

These three research questions were explored through an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995; 2000) which explored 10 individual readers' histories, preferences for reading, and specific responses to various YAL texts over the course of their reading lives. Through this case, both individual and collective findings for YAL's role and impact to reader identity formation over time will be explored in in Chapter Four, while implications for the fields of literary criticism, future research, and pedagogical practice will be addressed in Chapter Five.

Defining Key Terms & Concepts

For the sake of consistency and coherency, I have defined and described several terms and concepts related to my study including Young Adult Literature (YAL), Instrumental Case Study, Reader Response Theory (RRT), Engagement, Social Imagination, Theory of Mind (ToM), Narrative Empathy, Narrative Intimacy, Narrative Transportation, and identity.

Young Adult Literature: Though complex in definition, overall scholarship asserts Young Adult Literature is defined as literary form and commercial sales or marketing category which targets readers ranging ages of 12-18 (Buehler, 2016); however, Ginsberg (2022) recently pointed out young adult has expanded in both directions, "to an age as low as ten and as high as twenty-five" (p.4). Though seen by some as simply a marketing category or a story with a teen character, Buehler (2016) offers a nuanced understanding that YA literature is:

> many things at once…defy categorization…take risks and blur genres…ask questions about identity and formative influences on identity…expose social inequality…explore philosophical ideas…depict the complexity of human beings…they do all these things

while filtering the meaning making process through the minds and hearts of teens. The borders are porous and what we find within the field is continually changing (p. 27)

Ultimately, the key feature regardless of commercial or age categorization is that the story centers on an adolescent protagonist in their voice, about their concerns and conflicts (Campbell, 2000; Cart, 2008; Cole, 2009; Nilsen & Donelson, 2009). *Abbreviation: YAL*

Instrumental Case Study: Part of three types of case study defined by Stake (2000), instrumental case study design considers a particular case to "provide insight into an issue or redraw a generalization" (p. 437). Additionally, this form of qualitative case study design is characterized by the way it "enables identification of commonalities and differences within the boundaries defining a case" (Bullough, 2015, p. 14).

Reader Response Theory: An expansive field of literary criticism developed by many scholars examining the process through which a reader, text, and context interact with one another to create meaning. In this study, Reader Response Theory is most defined by the work of Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading which proposes that a reader carries lived experiences into the reading process and thus, meaning is created through both the readers' lived experience, the experience with the text while reading, and the context through which the reading takes place (Rosenblatt, 1995). *Abbreviation: RRT*

Transaction: Defined by the work of Louise Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional theory of reading, transactions are the "lived through intercourse" (p. 14) readers have with texts during the reading process. Conceptualized as a "live circuit" (p. 14), Rosenblatt (1994) explained transactions as the relationship between the reader and text where, "each component of the reading process functions by virtue of the presence of the other" (p. 14). Therefore, within this

study readers' experiences with texts (relationship, momentary feelings, images, metaphors, and continuing meaning created) are referred to as transactions.

Engagement: Defined by the work of Gay Ivey and Peter Johnston (2013; 2015; 2018), engagement with a text, particularly a YAL text, is determined through a reader's immersion into the narrative world of the characters and subsequently taking on the character perspectives, situational problems, decision making, emotional and social lives, and consequences. From this stance, engagement goes further and extends past the reading into social conversations with peers, teachers, family, and community members (including social media in my study) that provide space to reexamine and debate feelings, decisions, and attachments to characters and their worlds. (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; 2017; 2018).

Social Imagination: Stemming from the work of Peter Johnston (1993) and Judith Lysaker (2006; 2011; 2013), social imagination was defined as the process through which readers "imagine [themselves] as each of [their] characters, thinking, feeling, and acting" (p.428).

Theory of Mind (ToM): Originating in the field of cognitive psychology, literary criticism and reading psychology often uses this term interchangeably with social imagination. Literary critic Zunshine (2006) defines ToM as, "our ability to explain people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires" (p. 6).

Narrative Empathy: Narrative empathy originates from the work of literary critic and scholar Suzanne Keen (2013) who defines the concept as, "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" (para. 4)

Narrative Intimacy: Explored through the scholarship of Day (2013), narrative intimacy is defined as a "narrator-reader relationships that reflect, model, and reimagine intimate interpersonal relationships through the disclosure of information and experience of the story as a space that the narrator invites the reader to share" (p. 11).

Narrative Transportation: Narrative transportation is defined by, "a combination of attention, imagery, and feelings, in which an individual becomes immersed in a narrative world" (Green & Brock, 2000; Green & Brock, 2002).

Identity: Though theorized in several different ways within both the fields of literacy and psychology, my study primarily utilizes a psychological definition of identity as "an individual's sense of self defined by (a) a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that is not wholly shared with any other person… involves a sense of continuity… the feeling that one's memories, goals, values, expectations, and beliefs belong to the self" (APA, Dictionary of Psychology, 2018). This definition is used in connection to Bakhtinian (1981) notions of a dialogical self and Holland et. al's (2001) understanding that identity formation occurs in relationship to contextual factors.

Chapter Summaries and Dissertation Overview

In this introductory chapter, I shared my own relationship to story through my meaningful childhood and adolescent reading experiences. I delineated the ways young adult literature had a formative effect on my life including my social, emotional, and spiritual worlds. Additionally, I explained the ways these inner workings and continued reading of young adult literature informed my practice as an educator in the secondary classroom. From this experience, I connected my anecdotal experiences to the purpose and focus of my research and questions that

guide my study as well as provided key words and definitions relevant to understanding my study.

Chapter two explores the foundations of my study through a literature review of Reader Response Theory (RRT) and its connections to literacy and educational research on reader responses to young adult literature. Particularly, literature with respect to engagement, social imagination, theories of narrative intimacy, narrative transportation, and narrative empathy are shared. Finally, relevant empirical studies are shared to expand on the connections between theory and practice that emphasizes the links between readers' engagements and the construction of identity.

Chapter three discusses the methodology used to conduct my study, introduces my participants, procedures, and the multi-step process of data analysis. I explain my rationale for the choice of research design and methodology as well as the data collection and analysis process including coding cycles and post coding analysis steps. Additionally, within this chapter, I outline my positionality and reflexive considerations for the study.

The findings of my study are explored in depth in chapter four through participants' own explanations of their transactions with YAL texts, the significance of these transactions to their overall lives, and their concept of the ways reading YAL has influenced their past, current, and envisioned future identities. Additionally, these findings will provide data that explores the role of YAL in overall identity development over time.

The final chapter of this dissertation elaborates and connects the review of the fields of literacy, reading psychology, and literary criticism literature to the findings of this study. Within this elaboration, I share implications for future research, pedagogical practice, and potential ways to deepen our theoretical understandings of reading engagements and transactions over time from

readers' own words. Through the connections of the literature, findings, and theory, chapter five concludes with an offering of one researcher and ten participant's answers to the questions of how reading YAL shapes who we are and can become.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I provide an overview the literature on three major components of this study: Reader Response Theory (RRT), social imagination and engaged reading, and identity theories as applied to literacy. The discussion of RRT explores the ways in which literary critics and literacy education scholars view readers, texts, and their contexts as meaning making spaces as well as the way this shapes pedagogy. Building upon RRT, the concepts of social imagination and engagement explore the theoretical and empirical implications of what occurs during and after readers' experiences with texts. In addition to these concepts, this section reviews literary critics' interconnected theories of narrative empathy, intimacy, and transportation to show how social imagination and engagements continue to be taken up in the fields of literary criticism, literacy education, and reading psychology. Finally, a review of the literature connecting identity and literacy ties together the concepts this study addresses.

Reader Response Theory

Originating from the field of literary criticism, Reader response theory (RRT) arose as a response to New Criticism's belief in the importance of finding and defining meaning only through the text itself (See Figure 1 in Appendix B); however, Reader response critics though not conceptually unified, advocated the importance of considering readers' and their meaning making process outside of the boundaries of the four corners of the page (Tompkins, 1980; Tyson, 2015). To explore and theorize the process of reading, the reader's role, and response, Reader Response Theory (RRT) in its varied, multifaceted forms developed. As its name suggests, RRT directly centers the reader's experience and response to a text as the main interpretive approach to meaning. Although there are many leading scholars (e.g. Rosenblatt, 1994; Fish, 1980; Bleich, 1975; Holland, 1975; Iser, 1974) with differing areas of interest, reader

response theorists agree on two principles (a) the role of the reader plays an essential part of our understanding of literature (b) readers actively create meaning they find in literature and therefore, reading is not a passive process (Tyson, 2015). Based on these two guiding principles, Reader Response Theory holds that readers' past experiences, specific elements within the texts read, and social contexts in which they are read influence the construction of meaning (See Figure 2 in Appendix B).

Rosenblatt's Transactional Reading Model

Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading can best be characterized through the metaphor she provided sharing in *Literature as Exploration* (1995) that the act of reading is a, "...live circuit set up between the reader and the text: the reader infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into the patter of verbal symbols, and those symbols channel his thoughts and feelings. Out of this complex process emerges a more or less organized imaginative experience" (p.24) Based on this metaphor, the transactional model of reading positions the text as a stimulus channel to conduct the reader's individual feelings, associations, memories, and interpretations based on previous literature encountered or other accumulated knowledge. Therefore, as Rosenblatt (1995) asserted, "There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are only the potential millions of individual readers of the potential millions of individual literary works. A novel or poem or play remains merely ink spots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols" (p. 24). The transactional model shows the genesis of meaning (See Figure 3 in Appendix B) existing outside of the four pages of the text and outside of the reader, but rather situates meaning as co-created between the reader and the text in the reading process. The transactional experience in Rosenblatt's theory/model is ongoing and never static; an author and reader can return to the same piece of literature and

create new, different meanings. Based on this model, reader response is understood to be fluid in nature, but bound by present circumstances and purposes for reading.

Within this transaction, Rosenblatt (1994) offered two specific stances or purposes with which readers approach texts. These stances are not binaries opposed to one another, but rather they fall along a continuum which a reader may access differently at various times in their reading of the text. The reading process then identifies the most salient stance as the driving force for the reading experience. The "efferent" stance, which Rosenblatt (1994) explained, "derived from the Latin, 'efferre,' 'to carry away'" (p. 24), specifically focuses on the reader's purpose of "carrying away" information. In this stance, readers' transactions remain driven by the specific practical applications. Rosenblatt (1994) described this reading response as, "directed outward, so to speak, toward concepts to be retained, ideas to be tested, actions to be performed after the reading." (p. 24). This efferent experience of reading as most salient might focus on information retention as the purpose for the reading transaction but does not preclude an interaction with the secondary stance.

In this regard, Rosenblatt (1994) differentiated between the efferent stance and the aesthetic stance. Aesthetic reading can be best defined as, "...centered directly on what [the reader] is living through during [the] relationship with that particular text" (p. 25). This stance of reading primarily views the reader's response in dialogue and "listening to" (p. 25) the specific associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that the words and symbols within the text stimulate through the process of reading. Therefore, meaning is created, to return to the live circuit metaphor, through the specific electric signals that arise from the textual cues. Aesthetic reading concerns itself with the psychological and emotional lived experiences that create sensuous, qualitative, and affective responses (Rosenblatt, 1994). For Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional

reading theory, the combination of these two stances allows the reader to seek and create "verifiable ecological knowledge" which does not require "absence of awareness of affective elements generated by the words and their referents" (p. 45) through the reading process. Therefore, readers as active participants in the reading process bring both their purposes for learning new information and savoring the experience to enlighten and guide new perspectives of the world around them.

Pedagogically, Rosenblatt's work consistently refocuses the importance of literature instruction as contributing to making readers holistically aware of both themselves and the text. Unlike many of her predecessors who focused on right reading and interpretation, Rosenblatt's (1995) theory suggests that educators use RRT to make literature instruction relevant and able to answer students' practical and topical questions about the lives they are leading. She questioned in *Literature as Exploration*, "What do the things that we are offered in school and college mean for the life we are now living or are going to live?" (p. 4). In her view, the teaching of literature and the methods of reading that pedagogically shift towards the readers' concerns and responses to texts contribute to helping students process their immediate human concerns as they enter texts which explore the diversity of human experience and social relationships. Thus, the teacher's role is one of facilitating the reflective process of a transaction between individual readers and individual texts to explicate co-created, constructive meaning. Ultimately, Rosenblatt (1995) shared four basic principles for literary instruction based on her transactional vision:

1. Students should be provided with the opportunity to engage with their responses and do so in an environment that is "informal" and open to "friendly exchange" (p. 66)
2. The engagement with initial responses should be allowed to "initiate a process through which the student can clarify and enlarge" responses to the work (p. 73)

3. Teachers should facilitate access to a "wide range of literary materials that will serve as a bridge from the individual's experience to the broad realms of literature (p. 69)
4. The educator serves to beneficially influence as an "elaboration of the vital influence of literature itself" (p.70)

Rosenblatt saw literacy instruction as a "reconceptualization of what constitutes freedom and discipline in the English classroom, so they are intertwined rather than opposed" (Probst, 2005, p.12). This Literary Transactional Theory of reading design by Rosenblatt gave rise to application of theory into practice which inspired an interweaving pedagogy of both freedom of interpretation and discipline of reflection and questioning.

Pedagogical and Empirical Explorations of Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory

One of the first scholars to adapt and expand on Rosenblatt's work, Robert Probst (1981) argued for "Response-based teaching" and envisions instruction that focuses on the readers initial response and then expands through a patterned questioning that is "amorphous" and "non-directive" which leads to clarification, connection of similarities and differences between initial reactions, and personal origins (p. 44-45). Building on these principles, Probst (1986) asserts students naturally "dialogue" (p.35) with a text even despite teacher inclination to focus instruction on literature skills vs. student responses to texts. Therefore, Probst (1986) developed discussion questions focused on first reactions, feelings, perceptions, visual images, associations etc. (p. 35-36). These questions used within discussion guide classroom instruction towards "variability of response, and [opens] the possibility of moving from response to analysis without denying the validity of initial responses, of unique personal reactions and associations" (p. 36). Thus, building on RRT's principles to connect readers' responses to facilitate reflection on their relationship to themselves, others, and additional texts in the ambiguity of the meaning making

process (Probst, 1986). From these relationships, Probst (1987; 1990) shifted focus to suggest that specifically adolescent literature should be provided within English curriculum because reading literary works provide five ways of knowing: 1) Knowing about self 2) Knowing about others 3) Knowing about texts 4) Knowing about contexts 5) Knowing about processes of meaning making (p. 7-16). Most recently this work has evolved in Probst partnership with Beers to build on Rosenblatt's stances, Beers and Probst (2017) suggest readers develop responsive, responsible, and compassionate stances while reading and created a "Book, Head, and Heart" (BHH) framework which asks student readers to disrupt purely efferent reading by also examining their own thinking and feeling (p.63). Adding onto this framework, Beers and Probst (2020) spurred by the socio-political events of the time and belief in literature's transformational power added an action call step of "Do" to the BHH framework making it BHH-D (p.178). Thus, Probst continues to use theoretical principles of RRT to form pedagogical scholarship for teachers and students today.

In addition to Probst, Sumara (1998) also asserted that pedagogy formed around RRT become a more complex and interrelated process for readers to reflect on the relationships formed with characters and others while reading literary fiction. Sumara (1998) believed these reading experiences "become interesting and generative locations for interpretation of past, present, and projected identities" (p.206). Because of these guiding beliefs, Sumara developed several sequential pedagogical steps for readers to explore their responses within school spaces and literacy lessons. First, Sumara (1998) suggested students go through the process of "marking" (p. 206). In this first step, students would highlight or mark with post it notes the passages of interest and their response to the passage on the page to provide evidence and commentary on the dialogic relationship between the "author/text/reader/context" (p. 206). After

marking has been completed, the second step of tracing can occur through re-reading texts and in the practice of re-reading the text "students begin to notice the traces of a previous reader identity in their texts" (p.207). From this point forward, Sumara engaged students in "responding" (p. 207) which involves multiple opportunities for timed writing exercises where students use writing as a way of thinking and learning about the text, themselves, and their experience. Within this process, another pedagogical move of "juxtaposing" (Sumara, 1998, p. 207) comes into play. In juxtaposing, educators introduce and interweave other readings to broaden and add complexity to their original and re-readings. Once these initial steps have been taken, students can then engage in "chaining" "interpreting" and "weaving" (Sumara, 1998, p. 207-208). In these processes, readers create interpretive connections between three ideas from a) the novel being read b) a line from their timed writing and c) a line from another work of literature introduced. From these three lines, they seek connective ideas that help them build "interpreted bridges" (Sumara, 1998, p. 207). After the chains are created, interpretation through more writing exercises where readers are directed to explore and develop a concept emerging from the previous activities that prove compelling. After this step is completed, the communal step of feedback enters through the process of weaving together other students' "associative/interpretive commentary to the reader" through small group engagements with the interpretation writing piece. Finally, at the end of any unit where readers have been asked to engage in this process thoroughly, the last pedagogical suggestion remains an activity of "resymbolization" (Sumara, 1998, p.208) where readers work from their ongoing interpretations through essays, fictional writings, short films, visual art etc. As these resymbolizations are created, instructors can work with students to answer questions that ultimately point out the ways in which readers engage in a form of "literary anthropology" where, "as readers identify with and

interpret the experience of characters, they learn to reidentify and reinterpret themselves" (Sumara, 1998, p. 209).

Most recently, Ebarvia (2024) threaded RRT and critical literacy together to suggest that literacy educators must interrogate "Who is the I who reads?" (p. 4). Ebarvia argued, "I used to think that we are what we read and that what we choose to read is a direct or indirect reflection of who we are as people. But I realize now that it's not just what, but how—in other words, we are *how* we read" (p. 232). Based on this belief, Ebarvia (2024) suggests that pedagogical inclusion of RRT must also include intentional and consistent practice of perspective taking and critical reflection that calls attention to not just the facts of the stories we read, but rather "what we and others respond to in the text and why that matters" (p. 232). Therefore, inclusion of "identity inventory" (Ebarvia, 2024, p. 93) activities, K-T-D (Know, Think I know, Don't Know) charts, pre-reading surveys that question not just "what they *know* but how they *feel* and what they *believe*" as well as anticipation activities that bring conversation and discussion to the multiple perspectives within the classroom encourage questioning the reader who reads the text before reading begins (Ebarvia, 2024, p. 238-243). In addition to these activities, Ebarvia (2024) offers a multiplicity of activities for during reading:

- Rethinking characters and characterization (p.245),
- Who is centered? Who is marginalized? Who is missing? (p. 247)
- Reframing character analysis (p. 249)
- Step in, Step out, Step back (p. 250)
- Above and below the line (p. 250)
- Character spectrum (p. 251)
- Tracking their perspective-taking over time (p. 255)

- Second (and third) draft thinking (p. 256)
- Naming beliefs that impact interpretation (p. 257)
- Bias check in (p. 258)
- Making and remaking claims (p. 259)
- If…Then… (p. 262)
- Using literary theory as lenses (p. 263)
- Engaging and tracking perspective rich text sets (p. 270)

These activities shift the pedagogical focus from the texts themselves towards the tensions held within the topics of the texts and the readers' perspectives of themselves, others, and the characters and ideas within the reading. Ebarvia (2024) suggested that though personal response continues to be ignored as valuable by the instructional strategies espoused by reading programs, corporations, and standardized testing, "we cannot separate what we read from the who is the I who reads" (p. 264). Ultimately pointing towards an identity conscious reader response theory for after reading occurs. Through a synthesized identity conscious reader response and character/text analysis (Ebarvia, 2024, p. 281), students have the opportunity to engage with the multiplicity of identities they carry into the reading response, the identities the characters and text portray, and synthesize these with critical thinking about how systems and institutions of power play a role between readers, texts, and the world. Through these varying pedagogical suggestions, Ebarvia (2024) argued for the ways RRT paired with critical literacy deepens student learning and reflection on their identities, feelings, and beliefs and how these interact with the reading experience to contribute to their holistic sense of self.

Situating RRT in empirical study, literacy scholars such as Thein, Tatum, Brooks, and Scuirba deepened understandings and continue to investigate the ways Rosenblatt's transactional

theory affects real readers. Utilizing multicultural literature and socio-cultural lenses, Thein and her teams found that readers responses reflected a mapping of social discourses onto texts and produced dialogic tensions that momentarily shifted student thinking (Beach, Thein, & Parks, 2006; Thein, 2005). From these findings, Thein, Beach, and Parks (2007) examined perspective-taking as practice and found the participant's response to the text through perspective-taking prompted acknowledgement of other perspectives and reflected a "significant change in habit of mind–a transformation" (p. 57). Thein continued to question these perspective taking and transactional experiences as well as their ethicality in examinations of literature circles and emotional rules in literary interpretation (Thein, 2017; Thein, Guise, & Sloan, 2011; 2015; Thein & Schmidt, 2017;Thein & Sloan, 2012), ultimately to suggest a need to move transactional theory beyond the personal and towards more critical examinations of the social implications of interrupting socially constructed discourses within the reading process and inside classroom spaces.

Specifically interested in African American males and African American adolescents, Alfred Tatum and Wanda Brooks empirical studies explore the relationships between RRT and readers' identities, contexts, and textual relevancy. Interested in understanding meaningful experiences with texts, Tatum (2006; 2007; 2008; 2008; 2012; 2014) used RRT to conduct qualitative case studies focused on "enabling texts" and "textual lineages" (p.164). Enabling texts are texts which move "beyond a solely cognitive focus–such as skill and strategy development–to include a social, cultural, political, spiritual, or economic focus" (p. 164). Textual lineages are "diagrams of texts that individuals found meaningful and significant" (Tatum, 2008, p. 164). From this study, Tatum (2008) argued classroom teachers needed to build on students' textual lineages, engage questions that matter to students, and tap into adolescents'

multiple identities (p.83-84). Continuing to focus on these enabling texts and textual lineages, Tatum (2009; 2012; 2014; 2019) examined the ways that intentionally selecting texts developed not only knowledge but well-being. Tatum (2019) asserts, “After all, it’s not just about one’s literacy development; it's about one’s life development” (p.582). Succinctly, Tatum’s work expands RRT as a pathway towards understanding one’s history and future in meaningful, enriching ways.

Shifting towards primarily urban settings, Brooks builds on RRT in examining a multifaceted approach to understanding the ways in which textual features and themes, cultural representations, and a reader’s situatedness within stories affect the readers’ responses and interpretations. Through examining reader responses to *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, Brooks & Hampton (2005) found that textual features such as themes of confronting racism, as well as their own socio-cultural situatedness within the story pointing towards literature as a “safer” place to explore issues relevant to adolescents’ lives (p.98). Brooks (2006) continued this work, finding students “used culture to develop literary understandings” (p. 390). Through the exploration of textual features students were able to read and develop entry points for interpretation of characterization, plot patterns, theme, conflict, use of metaphor, and authorial intention. Moving outside of the classroom context, Brooks, Browne, and Hampton (2008) and Brooks and Savage (2009) expanded research into reader response to YAL in afterschool book clubs. Both studies found participants responses exist in complicated and multifaceted relationships with the presumed reader-text identification process as well as suggest the importance of examining learning outside of the classroom space. Building on these studies, Brooks and Browne (2012) theorized a new approach to RRT, a Culturally Situated Reader Response (CSRR) which accounts for the positions of students, textual features, and cultural contexts within the meaning

making process of literary interpretation (p. 77). From this CSRR perspective, readers transact from a dominant position (homeplace) and then have supporting positions that influence their responses (community, family, peers, ethnicity); however, the positions cannot be crystallized without considering the cultural aspects within the text (Brooks & Browne, 2012, pg. 78).

Working with adolescent males of color, Sciurba (2014) connected the research of Tatum (2005) and Brooks (2006) to explore ideas of texts acting as mirrors and windows for readers (Bishop, 1990) and complicated the current understanding of textual relevance. Through semi-structured interviews, Sciurba (2014) asked students to explain how they decide relevancy of their readings and how their various identities (race, ethnicity, gender) influence their connections to the literature. Based on the analysis, findings suggested two types of relevance that aligned with Bishop's (1990) differentiation. Sciruba (2014) describes these relevancies as "empathetic relevance–the ability to relate one's life directly to the text due to common *experiences*, and sympathetic relevance–the ability to *live through* a story or construct significance from it without having experienced similar events firsthand" (p.310). Two Black male participant's stories led to the conclusion that textual relevance "has many faces on a mirror-window continuum" (p. 314) even for the same reader. Developing this research further, Sciurba (2017) expanded her findings on textual relevance to argue literacy research has "essentialized rather than recognized" (p. 388) students' complexities and the way their "personal and social identities" (p. 389) are multifaceted. Therefore, this study suggests the journey towards textual relevance must be more focused on inviting student input and request deeper knowledge from their perspectives of what degree of meaning "matches between their own lives and the stories they read" (p.389). Furthermore, Sciurba (2018) developed findings examining the multi-dimensional response to texts identical fraternal twins possessed. Sciurba

(2018) concluded that, “While Franklin and Freddy had some commonalities in how they constructed significance from texts, they differed greatly with respect to their perspectives on the salience of race/ethnicity and sex/gender” (p. 8) These findings again complicate the utilization of texts as mirrors and windows for students and the assumptions educators make about relevance to particular students based on their identity features. Sciurba (2018) argued for a “revamped reader response theory” that will “consider the multifaceted complexities of textual relevance, which takes into account the complexities of students’ racial/ethnic/cultural, sex/gender, and other identities” (p. 8). Overall, Sciurba’s studies point literacy educators towards a student-centered approach to reconceptualizing RRT and reading instruction that emphasizes empowering students.

Social Imagination and Reading Engagement

The concept of social imagination began developing in the field of literary criticism through reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1994; 1995) while reading psychologists simultaneously investigated the connections of fiction to the world (Oatley, 1993; 1994). Both fields specifically built on ancient works going back to Aristotle’s *Poetics* which argued that texts related to the world and provoked emotional responses within readers. Thus, the relationship between readers, texts, and the world developed. Rosenblatt’s (1994; 1995) transactional theory work as outlined in the previous section had direct implications for readers’ abilities to relate their lives and experiences to the text as well as engage with the imagination to perceive the reality of others.

Reading psychologists explored this same process through conceptualizations of schema and mimesis (Abrams, 1953; Oatley, 1993; 1994). Through this perspective, reader responses and the social imagination develop through fiction’s “imitation or representation” (Oatley, 1993,

p.103) of the world for the reader to interpret. However, as argued by Oatley (1993) fiction does not have exact imitation, which results in the suggestion that readers through fiction dream and simulate alternative realities. Therefore, reading psychologists argue the cognitive process of reading proves the essence of mental life to be "constructive" (Oatley, 1993, p. 108). Synthesizing reader response and reading psychology, Johnston (1993) conceptualized social imagination as a primary purpose for reading fiction as readers must, "imagine [themselves] as each of [their] characters, thinking, feeling, and acting" (p.428). This description of social imagination dovetails with and is used interchangeably with cognitive psychology's terminology of theory of mind (ToM) which describes "our ability to explain people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires" (Zunshine, 2006, p. 6). Again, intersections between cognitive psychology and literary criticism by Zunshine (2006) build to explore this "mind-reading" (p.6) that occurs through the mental process of reading fiction.

Zunshine (2006) asserts that fiction reading remains engaging and pleasurable due to the layers of mind reading conducted by the reader during the unfolding of a narrative as, "attributing states of mind is the default way by which we construct and navigate our social environment, incorrect though our attributions frequently are" (p.6). Therefore, through the understanding of ToM, reader response as conceptualized by Rosenblatt (1994; 1995) remains essential as a reader's creation of meaning from the "rich array of interpretations" (Zunshine, 2006, p.14) that relate to individual experiences. For example, Zunshine (2006) explains,

> Any additional information that we would bring to bear upon our reading of the passage–biographical, socio-historical, literary-historical–would alert us to new shades in its meaning…[a detail] may connect to something in my personal experience that will induce me to give significantly more weight to one detail of the text and ignore others,

> which means that you and I may wind up with wildly different readings of [characters] emotions (p. 14)

This process of reading fiction accounts for the joy and complexity that readers find as they respond to texts which creates multiple readings and the possibility for meaning to shift over time through each "conversation" (Zunshine, 2006, p.21) with a text. These understandings of readers' ability to use fiction as a vehicle for social imagination or reading the mind of characters and therefore, practice the cognitive skills of perspective-taking, raise pertinent questions of the limitations and congruent links to narrative's ability to develop empathy in its readers.

Narrative Empathy

As author and scholar Maryanne Wolf (2018) states, "The act of taking on the perspective and feelings of others is one of the most profound, insufficiently heralded contributions of the deep reading processes" (42). This distinctive cognitive and affective process is known as empathy (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Brown, 2021; Djikic et al., 2013; Fletcher, 2021; Johnson, 2012; Junker & Jacquemin, 2017; Keen, 2007; McCreary & Marchant, 2017; McGinley et al., 2021; Wolf, 2018). The term, originating in the English language in 1908 from the German *Einfuhlung,* meaning "in-feeling" (Lanzoni, 2018, p.2) has been defined, conceptualized, and operationally used in many ways. While first focused on emotional or lack of emotional connections in the 1920s-1960s, recent scholarship has started to distinguish between the cognitive and affective aspects of empathy with neurologists attempting to locate empathy within the brain through use of fMRI scans (Fletcher, 2021, Keen, 2007, Lanzoni, 2018). Cognitive empathy–sometimes referred to as perspective-taking or mentalizing–is defined by an individuals' ability to recognize and understand another person's emotions. Affective empathy–sometimes referred to as emotional empathy–is defined by experience-sharing and

one's attunement to another's emotional state (Brown, 2021; Fletcher, 2021; Junker & Jacquemin, 2017; McCreary & Marchant, 2017; Wolf, 2018). These aspects of empathy, regardless of varied definitions, commonly have been used to suggest that individuals' responses are context-dependent to one's awareness of the relationship between self and others; thus, individuals use this awareness to "simulate" (Mar & Oatley, 2008, p. 173) or "try on" (Lanzoni, 2018, p. 272) another's experience.

As explored with social imagination and ToM, narrative fiction and the act of reading has been linked to empathy research as well. Lanzoni (2018) asserts that fiction increases empathy by "encouraging readers to make references about characters and be sensitive to emotional nuance and complexity" (p.4). The two facets of empathy are argued to be drawn out by narrative fiction through the reading process as individuals experience a transportation or emotional involvement with plots and characters within stories that lead to deep connections and may open readers to new experiences and perspective that prompt empathic response (Djikic et al., 2013; Johnson 2012). Additionally, Oatley (1994) links the work of social imagination with empathy explaining that simulated worlds create real emotional responses in readers that have consequences for a reader's social world and embodied life. Thus, consequences can be "*affective* by fostering compassion for the character and/or *cognitive* by initiating a different world view or changing behavior" (Fair & Florell, 2019, p. 14-15). This link between narrative fiction and empathic response most clearly finds its foundation in literary theories of empathy called narrative empathy.

Hammond & Kim (2014) define literary and narrative empathy studies as ones which, "investigate how 'thinking with' or 'feeling with' another happens within literary texts or because of literary texts" (p.1). Narrative empathy studies then are concerned with "how writers

represent empathic experience and how they provoke, promote or prevent it in readers" (Hammond & Kim, 2014, p.1). Leading literary theorist and scholar on narrative empathy, Keen (2013) defines narrative empathy as "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" (para. 2). Her exploration of narrative empathy identifies two main characteristics of narrative fiction that aid in reader empathic responses: *character identification* and *narrative situation.*

First, *character identification* involves readers' relation through emotional experiences with and attachment to characters through their characterization, "mode of representation of consciousness," and action within the plot (Keen, 2007, p. 93). *Narrative situation,* according to Keen (2007), signals the relationship between the reader and the characters' "inner lives" (p. 93). For example, texts which tell stories through first person narration and provide readers with insight into the characters' thoughts, feelings, and motivations for actions have the potential to create empathic feeling through sharing perspectives of the characters and their emotions. This strong character identification or narrative situation identification as outlined by Keen (2007), "invites empathy, even when the fictional character and reader differ from each other in all sorts of practical and obvious ways" (p. xii). This relationship between readers and characters across differences has also been taken into consideration when linking narrative empathy to the field of young adult literature (YAL.

Connecting the concepts of reader response theory, social imagination, and narrative empathy, many YAL scholars have created metaphorical understandings of the ways in which texts can act on their readers. Primarily, Bishop (1990) conceptualized this transaction through the metaphor of stories as "mirrors, windows, and sliding doors" (para. 1). Through this metaphor, YAL possesses the power to build the reader's emotional and social thinking which

leads to empathy building (Alsup, 2013; Johnson, 2012; Keen, 2007; Koopman, 2015; Mar & Oatley, 2008). Bishop (1990) argued that books function as *mirrors* for readers who see themselves represented in the text, *windows* when readers can see outside their own experience and empathize with the experiences of others, and *sliding glass doors* when the reader can step into the world created by the author (Bishop, 1990, p. ix-xi).

Additional YAL authors and scholars have developed Sims-Bishop's metaphor to call for more representation and diversity within children and YAL. For example, Myer's (2014) metaphors of maps suggest diverse text selections can point readers toward their future destinations, and therefore, the pathways offered must be considered carefully so as not to depict ventures that further perpetuate stereotypes and trauma. Krishnaswami (2019) built on Bishop's use of glass as an object lesson for text-reader actions to apply to "prisms" (para. 5). Prisms act by slowing and bending the light that passes through them, and therefore, metaphorically books can slow readers' attention to representations by interrupting harmful stereotypes and placing characters in empowered spaces to question the way reality functions. Finally, Toliver (2021) opens possibilities for windows and mirrors to turn into "telescopes" (29). In this iteration of the metaphorical text-reader relationship, Toliver suggests that books can, like telescopes, "make faraway, liberatory ideas clearer and brighter" (30). These theories and metaphors with YAL scholarship all attempt to explain the complexity of what occurs in the reading process that possibly engages individual imagination and connective, empathic responses.

As Buehler (2016) noted, "The stories teens read in YA lit give them reasons to read both closely and personally" (30). It is the close and personal reading experiences of young adults that lead YAL scholars to cite YAL as an empathic tool that expands readers' social imagination. Cart (2008) explained YAL's function as one that builds,

> understanding, empathy, and compassion by offering vividly realized portraits of lives–exterior and interior–of individuals who are unlike the reader. In this way, young adult literature invites its readership to embrace the humanity it shares with those who–if not for the encounter in reading–might forever remain strangers (para. 11).

Additionally, Alsup (2013) purports YAL narrative fiction invokes "critical response and empathetic feelings" that can lead to transformative learning (p. 182). She argues, "stories surround us, form us, and change us. Stories make us human" (p. 182). These widely accepted views of YAL narratives and their power to create close, personal, empathic effects on readers continues to prompt investigation into the nature of the relationship between the reader and the text.

Narrative Intimacy & Narrative Transportation

Through these conceptualizations of narrative empathy linked to YAL by emotional responses and feeling with characters, study of the nature of reader and narrator relationships offer another pathway to deepening understanding of why YAL builds relational and social imagination. Most recently, Day (2013) explored this reader and narrator relationship through the lens of narrative intimacy. Characterized by the blurring of boundaries between narrator and reader, Day (2013) defines narrative intimacy as, "narrator-reader relationships that reflect, model, and reimagine intimate interpersonal relationships through the disclosure of information and experience of the story as a space that the narrator invites the reader to share" (p. 11). Based on this definition, readers develop an emotional bond through trust and disclosure. Like Keen's (2007) observation of narrative empathy being formed through character identification, narrative intimacy is marked by:

- A first-person narrator who self-consciously discloses information.

- The first-person narrator implicitly or explicitly signals an awareness and expectation of a reader, either through direct address or…through more general construction of the narrator's tale as disclosure, confession, or other interpersonal discourse.
- Stories reveal a desire to share personal, private feelings, questions, and struggles as well as a hesitation to share them with other characters within the fictional world (Day, 2013, p. 11).

Through this lens, the storyteller and listener construct a relationship shaped by privacy, secrecy, and trust. Narrative intimacy, though explored in many literary works across genre and culture, holds a particular prevalence within YAL narrative fiction due to the genre's use of first-person narration of transition from childhood to adulthood, particularly the struggles surrounding friendship and romantic relationships. Thus, the sharing of these experiences, thoughts, and feelings provide space for adolescent readers to experience through narrative intimacy feelings of knowing and being known (Day, 2013). Though not directly linked to empathy or social imagination, narrative intimacy does have implications for how readers develop their sense of safety, imagined relationships, and intimacy in their real lives.

In addition to examination of narrative intimacy, another theoretical ideal of narrative transportation (Green, 2004) could have connections to readers' responses of empathic and social imagination development. Defined as, "a combination of attention, imagery, and feelings, in which an individual becomes immersed in a narrative world" (Green & Brock, 2000; Green & Brock, 2002), narrative transportation links to both narrative intimacy and narrative empathy as individuals who experience transportation or the sensation often referenced as being "lost in a book" (Nell, 1988) develop more likelihood to connect with characters and "adopt beliefs,

attitudes, and behaviors that are implied by the story" (Green, 2021; Murphy et al., 2013). This identification process with the character either through the bonds of narrative intimacy (Day, 2013) where the character becomes like a friend to the reader or through "remindings" of their own life experiences (Strange & Leung, 1999) impacts the level of attitudinal shifts (De Graaf et al., 2012). Readers that identify with the characters demonstrate a stronger level of narrative transportation which could lead to stronger empathic responses and social imaginings (Green, 2021). Therefore, consideration of the connections between narrative intimacy, narrative empathy, narrative transportation, and social imagination holds possibilities for further exploration in deepening understanding of how texts act upon readers specifically with YAL.

Applying Theory to Practice: Empirical Explorations of Engagement & Response

Social Imagination in Children's Literature Studies

Based on the implications of theoretical understandings of reader response, narrative empathy, and social imagination, researchers and teacher educators have empirically set out to study the validity or applicability of ideals to readers and classrooms. Approaching the question of what reading literature does or has the potential to do to young readers, Lysaker et al. (2011) examined the effectiveness of Relationally Oriented Reading Instruction (RORI) and reading of picture books with second and third grade students in producing a development of social imagination in order to address both reading and social difficulties. After a two-phase intervention implementation, children's reading comprehension and social imagination were shown to increase. Lysaker et al. (2011) suggested, "that children took up the identity of the characters as some aspects of themselves, which had the effect of developing their intimate knowledge of others through the internalized comingling of the voices of reader and text" (p.552). Thus, arguing that comprehension is an active process between the reader and the text

and that the findings of Lysaker et al's (2011) study show empirically the belief that "reading changes us" (p. 553). Building from this implication, Lysaker and Miller (2013) studied the development of social imagination from another perspective using wordless picture books to determine a more detailed "in-process view" (p. 149) of the transactional relationship between readers and texts. Findings suggest that the participant made specific "dialogic moves" (Lysaker & Miller, 2013, p. 164) to inhabit the character; perspective-take in regard to thoughts and feelings of the character and assume an outside narrator position. Through this, Lysaker and Miller (2013) argue that this study demonstrates:

a) the use of social imagination occurs within the reading process itself.

b) the dialogic exchanges occurring during reading offer opportunities for self-development.

c) documentation of social imagination and moral decision-making within reading highlight the need to rethink the critical role fiction plays in schools for children's social and moral development; and

d) wordless picture books offer a window into the meaning making process of children's minds (p. 169-170)

Overall, Lysaker's work with early childhood literacy, social imagination, and reading response provides a glimpse into the theoretical basis for transactions and dialogues that occur during reading and cause an interrelationship between the reader and text.

Engagement and Social Imagination in Young Adult Literature Studies

Moving from early elementary research, YAL scholars Gay Ivey and Peter Johnston study engaged reading with YAL narrative fiction. Based on interviews of 71 adolescent readers, Ivey

and Johnston (2013) found through multi-phased analyses that engaged reading with YAL texts had the following causal links:

- Books (YAL texts) were cited as consequential to student moral agency, social imagination, intellectual and moral stances, identity and self-knowledge, and happiness.
- The element of Choice resulted in students' notation of wider and more engaged reading experiences as well as building of knowledge.
- Relationship and social imagination were developed through talking about the books and exploring differing perspectives to intellectual and moral ideals.
- Students shared that teacher behavior differed as educators read aloud with students and connected them with the right books and with other students.
- Increase in time to read and wider reading led to more engagement with the reading process and exploration of identity and self through complex and varied stories (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, p. 266- 268)

Through the interviews with students, Ivey and Johnston (2013) concluded that "while constructing meaning from text, students were also using text to construct meaning in their lives" (p. 270).

Building on this work, Ivey (2014) furthered the discussion on the social aspect of engaged reading in her previous study noting that another layer to social engaged reading occurs in the reader's mind. Ivey (2014) stated, "Readers simulate the social experience by taking up perspectives of characters in the story and dealing with the conflicts they encounter" (p. 167). Thus, the research draws the connecting line between theories of reader response, engagement, social imagination, and potential empathic response. Additionally, Ivey (2014) expanded the boundaries of the reading experiences when she explained, "the dialogic

engagements, both inside and outside the texts, do not demand the physical presence of the book, so thinking and conversation occur not just during the reading, but long after students have closed the book" (p. 168). These findings suggest that the potential for engaged reading with YAL texts have outcomes which affect readers' real lives as well as the dimensions of literacy learning upheld by policy and educational reform goals (e.g., increased test scores, increased comprehension etc.).

Ivey and Johnson's work continued with a longitudinal study examining the change created by the instructional shift towards self-selected YAL texts, as well as studies in 2017 and 2018 examining the implications of student readers' engagement with YAL that presents challenging issues and mature themes. Within the longitudinal study, Ivey and Johnston (2015) found "transformation" of students in "lowered need for closure; greater emotional, behavioral, and academic self-regulation; increased social, academic, and moral agency; increased social imagination; and increased happiness" (p.319). These student transformations resulted in teacher and learning environment transformations such as, "relational properties of openness, trust, and acceptance, even valuing, of difference…division of labor included a redistribution of the teaching function throughout the community" (p. 319). From the findings of this study, engaged reading with YAL texts point to larger social and cultural implications of the reciprocal and dialogic nature reading transactions have as "agentive transformative practice" (p. 321) within individuals and their larger social contexts. Then in the continued 2017 and 2018 interview studies, Ivey and Johnston (2017) argued, "reading about characters experiencing phenomena at the far edges of students' own experiences is quite useful because it creates the opportunity to think through the consequences before they encounter similar situations" (p.161). Though often viewed as problems within classroom contexts, the researchers suggest that students who engage

in the dialogic reading process with YA books that are described by students as “intense and disturbing” (Ivey & Johnston, 2018, p. 143) can use the reading process as a learning tool. Ivey and Johnston’s overall body of work, then, suggests that in asking the question to student readers why YAL texts specifically act on them–the resounding answers remain related to personal interest, relevance, perspective taking, and social imagination.

Empathy and Transformation with YAL Studies

The theory of narrative empathy and ToM as related to literary fiction has been explored through multiple empirical studies within reading psychology and literary criticism (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Kidd & Castano, 2013; 2016; Kleij et al., 2021; Koopman, 2015; Mar & Oatley, 2008; Mumper & Gerrig, 2017; Pino & Mazza, 2016). Most find general linkages between the use of literary narrative to promote perspective taking (cognitive empathy) and emotional response (affective empathy). However, findings present limitations on the power of links showing that long-term empathic response and implications still present difficulty due to the investigations of most studies taking place over short-term time periods. Additionally, these studies suggest that even with empathic response or ToM being exhibited by participants the assumed prosocial outcomes are not definitive.

Though the definition of empathy remains complex within the field of YAL, most studies engaged the cognitive, perspective taking definition of empathy when examining student responses to YAL texts (Falter & Kerkhoff, 2018; Glenn et al., 2012; Glenn, 2014; Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013; Szecsi et al., 2010; Thein, Beach, and Park, 2007; Thein &Sloan, 2012; Wender, 2015; 2016). Though in the minority, two studies defined empathy through affective terms as well as perspective based (Glenn et al., 2012; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019). Based on these definitions of empathy, the grounds and definitive qualities of transformation differ. Szecsi et al.

(2010) utilize Wilson, Switzer, and Parrish and the IDEAL Research Lab's (2006) frame which defines transformative learning experiences as those including lasting impressions, integration of the experience into the participant's self-narrative, and behavioral impacts (p. 44). In their 2012 study, Glenn et al. refers to transformation as, "worldview extension" (p. 329) and similarly, Haddix and Price-Dennis (2013) share transformation reading to be those which, "challenge their [the readers'] own normative worldviews and respond" (p. 252). Thein and Sloan (2012) take up the call for action and define transformation through ethical reader response as movement, "beyond a rhetoric of politeness, political correctness, tolerance or persuasion, and towards authentic change–changes in habits of reading and thinking necessary for becoming democratic citizens…" (p. 322). This idea of transformation-as-action was also found in several of the other studies whether that action was listening (Wender, 2015/2016), shifting thinking outside of neutral information (Falter & Kerkhoff, 2018), drawing on critical lenses during reading (Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019), or embodied engagement with social justice (Glenn et al., 2012).

To determine students' (preservice teachers) empathic and transformative responses, most researchers (teacher educators) from these studies utilized strategies of verbal discussions as well as written responses to produce the data analyzed. Ultimately, despite some variation in what empathy is and what activities foster this skill within the classroom that led to differing ideas of transformative learning, all studies affirm that multicultural YAL has potential to create opportunities for reader transformation through their responses. The most affirmative of transformation, Szecsi et al. (2010) concluded that, "when teacher candidates have opportunities to experience multicultural literature, to reflect on it, and to discuss the narratives, transformative thinking clearly emerges in their discourse" (p. 47). Other studies were more diplomatic in their findings and conclusions. For example, most found reader response to YAL as an opportunity to

"reconsider" their identity (Glenn, 2014), assumptions about the world (Glenn et al., 2012), and positions towards specific religious or cultural groups (Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019). Haddix and Price-Dennis (2013) expressed this idea of reconsideration by stating that YAL could "shift their thinking from a deficit perspective to a diversity perspective" (p. 276). Thein and Sloan (2012) suggested that the reader's response towards multicultural texts promotes reconsideration of stances due to its ability to "encourage uncertainty, dissonance, and tentative thinking" (p. 321). Similarly, YAL specifically promotes moments of tension where students can examine their own emotions and perspectives (Wender, 2015).

Another key finding through each study's emphasis on reader response analysis points to the identity of the readers. Specifically, Wender (2017) stated that YAL can "spur both identity construction and belief formation" (p. 12). Glenn (2014) similarly suggested that the readers were "challenged and empowered" by the texts and their responses to a "reconsideration of identity" (p. 112). These complex responses from readers point to the argument that the texts themselves can act in transformative ways. However, Falter and Kerkhoff (2018) discussed that YAL "can only open the door" (p. 271) suggesting that readers must do the work of identity and transformational learning on their own based on their reflections.

Across studies, findings suggested that reader responses were more transformational or engaged by utilizing critical literacy strategies and multiple texts (Falter & Kerkhoff, 2018; Haddox & Price-Dennis, 2013; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019; Glenn, 2014; Glenn et al., 2012; Thein & Sloan, 2012). Additionally, using tools like culture mapping supported reader responses (Szecsi et al., 2010; Wender, 2015) as this strategy fosters comparison to the characters and the readers' identities. Studies that required writing from multiple perspectives also saw more increased levels of engagement with possible empathic responses (Thein & Sloan, 2012;

Wender, 2015; Wender, 2017). Overall, these studies indicate that more research is needed to understand the complex nature of reader responses and specific ways in which YAL acts on its readers towards empathic and transformative ends.

To attempt to investigate these theoretical ideas of RRT, social imagination, and narrative empathy outside of preservice education, Lawton and Cain (2022) explore their own experiences of reading YAL to dig deeper into reader voices about how texts act on readers. Through a duo autoethnographic journaling process, they found the following themes: "(1) YAL stories have provided us with an escape, (2) YAL provided us with a space for self-discovery and identity formation, and (3) YAL books have served as pathways toward cultivating our empathy for others and solidifying our commitment to social justice issues" (Lawton & Cain, 2022, TBP). They explored these themes through specific vignettes which highlighted:

- Escape from poverty, childhood trauma, and abuse into stories of belonging, possibility, and tensions of beauty and pain
- Identity formation through narrative connections with queerness, belief system questioning, and processing grief
- Empathic response and commitments to work towards social change through character solidarity, listening and valuing multiple perspectives, and critical thinking skills that uncover power dynamics and ways to fight against systems of oppression.

Based on the vignettes, they argued that engaging with YAL worked across time, space, and difference to affect our social imaginations and identities. Through this work, they saw that stories have implications for more than just our personal, momentary experiences.

Identity, Literacy, & YAL

Literacy and identity have intersected for the last several decades with literacy scholars emphasizing the importance of identity or identities as influential to literacy development depending on the studies and range of perspectives. Moje and Luke's (2009) literature review of the many ways in which these fields overlap serves as a primary base for understanding the metaphors used to conceptualize the complex construct of identity as it relates to literacy. Within this review, scholars developed five primary metaphors for identity to answer questions regarding how literacy plays a role in development of identity or conversely how identities play roles in literate practices. Ultimately, Moje and Luke (2009) assert that identity and literacy interact in the following ways as differentiated by perspective:

- Literacy studies and Identity as Difference implies that literate practices may be taken up as a matter of cultural difference through specific recognitions based on cultural practice; however, this definition also leaves space for agency for the individual to choose to not identify with these literate practices as well (p.421).
- Literacy studies and Identity as Self argues that texts and literacy practices can play a crucial role in the explicit or implicit process of becoming selves or developing certain identities. Through this metaphor, literacy offers youth the opportunity to "consciously" (p.425) build individual identities through specific practices that might change over time.
- Literacy studies and Identity as Mind or Consciousness implicates literacy as a "tool" (p. 426) for developing abstract ideals and concepts that shape human evolution into higher levels of consciousness. Thus, new literacy practices lead to new mind development and ways of working through tensions or conflicts to discover self.

- Literacy studies and Identity as Narrative according to researchers remains a dominant metaphor in literacy research as it offers opportunities to explore the possibilities of the ways in which individuals hold together identities through stories told over time; however, since representations of identities are bound by one time or one space delineation between how the story is constructed for future purposes is unclear. Literacy practices are therefore both ways individuals are "doing and representing" (p.430) identity.
- Literacy studies and Identity as Position suggest that literacy remains a space for movements between positions and experiences of hybridity between meaning making and speaking back. Literate practices offer agency and interpellation between specific times, spaces, and relationships that produces an individual's subjectivity and enactment of that subjectivity (pp. 431-432).

Overall, Moje and Luke's (2009) exploration of identity and literacy through these metaphors provide understanding of identity as fluid and ever-changing through literate practice; however, this review also points to the key ways in which defining identity implicates specific questions and assumptions of literacy practices (e.g., how is a person who is non-literate producing identity? Who is a reader? Writer? etc.).

Bakhtin & Holland: Selves and Children's and Young Adult Literature

Narrowing theories of identity down to the field of Children's and Young Adult Literature (CYAL), Bakhtinian theories of selves and identity as dialogic and Holland et al's (2001) theory of self as both agentic and subjective to individual and cultural constructions prove salient for how identity is discussed. First, Bakhtin's foundational work *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), though a work of literary criticism has several key constructs which have

been taken up in scholarship and research to apply towards the reader of CYAL and formation of self. Most notably, the construct of dialogism or the dialogical relationship between language, narrative, and subjectivity of an individual. Dialogism occurs with conflicts between forces of language and culture, linguistic diversification, and decentralization (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 272). Therefore, Bakhtinian theory implies a dialogue between individuals and society. Identity or consciousness of self results from the dialectical process of this dialogue. Bakhtinian theories of selves and identity as dialogic proves of particular emphasis for framing research within the CYAL field (Auten, 2020; Coats, 2011; Lysaker, 2006, Lysaker et al., 2011; Lysaker & Miller, 2013; Thein & Sulzer, 2015). Within these studies, scholars suggest identity or selves interact through language and the process of reading. Literacy forms contained in CYAL offer the many languages and voices for dialogism to develop. Therefore, CYAL as a genre results in opportunities for novelistic exploration of cognitive, ideological, and social stances within an individual's consciousness that can result in change over time from the dialogues with different texts at different times.

Moving from Bakhtin's dialogic understanding of self as interactive, Holland et al. 's (2001) investigation of identity argued that individuals are "caught in the tensions between past histories that have settled in them and the present discourses and images that attract them or somehow impinge upon them" (p. 4). Therefore, operating from constructivist lenses, researchers explained, "we conceive persons as composites of many, often contradictory, self-understandings, and identities whose loci are often not confined to the body but spread all over the material and social environment" (Holland et al., 2001, p. 8). Thus, building on Bakhtinian notions of self and Vygotsky's notions of development, Holland et al. (2001) push into notions of identity change through negotiations of agency and subjectivity. They suggest that identity can

shift through mediation of, “continuous self-fashioning” (Holland et al., 2001, p. 4) in response to experiences of their own meanings made from social and cultural environments. Based on this conceptualization, one’s interaction with reading CYAL can offer opportunities to resist expectations of what it means to be who they have been and currently are and rethink who they want them to be in the future. Literacy can play a central role in reflecting on ideals of self and potential behaviors that prove consequential to development of their identities.

Empirical Studies of Identity, Change, and Reader Response

Though identity remains a concept discussed within empirical research on CYAL and with readers of CYAL, there are limited studies which intersect both theories of identity and theories of reader response or change of identity through reading CYAL. Much of the work within the field focuses on representations of specific identities, their accuracy and consequences for readers who do and do not possess specific identities as well as pedagogical and theoretical implications.

To begin, the connection between identity as conceptualized within Bakhtinian frames of the dialogic self, Lysaker (2006) explored the ways emergent literacy in young children’s readings of wordless picture books develops the understanding of reader/text transactions as a “dynamic and self-changing process” (p. 37). Lysaker argues that “Dialogism identifies and describes qualities of self that allow us to be transformed by a reading event; it provides an explanatory theory for the activity of comprehending itself” (p.37). Additionally, using Bakhtinian notions of the dialogic quality of reading events, Lysaker positioned young readers as capable of the capacities of self necessary for engaged reading often dismissed as developmental abilities of more mature readers. Through her study with readers ages 5 and 6 years old, Lysaker (2006) found identity development of the dialogic self in emergent reading events on a

continuum moving from functions of: reactor, observer, emerging narrator, developing narrator, and established narrator (p. 46). Within this continuum, Lysaker (2006) combined Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional reading theory with Bakhtin's (1981) theory of the dialogic self and argued, "the understanding of stories is predicated upon one's ability to participate in them; a child 'understands' stories by first experiencing them as an event of the self, a merger of their personal narrative and the narrative of the book" (pp. 50-51). From this, Lysaker (2006) implied that children's identity development of the "self as reader" (p. 51) coincides with literacy development based around movement within the continuum of self-capacities and opportunities to access texts and multiple experiences with literacy skills of print concepts, fantasy play, and storytelling. In addition to exploring how dialogues within self develops individual's identities as readers, Lysaker continued her work on identity development through reading, specifically exploring the development of social imagination as a byproduct of the self as reader identity implicating self as relational and able to understand others (Lysaker et al., 2011; Lysaker & Miller, 2013).

More recently, Rowe (2019) built on Lysaker and others' work to explore pleasure reading of YAL in adults (30+ years old) as an event of continued identity construction. Combining understandings of reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1994) and theories of the dialogic self (Bakhtin, 1981; Lysaker, 2006; Lysaker et al. 2011), Rowe (2019) argued that:

> Engaging with texts provides a relational environment to explore concepts of creating a new self (self-authorship) and negotiating the attributes of self already possessed in conjunction with new perspectives gained from texts (self-mediation) ...Through the social imagination, self-mediation process, self-text dialogue, and self-authorship of

> texts, readers become agentive in both their meaning making and identity construction (p. 21).

Thus, readers' transactions with YAL texts provide opportunities for reimaginations of current selves and construction of identity. By completing a narrative instrumental case study within a YAL book club, Rowe (2019) created an Engagement-Identity Topology (p.87) which measured identity development through three levels of real-world actions (micro, meso, and macro) that revealed the scope of the adult participants' construction of self as related to their reading experiences. Rowe's (2019) identity developments within these levels are defined:

- Micro actions– consist of internal thoughts, ideas, and questions (p. 88)
- Meso actions– extend action outside of self through conversations with family and friends, contacting authors, or changing of relationships (p.88)
- Macro actions– move action into larger societal groups, institutions, or organizations through challenging policies and rejecting dominant societal narratives (pp. 88-89)

From these categorizations, Rowe (2019) argued that participants had differentiated experiences with the texts read based on their pre-existing identities, preferences, reading experiences, but synthesized adult reading of YAL as holding significant identity shaping power through: a) situation simulation b) antimony in self-contradictory experiences with YAL and c) reflection as key to acceptance (p. 133). Therefore, Rowe's (2019) study provided insight into the possibility for YAL to influence identity development through socio-emotional and cognitive processes of reading and the dialogues readers have within and outside of themselves based on their reading experiences.

While Lysaker and Rowe's work used specific Bakhtinian notions of identity and connected them with overall examination of identity changes through the reading process with CYAL, identity and change has also been explored to examine how classroom factors promote specific kinds of reading identities. Utilizing Holland et al.'s (2001) theory of identity, Glenn and Ginsberg (2016) investigated through phenomenological case study the ways in which students' reader identities changed across contexts of traditional English literature courses and YAL elective courses. Following 10 readers concurrently enrolled in a YAL course and traditional English course, researchers found students went through a process of deconstruction, reconstruction, and independent designing of their reading identities across courses through change that was, "non-linear and recursive" (Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016, p. 92).

The deconstruction of reading identities began by students sharing their conceptions of traditional English courses. Glenn and Ginsberg (2016) found that students "used game-infused language to define English course experiences. They positioned teachers as rule makers and referees and students as captive players" (p.93). Within this deconstruction of English as a game, participants shared that the game "felt constricting and limiting, denying autonomy and suffocating their reader identities" (Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016, p. 93). Therefore, participants described their ability to exert control over the game relied upon non-participation and accepting the negative consequences of this choice. Glenn and Ginsberg (2016) argued students "have the capacity to envision new identities, but these identities can only emerge when students are supported in ways they anticipate or desire"; however, despite participants identities being constructed, "too often there is little or no sanctioned space or opportunity in schools for the necessary building" (p. 94).

Due to this lack of opportunity in traditional English courses, Glenn and Ginsberg (2016) found that participants viewed the YAL elective course as a space for "exploration and development of more liberating reading identities" (p. 94). In the YAL course, participants reconstructed their reading identity suggesting that self-selected reading materials, increased experiences of autonomy in the classroom space, and partnership with the teacher invited the "try[ing] on" (Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016, p.98) of identities. In this stage of the identity change process, Glenn and Ginsberg (2016) argued that participants "inhabited a transitional space, both literally and figuratively, between the traditional English classroom and the YAL elective and between their associations of authority and freedom within each context" (p.95). In the transitional space, researchers found increased examination of past histories with experiences in school (e.g., remediation classes, etc.) influenced students desire to move into new spaces (e.g., YAL elective). In this new space, Glenn and Ginsberg (2016) asserted participants "were granted opportunities to…build new conceptions of their reading selves" (p.98).

From this second stage of reconstruction, participants moved into the final stage of agentic designers of their new reading selves. Glenn and Ginsberg (2016) suggested that participants in YAL contexts were able to discover new reasons to read that "extended beyond those privileged in the traditional English classroom" (p. 98). For example, participants explained the YAL course increased their access and knowledge of genres and subgenres with the literary world as well as viewed the goal of "reading to connect" (Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016, p.98) as a valued purpose for reading. Additionally, within this agency to choose their own YAL reading materials for their own reading purposes, participants also joined the YAL community which exists outside of classroom space. Therefore, participants explained their reading selves and engagement expanded. By comparison of limited to no completion of reading a single book

in traditional English classrooms, many participants shared reading several complete books within the YAL setting. One participant described the difference of engagement when she stated, "When you go to young adult lit, it's like, 'Yes. Finally, this class is here. I get to read'" (Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016, p.100). Through Glenn and Ginsberg's (2016) study, participants revealed that identity growth and development can change based on both context and reading material– specifically pointing towards the efficacy of YAL as a tool for encouraging this phenomenon.

Synthesis of Identity Theories & Reader Response

Based on these theories of identity and their empirical intersections with RRT, the definition of identity that best synthesizes both the internal Bakhtinian dialogic (1981) and external Holland et al. (2001) agentic contributions made to an individual's sense of self proves to be a psychological definition of identity. The American Psychological Association defines identity as,

> an individual's sense of self defined by (a) a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that is not wholly shared with any other person… involves a sense of continuity… the feeling that one's memories, goals, values, expectations, and beliefs belong to the self (APA, Dictionary of Psychology, 2018)

From this combination of internal and external factors, individuals' sense of personal identity can include multiple individual facets that make up the holistic self. Therefore, when approaching literacy, RRT, and CYAL, all facets of the individual can be internally in dialogue with each other and the text as well as interacting with the contextual, environmental factors of the self in the world. Thus, one's identity as reader interacts with their identity as woman or person of faith as well as their environmental contexts of classroom in North America or reader in a state affected by censorship. Approaching the interrelationships of these theories provides a way to

explore identity as both static and evolving at the same time. The synthesis of these theoretical understandings contributes to understanding the ways literacy and identity formation interact, but ultimately fall short; thus, the findings of this dissertation study seek to contribute an understanding from a reader's point of view of how their literacy life—specifically, their reading of YAL—connects to their identity growth over time.

Chapter Summary

In overviewing the three major components of this study: Reader Response Theory (RRT), social imagination and engaged reading, and identity theories as applied to literacy, I've sought to provide clarity in gaps in the field and the need for further investigation of the interconnectedness of each component. A synthesis of Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading (1994; 1995) within the field of RRT and the ways other literacy and CYAL scholars have utilized this theoretical frame was provided to connect RRT and theories of social imagination and engagement. Additionally, this review of the literature provided theoretical understandings of identity as connected to literacy and RRT. Both empirical and some pedagogical suggestions from these theories were provided to suggest how YAL has been used to study and promote reader response, social imagination, and identity development. This dissertation seeks to provide an empirical investigation of how readers explain how they transact with YAL texts and how these transactions act upon their holistic sense of self to add to conversation about YAL's role in readers lives.

Chapter 3: Methods

This study sought to explore the transactions YA readers have had over time and why those transactions have continued to hold significant meaning to the readers. Additionally, the study investigated the ways in which reading YAL texts has contributed to the identities of YA readers and what roles these texts have played in their overall identity development. This chapter overviews the research design methodology and rationales for design choices as well as explains the contexts, participants, data collection and analysis procedures.

The chapter begins with an explanation of the study's qualitative nature and specific definitions and boundaries of methodology chosen. From this methodological foundation, the chapter then moves into my ethical and positional considerations that informed my study design and methodology process. Then I explore the relevant background information about the participants and their varying contexts. This section provides a profile of each of the ten individuals' personal factors and significant experiences with YA texts up to the present time; Because the findings will explore in depth the experiences and meanings with these texts these are succinct summaries not in-depth reader histories. Also, within this section the three course contexts participants were recruited and selected from are described. In the next section, I provide an outline of data collection processes, sources used, and then analysis methods utilized. Finally, I conclude the chapter with data quality considerations to the study.

Design Definition and Rationale

Qualitative Research & Instrumental Case Study Design

Due to the broad and complex nature of human subject and qualitative research, this study focused through qualitative instrumental case study design (Glesne, 2016; Stake, 1995, 2000, 2008; Yin, 2009, 2018). Therefore, the specific guiding principles of qualitative research

and considerations of instrumental case study design (Glesne, 2016; Stake, 1995, 2000, 2008; Yin, 2009, 2018) shaped the direction for the methods and further data collection processes involved in the holistic dissertation study.

To begin, qualitative case study research "refers to the intensive study of a case, but what 'case' means can vary…the common denominator is that each [case] is a bounded integrated system with working parts" (Glesne, 2016, p. 289; Stake, 1995, p. 445). Similarly, Yin (2009, 2018) defines case study research as an empirical inquiry into case/cases to understand the *how* and *why* of a phenomenon as related to the case and its context. Using multiple methods of data collection and sources, Baxter and Jack (2008) argue qualitative case study provides assurance that, "the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood" (p. 544). Therefore, case study methodology and design offer researchers an approach to investigate both the specificity of the case, but also the implications for the larger field of study.

Instrumental case study design more specifically draws attention to a particular case in order to "provide insight into an issue or redraw a generalization" (Stake, 2000, p. 437). Additionally, as pointed out in Bullough's (2015) work, instrumental case study design, "enables identification of commonalities and differences within the boundaries defining a case" (p.14). As I sought to clarify both the particular reader responses and the commonalities in reader responses as related to YAL, instrumental case study design best served the purposes of this study. The research questions involved in this study sought to explain the *how* and *why* (Yin, 2018) of readers' responses to YAL and their importance or lack of importance to readers' beliefs and identity formation over time pointing to the further relevance of instrumental case study design.

In designing an instrumental case study as a novice researcher, not only are these varied definitions of what qualifies as an instrumental case study important, but examination of the orientations and scholarly approaches to case study design (Yazan, 2015). Like many other qualitative research methods, case studies have been conceptualized in differing ways based on epistemological orientations. For example, foundational scholars of case study methods such as Yin, Stake, and Merriam define, design, gather data, analyze, and report through various epistemological lenses which determine their central tenets and practices (Yazan, 2015). While similar to one another, the purpose behind the design of case studies varies as do the key practices. As I will touch on in my reflexivity section, my epistemological leanings align with the definitions and tenets of Stake (1995) and Merriam (1998). I see construction of reality and knowledge within the practice of case study design to be flexible (Stake, 1995) and used to demonstrate "reality is not an objective entity; rather, there are multiple interpretations of reality" (Merriam, 1998, p. 22). Therefore, based on these orientations, practices I kept in mind when designing and conducting my instrumental case study involved a) awareness of my own reflexivity; b) gathering of my data from multiple sources; c) analyzing from various strategies; d) validity through methods of triangulation and disclosure/investigation of researcher positionality (Yazan, 2015). Using the foundational synthesis of these scholars solidified situating my investigation into a complex phenomenon such as reader response to YAL within an instrumental case study design.

Furthermore, my own situatedness within this study also supports the use of this method as Stake (2000) argued that instrumental case studies attempt to integrate understanding of "how the concerns of the researchers are manifest in the case" (p. 439). The individual and social phenomenon of reader response to YAL focalized through case study research provided the

opportunity to gather readers' voices and develop more empirical evidence for the ways in which they explain how and why YAL functions to engage readers in the meaning making and identity formation process.

As instrumental case study design pursues understanding of a phenomenon within a bounded context (Stake, 2008), this study specifically sought to interpret the phenomenon of ten self-identified YA readers explanations of their transactions, meaning made, and self-identified identity contributions to their holistic sense of self. Thus, the parameters of participants being self-identified YA readers who participated in a YAL course served as the boundary for this case. Each individual's reader responses and interviews contributed to the boundaries of this case exploring both each participant's unique personal experience as well as shared experiences across the participants. The following questions guided this case study:

1. What types of transactions with YA texts have occurred with self-identified YA readers? Why have these transactions proved meaningful for the reader?
2. In what ways does reading YAL texts contribute to the identity making of self-identified YA readers?
3. What role(s) do reading YA texts play in the identity development of self-identified YA readers over time?

To answer these three research questions, participants' unique and shared experiences within the bounds of the case were collected and analyzed as explained in more depth in the following sections. However, before exploring data collection and analysis, further contextual and individual participant orientations must be explored in the next section.

Reflexive, Ethical, and Positional, Considerations

Onto-epistemological and Researcher Identity Statement

As a researcher I hold to the onto-epistemological beliefs of an interpretivist as I seek to understand the world through multiple perspectives of reality and truth (Sipe & Constable, 1996). I also align with critical viewpoints as exploring the world leads me to see systems of power and seek ways to pursue justice and growth towards a more equitable, inclusive community. My reading life has been an experiential, formative influence on these stances. I identify as a disabled, white, cis-het woman, from a low-middle socioeconomic class, and person of faith. Additionally, my identity as a reader and educator holds deep relevance to the instruments and case involved. Therefore, I certainly approached this proposed dissertation study with subjectivity.

As overviewed in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, I've been a lifelong reader of YAL and utilized the genre in my work for the last decade of my teaching career. I have advocated in my own and my students' reading lives for choices of texts that portray identities outside of the "majority" culture in order for the normative identities they (we) possess to be disrupted and expanded. Because of my lived experiences and faith, I believe every identity makes each individual a unique reflection of the divine and worthy of representation and celebration in our storytelling and daily lives. Furthermore, I prioritize values of common humanity, empathy, and compassion as necessary for our culture to thrive, and therefore, support the critical questioning and re-thinking of systems that oppress and maintain power dynamics of discrimination and dehumanization.

Ethical Considerations of the Study

The primary ethical consideration of this study remains twofold: my roles within the classroom as student/co-instructor/researcher and my own personal experiences with YAL/texts in processing data. First, I was hyperaware that the context I inhabited initially to gather data for my study was within a classroom environment where I was both a student and a co-instructor. Therefore, I was aware that students may feel a desire to perform a response in a certain way and the accuracy of my data may be inhibited by power dynamics inherent in educational structures. Even though I personally operate from a pedagogical perspective that seeks to disrupt ideals of dualistic understandings of teacher/student or expert/learner, I did the best I could to partner with the other instructor during course design to create an open space for the intention for everyone's presence to be acknowledged, engaged and active participants in learning, and allowed space for dialogue with the world beyond ourselves (hooks, 2020) through pedagogical practice.

In order to do this, the courses were in varying degrees set up so that text and syllabus design be collaboratively co-created with students to select texts for our semester readings and the progression/order of course assignments and discussions. More specifics of this procedure were described in the course descriptions and data collection methods section. Through collaborative process, the majority of the texts selected were first time reads for myself, so that I was also a reader/learner first, and instructor second. Students also had active instructing/discussion leading roles throughout the courses. These course design and communication choices were meant to as much as possible decenter my power and rather make "the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute" (hooks, 2020, p.39). Additionally, the goals for all assignments, class discussions, and projects focused on centering and valuing each student's experiential knowledge as a non-hierarchical way to

understand the multiple ways of knowing. I sought to use this pedagogical strategy to affirm students' presence and voice as a way to encourage a collective listening and learning throughout the semester (hooks, 2020).

In regard to research communication and recruitment, students were informed in the presence of an outside/non-researcher of my interest in conducting my dissertation study based on the collective learning experiences. This information provided students with the foreknowledge to make their own decisions about what to disclose in their student artifacts. Also, formal recruitment for participation in the study did not take place until after final grades were submitted and therefore, the potential pressure of grade performance impact was mitigated. Additionally, once confirmed as participants, each individual had the opportunity to decide data inclusion/exclusion. Finally, all data collected, analyzed, and included in the final written report was sent to participants for member checking in order to provide corrections to any researcher misinterpretation. I've disclosed these explanations to clarify my own epistemological, reflexive considerations as I've conducted this study.

Secondary to power dynamics, my own long and complex personal history with YAL and reader responses caused me to enter my study with clear subjectivity and a need to delineate specific ethical considerations I am reflexively aware of when approaching the research process. First, self-awareness and reflexive notetaking was incorporated into the research process as I recognize myself not as separate from my participants but implicated within the study itself. However, my goal throughout the courses and data collection was to do everything in my power to decenter myself and not to influence participants one way or another towards response. I remained aware that my own experiences with YAL might create a confirmation bias in interpreting data; therefore, I utilized iterative participant centered data analysis processes aware

that not *everyone* has the same types of responses to YAL or defines reading as a particularly formative aspect of their life or identity. Therefore, my choice to utilize in vivo coding, and member checking processes was intended to continually keep participants' voices at the center of the research.

Positional Considerations

As stated above my specific positionalities include my identities as a white, disabled, cishetwoman, from low-middle socioeconomic class, person of faith, reader, student, teacher, and researcher. All of these variables affect my personal and professional interactions with my participants and my data. I did not seek to bracket these experiences, but rather I have woven my own voice into my work. I believe that we cannot separate ourselves from our minds, bodies, and emotions, but rather embrace that learning and research require holistic understanding of myself and my participants. I value the legitimacy of spiritual, social, and story-centered forms of knowledge (Safir & Dugan, 2021).

Based on these positionalities, my insider and outsider status varied based on individual participants and their self-identified positions. Some of my positionalities were outwardly apparent and therefore, communicated to students (my whiteness and disabledness); however, my other identities were less apparent/non-communicated dependent on how mutual disclosures occurred within the semester and interview process. My decisions about mutual disclosure throughout data collection was filtered through the lens of affirming their knowledge and experience of reading. While in the classroom and in the interview process, I disclosed personal experiences as an approach to enhance reciprocity between myself and my participants. Additionally, when a participant asked a specific question, I disclosed my honest perspective. I

made this choice based on my personal belief that vulnerability and storytelling remains an important part of learning and research, so I hoped to embody that belief through my practice.

Participants and Contextual Factors

Participant Selection, Recruitment, and Individual Profiles

In my time as a graduate teaching associate studying children's and young adult literature (YAL), I've had the privilege of co-teaching YAL courses with a variety of undergraduate and graduate students. During these courses, I met several self-identified young adult readers who shared the significance of reading young adult literature to their reading histories as well as their continued reading lives. My desire to understand the ways readers' of YAL explain the influences of YAL on their holistic identity led me to seek participants through convenient, yet purposive sampling (Miles et al., 2020; Patton, 2015) of these YAL courses. Due to the nature of qualitative research and case study design, participant numbers vary (Miles et al., 2020); however, ten self-identified YA readers who participated in a YAL course bound this case together. I sent recruitment emails with a recruitment flyer (see Appendix C) at the beginning of the summer and after the conclusion of the academic relationship between myself and the participants.

My inclusion criteria only required that participants completed the YAL course and consented to inclusion of their course artifacts and participation in follow up interviews for data collection and analysis. I had eleven total respondents and I excluded one participant who after they signed a consent form did not respond to any further communications. The remaining 10 participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity in this case study; additionally, I've chosen not to disclose which course context each participant originated from in order to provide another layer of participant protection. However, each course is described

within the course description section and its procedures for course artifacts collection is detailed in the next section on Data Collection. As mentioned in the literature review, in the field of YAL there are multiple theoretical claims and interpretations about what reading YAL does to/for readers (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Krishnaswami, 2019; Myers, 2014; Bishop, 1990; Toliver, 2021), but this convenient, purposive sampling provided an opportunity for participants to center of reader voices and explanations of their feelings, beliefs, and interpretations of their reading experiences with YAL. This shift to focus reader and student perspectives hopefully will contribute to the empirical research currently focused on YAL and reader response.

Each participant participated in a 60–90-minute interview which took place through secured and private meetings on the Zoom telecommunication platform (See Appendix C for Interview Protocol). All participants were provided copies of their interview transcript and had opportunities to add or remove any data before data analysis began. As participants in this study, each participant was provided a copy of a choice YAL book. Reflexively, the researcher had individualized and differing levels of relationship to each participant based on their time together over the course of their semesters together. However, in each interview the researcher and participant shared dialogue based on reciprocal personal disclosures and willingness to share vulnerably with the other person. Across the 10 participants in this study, each had the opportunity to self-identify their most salient identity characteristics outside of being YAL readers. These specific individual identities will be addressed in their individual narratives in the following summaries overviewing the participants' particular identities and contextual factors and reading experiences with YAL to the present time of the study.

Elena

Contextual & Identity Factors

Self-identifying as a white, Irish-Czech, agnostic, cishet woman, Elena described her Midwestern background as open-minded and full of people who were very understanding and interested in learning new concepts. Through this context combined with her reading life, Elena believes her own qualities of kindness and openness were developed. Though prone to initially be quiet, analytical, and reserved, she views herself as having outward and inward facing identities that become more open and extroverted as connections are formed. Elena shared that her close friends know her as someone who never stops talking. As a college junior studying aerospace engineering, she has experienced a shift in Midwestern ways of keeping beliefs, politics, and open discussions of both at home and behind a curtain the last few years in her move to the Southeast. Through this time of new experiences, Elena has gained confidence in expressing her beliefs and being more openly her true self. She was quick in adding, "I do feel like reading had to play into that," when describing her current self-concept and salient aspects of her overall personality, values, and interests.

History as a YA Reader

Stating, "I've always been a reader" acknowledging "at least for as long as I can remember," Elena expressed reader as one of her most important identity facets. Over the course of her life, Elena shared that she, "read a lot…a lot of different types of books…different genres…and saw a lot of different perspectives." From a young age, Elena had exposure and access to books. She recalls reading as a consistent part of her life from childhood into her present life as a young adult and reflected, "…many of my favorite memories and experiences I had have some connection to reading." Elena marks late elementary school into middle school as

a critical time in solidifying her readerly identity. This turning point made her an "avid reader." Through a friend in her class, Elena discovered James Patterson's (2005) YAL series *Maximum Ride*. Her love for this series sparked a passion for reading YAL fantasy and science fiction that continues into her reading life today.

From *Maximum Ride* (Patterson, 2005), Elena's social connections and avid reading of YAL led her to expand into YA dystopian texts like *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) and *Divergent* (Roth, 2011). The excitement and built-up anticipation of these stories drew Elena deeper into her love for YA. She reflected that it was always an enthralling experience of wondering, "Oh my gosh, what is going to happen next?" The plot twists and continued development of new stories and ways to experience different fantasy worlds brought her more series like *Percy Jackson* (Riordan, 2005), *The Selection* (Cass, 2012), *Throne of Glass* (Maas, 2012), and *City of Bones* (Clare, 2007) as she continued to age into her young adulthood.

While in high school and college, Elena continued to explore YAL in her English courses, electives, and free time. Gravitating towards books where the main characters were around her age or younger, Elena especially enjoyed *The Book Thief* (Zusak, 2005) and branched out in a phase of reading realistic fiction texts like John Green's (2005; 2012) stand-alone novels with *Looking for Alaska* and *The Fault in Our Stars.* Additionally, assigned *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Sáenz, 2012) in English class, Elena "couldn't put it down" and discovered yet another important text to add to her YA history. Moving towards her present reading life, Elena's most recent key texts have been *Graceling* (Cashore, 2008) from her comfort genre of fantasy and stemming into historical fiction Malinda Lo's (2021) *Last Night at the Telegraph Club.* Elena discussed the ways the characters were pursuing interests similar to her own career field, aerospace engineering. Surprising herself again, Elena delved deeper into

her YA well by expanding into reading a novel in verse, Amber McBride's (2023) *We Are All So Good at Smiling*. Blown away by the depth of the story, she discovered yet again the ways her reading life and personal life can expand into new spaces.

From these experiences throughout her reading life, Elena has found that her current reading life "leans towards fantasy and sci-fi, but more so fantasy." Elena describes this genre as enjoyable for her because "magical fantasy aspects" are "something we don't have in everyday life," and as a hard science major who regularly operates from a factual, scientific mindset conducting research, she views reading now as "getting a break." She describes her present reading habits as "chaotic" and based on what she is "in the mood" for which results in "jumping around and not sticking with one book." Elena has also discovered audiobooks as a new format to explore and enjoys listening to them at a "really fast speed." When discussing her personal conception of her reading transaction with YA texts, Elena used the metaphor of a garden or marketplace. She shared, "it's like intentionally putting things in the basket…just builds up with my experiences and the things I carry with me." Always exploring life through fictional worlds, Elena plans to "keep reading" and continue to "look for new and interesting stor[ies]."

Malaya

Contextual & Identity Factors

Describing herself as growing up in many different places, Malaya identifies as a Filipino American immigrant woman who sees herself as a learner full of curiosity. Valuing respect and trust, she holds respecting herself and others as key to her identity and desires to be heard and seen and wants others to feel the same way. Malaya described her personality as a balance between extroverted and introverted noting that her curiosity has led her to try varying professions such as baking and most recently graduating from her undergraduate program, she

has entered into a new career path of counseling. She desires to work with young adults and to provide much needed representation within the counseling field. The deep interest in other's motivations and thought processes connected her with reading, especially YA texts, because she shared, "you get insight into other people's brains…I'm allowed to be nosy in a story." Curiosity and openness to different points of view proved to be the most salient identity features for Malaya's self-concept.

History as a YA Reader

Sharing a self-description of "casual reader," Malaya described reading as part of her identity. Though accessibility to texts often determined Malaya's reading life when she was a child, she confirmed "I am definitely a young adult reader." She described her love for YA as stemming from the emotionality and palpability of the characters and conflicts within the stories. The way that youth characters are "living their emotions" and don't try to "hide it" engaged Malaya from her own youth. Spending time in libraries and bookstores, Malaya explained reading feels exhilarating, entertaining, and vibrant.

The catalyst for Malaya's venture into YA was her experiences with Japanese comics. While working in New York City, her mother would allow Malaya and her older sister to stay at Barnes & Noble where she discovered *Fruits Basket* (Takaya, 1999). As a high school student, Malaya sought out stories about other high school students discovering love and navigating friendship. *Fruits Basket* (Takaya, 1999) remained a series Malaya read for years because of the teenage drama held within its pages but also the magical elements that ignited her imagination. Though not as notable and somewhat part of her initial shame in loving the YA genre, she did note the way trending fantasy stories such as *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005) were part of this time of her reading life. Most critical for Malaya was *The Lovely Bones* (Sebold, 2002). After surviving her

own sexual assault, this text proved valuable to Malaya's recovery and reclamation of her ability to control the narrative of her own story.

Most recently, Malaya shared several YA titles that met her during her undergraduate program and drew her deeper into the genre. Jas Hammonds's (2022) *We Deserve Monuments* connected Malaya with the ways that family histories can be painful and beautiful at the same time. Her reading of *Shatter Me* by Tahereh Mafi (2011) led her into an escape that kept her reading until the series conclusion. Malaya expressed, "I need[ed] to know what happened." Additionally, Malaya shared that texts like *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet* (Ferguson, 2022) and *I'm the Girl* (Summers, 2022) made her reflect on social issues such as the ways we view women, the brutality and violence Indigenous communities still face, and the impacts social media can have on our own self-concepts. Finally, as a future counselor and mental health advocate, Malaya found Amber McBride's (2023) *We Are All So Good at Smiling* to be relatable and expressive in a way that has led her to return to the book multiple times since her initial reading.

Overall, Malaya's reading life continues to develop as she discovers new access points such as Libby and audio books. She continues to seek Asian American authors and support new voices in the field of YA as needed, important representation of the diversity of the Asian American experience. She joined a book club and desires to share books with others. When considering her own transactional experience, Malaya views the reading experience as climbing a mountain where one begins at the base and journeys with characters through the terrain. She stated at times the process can be "slow and steady" whereas other times she can go "pretty hard" and still other times she just is "really enjoying the moment." No matter at what stage of

the climb, Malaya views reading as an encouragement and helper in her continued process of becoming who she is.

Bree

Contextual & Identity Factors

Self-identifying as a young black woman, Bree confidently shared that she was born and raised in the South and comes from a very Southern household. Bree also identified herself as a Christian but clarified that she was "more like a Christian hippy" as she believes that everyone just wants happiness, and she wants to support all people. Seen as the "sticking glue," Bree described growing up with her grandparents as formative to her values, beliefs, and personality. She shared that many truisms passed down from her grandmother and papaw such as, "Stand tall in who you are; Never give up on yourself; Speak up is something doesn't sit right in your spirit; Be mindful of the words you say; and Carry your name with respect" guided her work towards shaping her own value system. Bree also described herself as a hopeless romantic who loves to lean into the magic found in the world around us. Her reading life in Bree's view certainly contributed to these personality traits and her identity as a reader and future educator held deep significance to Bree as she discussed her overall self-concept and experience of the world.

History as a YA Reader

Beginning to read YA early in elementary school, Bree recalled the many summers of choosing her own books to read and share with her grandmother. The emphasis of maintaining reading stamina and growth held importance to Bree's family and fortunately spurred a love of read that continues into today. She described her early reading life as one of passion—telling her grandmother and mom about the characters she loved and "being one of those readers where your mom comes in and you're up at 3 o'clock in the morning and she had to take the book away

from me." This passion continued throughout middle school and experienced a bit of slowing due to assigned reading throughout high school and college; however, YA texts continued to meet her in important moments of her life when she was and continues to determine who she is.

Starting with the *Bluford High* series (Alirez et al., 2002), Bree gravitated towards YA even at a young age since this series provided her characters navigating love and life in an urban setting similar to her own. Also significant to her life, *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon G. Flake (1998) proved a key text because of the ways it in Bree's words, "made me realize how the world sees me versus how I see myself in the world." These two texts found during Bree's early life and schooling provided entertainment and representations of Black characters and similar experiences to her own that resonated. Other texts that Bree mentioned as important as she grew were *The Hobbit* (Tolkien, 1937) and *Monster* (Myers, 1999). *The Hobbit* (Tolkien, 1937) confirmed her interest in fantasy which continued to grow as she discovered *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005). When discussing her preference for fantasy YA, she recalled, "fantasy is a sense of escapism…you can just dive yourself into this world even if you've never seen the world."

Though high school and college assigned readings led Bree into a reading drought, it was YA that brought her back to her love of reading. While wandering through a bookstore with a friend, Bree's hopeless romantic personality matched with Joya Goffney's (2021) *Excuse Me While I Ugly Cry*. This story was "one of those moments" for Bree and reminded her of the feeling of enjoyment she missed while reading assigned texts. Other more recent key texts for Bree were Jason Reynold's (2017) *Long Way Down* and Kalynn Bayron's (2020) *Cinderella Is Dead*. While reading *Long Way Down* (Reynolds, 2017), Bree noted the way it confronted and made her rethink her experiences as well as surprised her due to it being written in verse.

Similarly, reading *Cinderella Is Dead* (Bayron, 2020) allowed Bree's preference to play outside, wear jeans, and not conform to "lady like" constructs to be affirmed.

Overall, for Bree, the reading of YA texts helped her question, explore, enjoy, and consider new perspectives. Desiring to teach young people, Bree sees reading YA texts as vital to becoming more open minded and learning because it is "written in a sense of truth." She believes that YA offers so many different lessons that "you can learn from reading, no matter what age you are." When considering her own experiences within the reading process, Bree described her transactions as a "learning cycle maze" where she is travelling on a path when suddenly "something pops up" and then she has to go another way. Bree shared, that in life and reading her goal is to be "comfortable with being uncomfortable." Therefore, she seeks to move in new patterns with YA reading in order to grow.

Beth

Contextual & Identity Factors

Beth self-identifies as a white, cisgender heterosexual woman who grew up in a very Christian household in the South. She still identifies as Christian though noted she was "not as strict" in her practice of this faith as she was when growing up. From these identities, Beth sees herself as a person seeking open-mindedness and recognizes that her capacity for learning from other's perspectives remains a key value for the way she lives her life. Through this commitment to an open mind and exploring new perspectives, Beth has transferred this into her reading life and pursuit of a career in education. She desires to truly listen to marginalized voices especially regarding social justice, mental health, and religious issues. Advocacy remains a critical growth edge for Beth especially as she considers what her future as an educator means. Through these lenses, Beth's identity as a reader has been a throughline for the entirety of her life.

History as a YA Reader

Though her current life circumstances of attending college courses and working makes reading for enjoyment difficult, Beth described a rich reading history and love affair with books. Beginning at a young age, Beth enjoyed reading as an easeful, validating experience of escaping into a story and exploring herself and who she could be. YA texts came to be her companion in middle school with popular series like *The Clique* (Harrison, 2004), and Beth viewed the genre as a "natural" choice because it was readily available as well as it appealed to her because the "characters are really allowed to feel things." The emotionality and range of experiences within YAL drew Beth in.

Always interested in the merging between English and History, Beth began reading historical fiction YA texts like *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 1989) and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (Boyne, 2006). However, a key text that remains one of Beth's favorite stories today is Markus Zusak's (2005) *The Book Thief.* She recalled the immersive experience of reading the novel in a day because she "just didn't sleep" until it was over. An additionally critical series in her YA history, *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) proved to be books that in Beth's view "fully changed my life." Though dystopian, these novels provided Beth comfort that no matter how difficult the world became she could face her fears and fight back against horrible obstacles. In the same vein, *We Were Liars* by E. Lockhart (2014) also formed Beth's self-concept especially regarding her mental health journey and ability to find self-compassion.

Most recently, Beth has expanded her reading within the YA genre exploring texts by authors of color. Texts like *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* (Alexie, 2007), *Monster* (Myers, 1999), and *All American Boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015) have brought Beth an awareness of issues she previously had only learned about in passing in her history and civics

education. Being able to read from diverse perspectives has proved important to Beth as she earnestly seeks to listen first and then, advocate from a space of responsibility. Whether the YA text is a realistic social issues novel or fantasy novel, Beth views reading as a way to open her eyes and imagine new possibilities. In regard to her personal transactional experience, Beth views the reading process as a cycle. She reflected that throughout her reading life YA texts have allowed her to read and explore a specific idea, trait, or belief and then make decisions for herself about whether or not to incorporate those ideas, traits, or beliefs into her own identity. Through this cycle with varying YA texts, Beth shared she has grown as a person and found a confidence and security in who she is that without YAL she might not have had. Overall, YAL remains a critical tool of her reading and identity growth as she continues into her young adulthood and career.

Maeve

Contextual & Identity Factors

Growing up in the "Bible belt" South, Maeve self-identifies as a white, atheist, queer young adult. Driven by empathy, Maeve shared that she possesses a "strict moral code" that she upholds. She values everyone's autonomy and ability to live into who they are and respects others' identities. She expressed that though she is atheist, she did attend a Unitarian Universalist church with her family which focused on the message that "love is love" and "be kind to one another" which remain close to her own set of rules for herself. These facets of Maeve's identity proved salient as the context within which she grew up in did not always value respect for others and even operated in intolerance which Maeve viewed as harmful. Therefore, she has tried to take the most positive aspects of her place-based beliefs and incorporate them into her

personality as empathy, compassion, and respect for all. Partnering with her in the midst of this identity growth and evolution was her identity as a YA reader.

History as a YA Reader

Lifelong and embedded into her personality, Maeve shared that reading was "the number one thing I learned how to do and exist as since elementary school." Therefore, for her, the moniker of reader in some ways summed up who she was. Maeve began her reading life with fascinations in magic and loved the idea of being in a different world, but as she grew her reading interests matured as well. She recalled this evolution into YA dystopian texts as so critical it became her "sole personality trait." Enthralled with the politics, *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) series proved to be a key text for Maeve.

From the introduction into dystopia, Maeve quickly moved from *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) to *Divergent* (Roth, 2011) only to find that she hated the end. However, despite the disappointing ending the systems found within these worlds helped her contemplate questions about why the "real" world functions the way it does. The emotional attachment and curiosity brought joy to Maeve in ways that texts her peers read like *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005) simply could not. Clear that she preferred the combination of magic and politics to popular vampire lore, Maeve delved into the *Eragon* (Paolini, 2003) series next and discovered deeper lessons of growing up, grief, and the need for empathy in difficult times. These texts according to Maeve truly assisted her in "helping me figure myself out."

Now in college, Maeve carries forth the lessons learned from the YA texts in her younger years towards more justice, diversity-oriented goals. Because of the limited representation of atheist and queer characters that made her feel seen, Maeve desires to find more voices and perspectives of the world to continue her growth. Therefore, she expressed that her current

reading interest are in elevating voices of color and marginalized groups. She desires to listen to their perspectives, gain a deeper awareness of their feelings, and develop understanding. Some recent key YA texts that have drawn her into this were *Raybearer* (Ifueko, 2020) and *Everything Sad Is Untrue* (Nayeri, 2020). These stories helped Maeve learn from new perspectives, but also connect to her own past and present experiences of family, identity, and the uncertainty humans face. Maeve described her reading transaction experience as a wandering path similar to exploring a bookstore with no organizational structure. She explained, "…you sort of pick what interests you and then look within and maybe you will figure something out." The metaphor of a wandering path proved important for Maeve as she views reading YA as a partner to grow with as she continues to evolve and discover more of who she is. Maeve confidently stated, "I'll definitely learn in YA books as a 70-year-old."

Lana

Contextual & Identity Factors

Self-identifying as a white, queer female, Lana possesses a deep value for the arts and considers herself a people person. Lana grew up and was raised within a Christian religious community but considers herself more of a humanitarian now explaining "…I try to help people and be good to people where I can and improve myself and the world around me as I go throughout my life." Educationally, Lana attended private school up until college and described this aspect of her life as offering "one type of person you're allowed to be." Therefore, the arts, literature, and theater provided Lana space to explore herself and others to discover how to break away from some of the more limiting aspects of her context. Through deep personal work, Lana continues to solidify her values, beliefs, and sense of self.

History as a YA Reader

Describing herself as an "avid reader," Lana recalled stories of actively reading picture books as young as the age of four. In her youth and adolescence, she spent her time at libraries and as she grew, she continued reading whatever she could get her hands on. As someone who has "always been a reader," Lana views her taste and interest in books, especially YAL as an aspect of her life which "evolved" with her. Starting with fantasy stories about "weird or unassuming" kids who save their worlds, Lana found escape and excitement and space to dream of being "this cool, magical wizard" in her otherwise "normal" life. Whether *Magic Tree House* (Osborne, 1992) or *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1998), Lana saw children's literature and YAL as "stepping stones" to follow as she matured.

One of the most important texts in Lana's history as a YA reader remains Madeline L'Engle's (1962) *A Wrinkle in Time*. As a text that she read early on in her life, returned to as a character in theater performance, and later circled back to when made into a film, *A Wrinkle in Time* (L'Engle, 1962) endures as a message to Lana about "accepting yourself." For her, this thematic message resonated as a queer, girl with insecurities and her own journey of self-discovery. Lana also noted the importance of *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) and *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1998) as companion, exploratory texts where characters aged as she did and went through questioning, journeys outside of their known roles and expectations, and figuring out their new paths. The importance of YA as a genre in her reading life and then the later experiences of "bringing [characters] to life" in theatrical productions drew Lana into furthering her exploration of the genre.

Most recently while in college, Lana noted the importance of queer YAL texts like *Quiver* (Watts, 2018) and *A Gentleman's Guide to Vice and Virtue* (Lee, 2017) for representation

and the way this matters deeply to her ability to explore the "trajectory of identity." The normalization and expansion of other options for how to be in the world provided through story continues to be valued and sought in Lana's life. She reflected that her progression over time as a reader from a child who read stories of people that "have a huge moral goal of saving the world" has shifted into a young adult buying and reading stories about "people that just go out into the world and do the best they can." When considering her reading transactions, Lana described it as "a cycle." Whether a novel assigned, recommended, or sought out, Lana reads, pauses for "time to digest everything," and then comes back to the text "to read into it deeper." This process for her offers multiple promptings of questions and answers across time, space, and contexts. Lana concluded that her life with YAL has been both "instigator" and "partner" throughout this cycle beginning with questions and continuing a "cycle that is never ending and always branching off in different places but comes back to it again."

Rose

Contextual & Identity Factors

Born and raised in the same place her whole life, Rose self-identifies as a white, Christian, female from the Southeast. Rose values hard work, learning, and her faith. Active in both a local church and campus ministry, Rose's belief in Jesus draws her towards valuing scripture, compassion, and integrity. She loves to serve others and believes that working to connect with people has pushed her to thrive in her rooted place-based context. Her desire to learn has driven her to pursue a degree in education and her love for stories helped narrow her focus in English Language Arts. In her spare time not only has reading YAL partnered with her family, friends, and faith as factors to shape her identity, Rose also noted that her abiding interest

in the YAL genre inspires her to write creatively in hopes to contribute to other young people and the literary world in general.

History as a YA Reader

When considering her reading history with YAL Rose started by sharing, "I was that kid that would choose to sit upside down in the chair and read for hours on end." Therefore, even though she has grown into a young adult, Rose considers the title of reader to be a deeply embedded trait of her personality and identity. Beginning with the worlds built by C.S. Lewis (1950-1956) in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Rose loved venturing into bizarre, unique, magical worlds within YA literature. Attributing this to her hyperactive imagination, Rose reflected that YAL series that followed characters as they grew also had salience to her developing reading journey whether it be *Nancy Drew* (Keene, 1930), or *The Series of Unfortunate Events* (Snicket,1999).

Not only did the character growth featured in YAL draw Rose deeper into the genre, but the ways in which YAL series explored friendship made Rose pay closer attention and assisted in her own friendship building. In middle school her reading of *The Series of Unfortunate Events* (Snicket, 1999) helped Rose connect the relationships in the novel with her real life and these social connections prompted an informal book club where Rose and others bonded over details of the novel series. Additionally important, *The Green Glasshouse* (Milford, 2014) proved impactful and emotionally resonant for Rose as a story chosen for her by her sister, but beloved for the ways it companioned her through a lonely period of her life. The salience of this novel extends to her life today as she attributes the inspiration to write from the complexity and details of that story as well as the way it allowed her to share her love of story and writing with others.

Progressing into high school and more recent years, Rose recalled *The Waking Forest* (Wees, 2019) as a critical text. Described as "unexpected," Rose found herself enveloped into the "cool, creepy, mysterious other world," but soon realized the impact the text had on her desires towards committed, long enduring relationships. She shared this novel made her realize, "I want to care about somebody in that way, and I want to be cared about in that way." This proved relevant to her at that point in her life when she was beginning to seek out romantic relationships and grow into that aspect of her identity. Leaving high school and entering into college, Rose has continued to read fantasy YAL although unlike her peers she is just now discovering texts like *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1998) and *Eragon* (Paolini, 2003); however, the world building, complex character and thematic development hold her attention as an aspiring creative YAL writer. Additionally in her pursuit of English education, texts like *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006), *Challenger Deep* (Shusterman, 2014), and *Long Way Down* (Reynolds, 2017) have proven impactful as she seeks to expand her reading outside of herself and consider how YAL functions in the classroom. Overall, Rose's passion and curiosity for YAL will continue to shape her reading life. She concluded, "I don't think I'll ever stop reading young adult literature. That's for sure."

Alexis

Contextual & Identity Factors

Alexis self-identified as a white, ciswoman, person of faith who grew up as an only child in the South. She conveyed that her values of kindness, trustworthiness, and pursuing love comes from both her lived experiences with friends and her spiritual background of Christianity. Alexis said, "I try at least to embody love like Jesus." These lifelong contextual factors also contribute to her value of nature and animals which led her to an interest in veterinary science. Ultimately,

Alexis holds non-judgement and kindness of everything "no matter if it is people or a mouse" as guiding principles to shape her identity and life.

History as a YA Reader

Identifying herself as a reader and lover of books remained a salient point for Alexis as she explained, "even though I definitely do not have the time, I would love to put my nose in a book right now." Alexis described her reading life as "sporadic" and based on "moods" where she read series or books back-to-back, but then would find herself taking a break from reading for a few months at a time. However, being a reader of YAL has always been a key feature of her overall life. With both parents working full-time, Alexis's grandmothers would take her to the local library where she discovered her first YA text *Paint the Wind* (Ryan, 2007). Alexis recalled this novel as key memory of surprising herself and everyone else in reading an advanced book at such a young age and at meeting a determined young female protagonist for the first time.

Building on this love of reading, Alexis then picked up popular YA texts such as *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1998) and *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008). From these texts, Alexis discovered escapism into fantasy worlds as a way to enjoy the lives of others not necessarily remove herself from her own "very good life." After "falling in love with those books," Alexis then read *Percy Jackson* (Riordan, 2005) and *Divergent* (Roth, 2011). All along the way discovering new heroines that deeply engaged her subconscious sense of an independent, smart, and capable self. From these fantasy and dystopian texts, Alexis began to grow intellectually and attributes the continued reading of YAL during the pandemic in her raising her ACT score from a 26 to 36 in reading.

Based on the enjoyment and growth she experienced, Alexis continued to read YA in college and shared several texts that impacted her during her undergraduate studies. Jas

Hammond's (2022) *We Deserve Monuments* proved meaningful based on the timing during her freshman year and the decisions she had to make about moving away from home. Additionally, during this time Alexis discovered other heroines like Juliet and Inej from Tahereh Mafi's (2011) *Shatter Me* and Leigh Bardugo's (2015) *Six of Crows.* Finally, Alexis noted the importance of not only texts that were relatable or within her comfort genre of fantasy or dystopia, but also texts that contained social issues and raised her awareness of others' lives like Tiffany D. Jackson's (2022) *The Weight of Blood* and Jen Ferguson's (2022) *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*. All of these texts ultimately combined for Alexis to solidify her commitment to read YAL widely and diversely explaining that "I realized 99% of the time if I read a book, I'm going to like it." Alexis concluded that YAL acts during her transactions as a metaphorical "older sibling" since she grew up as an only child. For her, characters within the books became role models "like how a younger sister would try to be like her big sister." Overall, she shared that though she will always return to her "comfort" genres within YAL, she also will continue to seek out new opportunities to explore her reading life deeper and confidently stated, "I won't shy away from books that I think I won't like…I want to expand my reading palette."

Skye

Contextual & Identity Factors

Skye self-identified as a non-binary, neurodivergent, white, panromantic/pansexual, lifelong learner who deemed themselves a nerd. They explained their personality as empathic, open, and honest. Though "Ex-Christian religious," Skye shared they have an interest in exploring religion, but that explorer of truth would be a more apt moniker. Thinking in shades of gray, Skye shared some key guiding principles or beliefs "Everyone deserves kindness. Everyone deserves love. Everyone deserves a chance…and one I've learned: Everyone is equal, but society

treats them as not…basically do no harm." From these "tenets" Skye orients their world and has entered into the field of education for their undergraduate studies. Overall, their identity as a reader has existed as a key aspect of their life and contributed to their other integrated facets of who they are.

History as a YA Reader

Beginning their reading life in reading intervention, Skye had a lack of interest in many offered texts from the State tutors but worked alongside their "hyperfixations" to identify YAL novels that had been adapted for television. Therefore, early in their reading life series like *Vampire Diaries* (Smith, 1991) introduced them into the YAL space and more specifically the fantasy and supernatural genre. Following in the steps of *Vampire Diaries* (Smith, 1991), the school librarian worked with Skye to find the *Vampire Academy* (Mead, 2007) series. They flew through each series provided to them having a book out as soon as work in class or homework was completed. James Patterson's (2005) *Maximum Ride* series and Stephanie Meyer's (2005) *Twilight* series soon became important texts for Skye to further explore their new passion for supernatural stories as well as religious and gender perspectives.

Twilight (Meyer, 2005) and *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) proved to be resonant and enduring texts for Skye as they continued in their reading journey because of the fandom involved. Not only were the characters critical to their own internal sense of identity exploration, but they also provided opportunities to connect with their peers. Skye shared, "I don't know of a single person in my middle school that did not have a braid at some point." They enjoyed the community reading brought, and also discovered a new pathway to exploring the extension of YAL worlds in fanfiction. As they continued to mature and age alongside the *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005) series releases, Skye found *Breaking Dawn* (Meyer, 2008) as "the weirdest of those

books" but the "male perspective was really important" for Skye as they continued to explore themselves.

Moving from middle and high school into college, Skye began to seek out more diverse texts, specifically queer novels. Key in this branching out was Kacen Callender's (2020) *Felix Ever After*. Skye explained this text to be the first book they saw a true personal mirror connection with the character. Additional texts that Skye found meaningful along the way were Tracy Deonn's (2020) *Legendborn* and George Johnson's (2020) *All Boys Aren't Blue.* They continue to pursue growth overall in their reading life. When describing their personal transactions and overall development of reading, they used the metaphor of a "spider's web" explaining, "you start in the center, and you work your way out." Therefore, for Skye they view reading both in process and in progression as interconnected and always building a larger system of learning. Committed to continuing their journey with YAL, Skye shared, "I don't read, I eat books!" Overall, pointing to the consistent and continued way they view YAL texts as an integrated tool for their becoming.

Veronica

Contextual & Identity Factors

Born and raised in the South, Veronica self-identified as a white, cishet woman, person of faith marked by her context in low-socioeconomic Appalachia. She shared that her empathic, kind heartedness exemplified her emotional personality, and her role as an older sibling mattered deeply in her desire to care for others both within her family and around her community. As a daughter of a person struggling with addiction, Veronica reflected multiple times her determination to care for herself and others to prevent "becoming another statistic." Ultimately guided by principles of love and respect, Veronica explained the value she possesses for where

she is from, who she is from, and how vital it remains to her to ignore stereotypes and be proud of herself and her community.

History as a YA Reader

Sharing that "once I start reading, it's hard for me to stop," Veronica's reading history with YAL started early with the support of her school librarian and Grandmother's support. She considers herself a "series" or "chronological" reader who grew up surrounded by mysteries and forensic tales. Her first key series in elementary was *Geronimo Stilton* (Stilton, 2000) whereas she described, "something would go missing, and they'd have to find them." This mystery solving would extend to her interest leading into middle school of investigating historical tales. Shifting from mystery to non-fiction YAL adaptations, Veronica continued to foster her curiosity through reading and partnering with her teachers, librarians, and Grandmother to find new YAL.

Moving into her adolescence, Veronica encountered YAL dystopia for the first time in *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) as a paired reading for her class's exploration of *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury, 1953). Though dystopia did not endure as a favorite genre, she recalled this exposure to YAL as "the perspective I had been looking for." Veronica then read a YAL classic Cisernos's (1989) *The House on Mango Street.* In this novel, Veronica saw for the first time an adolescent girl's perspective and though they contextually differed, she shared that the character's experiences felt similar to her own. These two novels were some of the limited exposure Veronica had to YAL that she craved and therefore, began to decrease reading as her high school years progressed with classical text offerings.

Once in college, Veronica decided to pursue developing her readerly identity again with a young adult course. She reflected that the YAL course met her in this new season of life and reminded her of her love for reading, especially the first novel *In the Wild Light* (Zentner, 2021).

This novel resonated for Veronica, and she immediately found the young adult voice she had longed for in her reading life. Several other texts proved critical in growing her motivation to continue to read whether based on experiential connections or alignment of her favorite genre. Renee Watson's (2021) *Love is a Revolution*, Ruta Sepetys's (2022) *I Must Betray You*, and Holly Jackson's (2019) *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* held Veronica's attention and continue to be novels she thinks about in regard to growing her identity as a reader and person. When considering her personal concept of her reading transactions with YAL, Veronica aptly to her personality and future career interest in criminal forensic science used the metaphor of a "murder board where you have all the strings attaching." She explained that in reading she seeks new pathways and interests, but she always connects them back to herself and other books she has read. Overall, Veronica shared that YAL has and will continue to be a space to explore her identity and expand her horizons.

Course Descriptions and Contextual Factors

Each of the ten participants described in depth above participated in one of three YAL courses I had the opportunity to co-teach during the 2022-2023 school year. Below I provide a course description of all three courses and their orientations and will describe in the next section more detail the specific procedures for co-creation of text selection and data collection of any course artifacts that were included in my data analysis. Two courses took place in the fall semester of 2022 and one course took place in the spring of 2023. All recruitment occurred after the conclusion of the school year during the summer of 2023.

Course 1

The first YAL course was a 3-credit hour course with students ranging from freshman to senior and graduate level. Course 1 differed slightly in orientation due to the inclusion of both

education majors seeking to learn how to use YAL in their future classrooms and a wide array of other majors stemming across the University (e.g., business, kinesiology, environmental science etc.). Therefore, the course served two purposes: 1) providing an historical overview of YAL as a field and 2) exploring a variety of YAL novels and their pedagogical potentials. Within this course, students had a mixture of teacher selected texts and student choice texts. During the course, students were regularly asked to not only connect their readings to the course objectives of the development of YAL and its use in an educational setting, but also explored their own responses to each novel read. Students discussed their preferences, reactions, reflections, and the overall impact the novel provided to them as readers. Thus, Course 1 had a stronger emphasis on YAL within educational settings and as an instructional tool than Course 2 and 3.

Course 2

The second YAL course was a 1-credit hour First Year Studies course that served as an introductory survey of current YAL novels and a way for freshman students to form community with their peers and University faculty. Therefore, the student makeup of this course was limited to freshman level students. Oriented towards RRT, this course functioned as a weekly book club for students to read and discuss their responses and reflections on the novels. The first three novels of the semester were teacher selected, and then the remainder of the semester centered around student preferred genres and student selected texts. Therefore, this course placed a strong emphasis on enjoyment, discussion, and personal response to reading YAL.

Course 3

The final YAL course had similar course design to Course 2 but was a 3-credit hour course that allowed for more novels to be explored in more depth. The course makeup again ranged from freshman to senior level students across multiple majors. RRT oriented the course

design and class discussions; students explored their own involvement with each novel and how the novel interacted with their various identities. Each novel within the course was student selected with the first week being a voted text between two instructor suggestions. The following weeks of the semester were split between individual student selections for everyone to read and genre-based choices ultimately decided by student vote. Though this course provided some scholarly readings, the primary discussion and class assignments were opportunities for students to share their reactions and reflections on each reading and its impact or lack thereof to their personal identity growth as a reader and human being. Thus, this course placed emphasis on enjoyment, personal response, and reflection towards how the act of reading shapes individual identity.

In order to provide participant protection, I cannot disclose the specific materials (novels) read in each course; however, I have provided a table (see appendix A) of Key Texts across participant data that summarizes all novels discussed in depth within participant interviews as having in participant words “critical” or “impactful” relevance. Some of the texts read in each course are within these titles. It is important to note however the intentionality and process of co-creation in each of these courses between the teacher/co-teacher and the students. In all courses, the instructors utilized their engagement with YAL research, award lists, and up-to date personal readings in the YA genre as a basis for gathering texts to co-create the text selections. In Course 1 the overview of the YA field through history leaned on specific notable texts highlighted from the 1970s to 2023. Within Course 1, students co-created their curriculum through selecting between 2-3 choice texts each week from the historically relevant timeline determined by instructors. Courses 2 and 3 that were shaped around RRT followed a similar pathway utilizing teacher knowledge of the field of YAL but brought in more student voice through preliminary

reader history questionnaires. Course 2 began with 3 teacher/co-teacher selections based on the Printz Award, National Book Award, and one regionally specific Walden Award winner. From this base, reader history questionnaires provided student selected genres to explore for the rest of the course. In each of the genre focused weeks, students co-created their text selections by choosing between 3 different YA novels. Finally, Course 3 followed the most student co-created curriculum with the first week of the course following a vote between two teacher/co-teacher selections. After this first week, each student in the course selected a YA novel to read and lead discussion. Then, reader history questionnaires were utilized to highlight specific genres and students selected between 3 different YA novels each week. Each course in its own structure tried to incorporate both field related, high-quality selections as well as student selected novels of interest. To further contextual and methodological procedure knowledge, the following section will provide a more in-depth explanation of course reflection prompts and procedures that were included as part of data collected in this study.

Data Collection, Sources, and Analysis

Primary data collection occurred through methods of gathering student course artifacts in the form of reader response discussion boards, end of course reflective essays, and individual semi-structured qualitative interviews as the focus of this case study inquiry. These artifacts vary based on the course orientation; however, all three courses asked students to respond during and post reading to prompts that will be outlined below for each course. Also, I utilized the same interview protocol (see Appendix C) for each semi-structured interview with variance in questions based on the participant reflections. I've provided a table (See Table 1.2 in Appendix A) to demonstrate the alignment of the multiple data sources and research questions in the Appendix.

Course Artifacts & Procedures

As the previous section provided the course context descriptions and orientations, this section overviews the specific breakdown of artifact procedures for each course including prompt questions for reader response discussion boards and end of course reflections for courses 2 and 3. Each course had some grounding in RRT as each course aimed to provide opportunities for students to consider their personal histories with YAL up to the course time, reflection and discussion throughout the course that explored varying reactions and responses to the texts read, and finally, considerations on how the class and current social contexts influence their readings (Rosenblatt, 1994). Course 1 and course 3 followed the 3-credit hour pacing of one novel per weekly course; Course 2 followed a bi-weekly pacing of one novel due to the 1-credit hour schedule. Novels included in each course are not specifically outlined; however, a key text table is provided in the appendix (See Table 1.1 in Appendix A).

Course 1

As the course with the least emphasis on RRT, the course artifacts included in the data collection for the participants in this study were only their during course reader response discussion boards. The following outlines the weekly discussion prompt choices for each participant in Course 1.

- Option 1: Post 1-2 discussion questions or important quotations from the YA novel/supplemental reading(s) that you would like to discuss. We will use these responses to guide our in-class discussion.
- Option 2: Answer one or more of the following questions in your post:
  - How is this novel YA? What makes it YA?
  - Does anything in the novel resonate with your experience(s) as an adolescent?

Explain/say more.

o What does this book make you think about/want to do/change/act on, if anything?

- Option 3: Answer one question from the racialized reader response framework in relation to the YA novel you read (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019).
- Option 4: A creative response with a short explanation/description.

Course 2

Course 2 had its foundations in RRT, and participants reader response discussion boards occurred bi-weekly. The following prompt outlines the prompts for both the first week of reading and the second concluding week of reading.

Week 1 Prompt: Please choose one of the following ways to respond to your reading:

- **Option 1:** Questions & Quotes for Discussion–please share 1-2 questions or one quote from your reading that drew your attention, communicated a theme, or felt meaningful to you personally. Explain the meaning and importance to you as a reader.
- **Option 2:** Reader Response–please discuss how this book is acting on you as a reader–what do you feel, think, question as you read?
- **Option 3:** Character or Plot Connection–As you read, consider specific characters, or plot situations they face, do you relate to them or have a strong connection? How/Why?
- **Option 4:** Creative Expression– Communicate your interaction with the text through your own creativity (e.g., poem, artwork, song lyrics, etc.) with a short explanation/description.

Week 2 Prompt: Please use the following options to respond to your reading. Be sure to answer the end of book questions in addition to one of the other options.

- **Option 1:** Questions & Quotes for Discussion–please share 1-2 questions or one quote from your reading that drew your attention, communicated a theme, or felt meaningful to you personally. Explain the meaning and importance to you as a reader.
- **Option 2:** Reader Response–please discuss how this book is acting on you as a reader–what do you feel, think, question as you read?
- **Option 3:** Character or Plot Connection–As you read, consider specific characters, or plot situations they face, do you relate to them or have a strong connection? How/Why?
- **Option 4:** Creative Expression– Communicate your interaction with the text through your own creativity (e.g., poem, artwork, song lyrics, etc.) with a short explanation/description.

End of Text Questions:

- What are your final reactions to this novel? Are they the same or different from your initial reactions to this novel? If your feelings/thoughts/questions changed, explain why.
- What (if anything) have you learned, questioned, reframed, enacted after reading this novel? Has your understanding of yourself, your connection to others, or the beliefs/values you have changed/shifted at all? *How*?
- Do you think these experiences with this story will form your future thinking/acting/perspective? Why or why not?

In addition to weekly reader response discussion boards, participants from this course also completed a whole course reflection at the end of semester which was included within the data collected. The following questions outline the prompts for reflections:

1. What are your overall feelings/takeaways about the novels you read? Overall, do you feel like reading a certain book/combinations of books changed you in any ways or will it stay with you as a formative experience? How/Why/Why not? Has this process of reading YAL made you see the act of reading as a formative part of your emotional, intellectual, spiritual/moral life (identity)? How/Why/Why not? You may discuss any number of the novels in detail or briefly touch on them all. Explain your feelings in about 2-4 paragraphs.

2. At the beginning of the semester, you were asked why you enrolled in YA Book Club, and now we want to know how your experience was! In 2-4 paragraphs, please answer the following questions:

a. Which novel was your favorite? Which was your least favorite? If you could rank the 6 novels, how would you? Explain why.

b. What, if anything, did you enjoy most about YA Book Club (class discussion, the readings, the relationships, etc.)?

c. What do you think, if anything, you learned in this class?

Course 3

Course 3 had its grounding and orientation in RRT and both course reader response discussion boards and end of course reflections were collected and included in the data for this study. The following questions guided weekly novel reader response discussion boards:

Please use one of the following options to respond to your reading this week.

- **Option 1:** Questions & Quotes for Discussion–please share 1-2 questions or 1-3 quotes from your reading that drew your attention, communicated a theme, or felt meaningful to you personally. Explain the meaning and importance to you as a reader.
- **Option 2:** Reader Response–please discuss how this book is acting on you as a reader– How did this reading feel for you, what (if anything) did it shift for you, and how do you see the world differently (if at all)? How did you notice your responses changing/staying the same throughout the novel? If your feelings, thoughts, or questions changed by the ending, explain why.
- **Option 3:** Character or Plot Connection–As you read, consider specific characters, or plot situations they face, do you relate to them or have a strong connection? How/Why?
- **Option 4:** Creative Expression– Communicate your interaction with the text through your own creativity (e.g., poem, artwork, song lyrics, etc.) with a short explanation/description–as a prompt to get your brainstorming started, think what did this make me want to create or express?

Please answer both of the following End of Text Responses:

- What (if anything) have you learned, questioned, reframed, enacted after reading this novel? Has your understanding of yourself, your connection to others, or the beliefs/values you have changed/shifted at all? *How*?
- Do you think these experiences with this story will form your future thinking/acting/perspective? Why or why not?

Again, in addition to data collected from weekly reader response discussion boards, participant end of course reflections on their reading were included from Course 3. The end of course reflection used the following questions to guide participant responses:

> Part 1: What are your overall feelings/takeaways about the novels you read this semester? Overall, do you feel like reading these books changed you in any ways or will any specific texts stay with you as a formative experience? How/Why? Has this process of reading YAL made you see the act of reading as a formative part of your emotional, intellectual, spiritual/moral life, or overall identity)? How/Why? You may discuss a limited number of the novels in detail or briefly touch on them all. Explain your feelings in about 2-4 paragraphs. *If these questions in the prompt above seem inaccessible, here are some alternative ways to think about this:
>
> What are you taking away?
>
> How would you describe the experience of reading your chosen books from the class?
>
> When you think back on these books, what feelings will you have?
>
> What do these books make you want to do?
>
> What do these books make you want to find out?
>
> *Fill in the blank and then write . . .*
>
> While I read this book (insert title), I felt _____, then _____, and then _____.

At the end of this book (insert title), I believe _____ because _____

Part 2: At the beginning of the semester, I asked you why you enrolled in YAL, and now I want to know how your experience was! In 2-4 paragraphs, please answer the following questions:

1. Which novel was your favorite? Which was your least favorite? If you could rank the novels, how would you? Explain why.
2. What, if anything, did you enjoy most about the YAL course (class discussion, the readings, the relationships, etc.)?
3. What do you think, if anything, you learned in this class?

Though slightly different depending on course context and course credit hour expectations, each course provided opportunity for participants to respond and reflect on their readings and their personal transactions with texts. Therefore, each response and reflection proved important data to collect as part of exploring and answering the research questions pertaining to this study.

Open Ended Qualitative Interview

In addition to course artifacts, participants across the 3 YAL courses were recruited via email using the recruitment flyer (see Appendix C) at the conclusion of the 2022-2023 school year. Participants were invited to participate in a 60–90-minute open ended qualitative interview via Zoom to delve into focused, open-ended questions (Roulston, 2013) surrounding their individual reading experiences with YAL and their views on how their reading affects them emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, and the ways this may have provoked embodied action in their lives. Interviews followed a semi-structured, romantic interview style (Roulston, 2010,

2013). Roulston's (2010) description of romantic style best suited these interviews because contextually the researcher-interviewer, "... [were] open about his/her interests in the research topic, and readily express this within the interview setting when called upon the interviewee" (p. 217). I also utilized this interview approach because the relationship between the researcher and the participants after a semester together was one in which "genuine rapport and trust are established" (Roulston, 2010, p. 217). In order to accommodate privacy and participant preference, interviews were conducted via the zoom platform. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed first automatically from zoom's platform and then edited for verbatim participant language by the researcher before data analysis.

Within this interview process though I used a prepared general interview guide (see Appendix C for interview protocol), I also planned for a semi-structured format in order to consider that open-ended interviewing may require me to "remain open to re-forming and adding to questions throughout the research process" (Glesne, 2016, p.96). Therefore, though my intended style accounted for these factors, I also must acknowledge as Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2020) noted,

> during an open-ended interview, some analysis and interpretation occur along the way. The person describing [their] 'life world' may discover new relationships and patterns during the interview. The researcher who occasionally summarizes or reflects what has been heard is, in fact, condensing and interpreting the flow of meaning. Data are not being collected but rather co-authored (p. 31).

Therefore, this required me to both listen and collect data as well as participate in the subjective process of making meaning from participants' responses and guiding them towards voicing their opinions, feelings, and beliefs about their experiences. Additional researcher positionality and

participant relationship information is addressed in further detail in the final sections of this chapter.

Data Analysis

Data analysis steps were iterative and driven by all three research questions outlined previously in this chapter. I used an iterative approach (first and second round coding, memoing, etc.) as this process subjected data to "a critically reflective process of preliminary data analysis to determine 'what is going on' in order to build up a picture of the data and going back to the field to find out more" (Grbich, 2013, p.17). Because I had multiple data sources, using an iterative process allowed me to read through student artifacts as a preliminary stage which informed additional questions for the open-ended qualitative interview. This allowed for initial hypotheses based on the participants artifacts that were addressed and checked for clarity of meaning during the interview. In completing this iterative process, I recognized that, "both [myself] and those whom [I] research are constructing meaning together, and that [I] will attempt to minimize both [my] impact on the setting and possible over-interpretation of the situation, in favor of highlighting the views of those researched" (Grbich, 2013, p.17).

From these initial data collection and analysis cycles, I proceeded with an initial coding cycle described by Saldaña (2013), a process of "breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences" (p. 100). I used in vivo coding (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2013) as the preliminary coding cycle to capture as much of participant language as possible to guide the research findings. Then, I proceeded to re-read the data multiple times noticing patterns across the participant data which formed open codes (Saldaña, 2013). By utilizing multiple rounds of coding, I aimed to "remain open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by [my] reading

of the data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). Once the iterative coding process was complete, I used the patterns to combine codes into thematic categories presented in the findings. See Appendix A Tables 1.3 and 1.4 for examples of in vivo coding, open coding, and how these codes were combined into themes.

First and Second Round Coding

In vivo coding, deemed as "appropriate…for beginning qualitative researchers" (Miles et al., 2020), served as the initial coding method employed. Saldaña (2013) defines in vivo coding as referring to "a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record" (p. 91). Also labeled "literal coding" or "verbatim coding" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 91), in vivo coding focuses on prioritizing and honoring the participant's voice. Since I sought to answer research questions based on reader experiences this type of coding enhanced the analysis by maintaining the participants' own explanations of their experiences. In vivo codes also "can provide a crucial check on whether [the researcher has] grasped what is significant to the participant and may help crystallize and condense meanings" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). Therefore, when reading through participant artifacts and interviews I processed line by line phrasing and used direct quotes as the initial code. For example, in Elena's interview when discussing how she saw her reading habits connected to her identity or personality codes were created using her phrasing of "helped me" "be" "a more creative person." Similarly, artifacts were coded in this same manner; therefore, when Elena wrote about connecting to a character, in vivo codes emerged from phrases like "I related to Lily and Kathleen" "that really struck a chord with me." Thus, using this type of initial coding assisted me in trying to avoid overinterpretation and center the participants' meanings. This form of data analysis also aligned my practice as a researcher with my epistemological, ethical, and positional beliefs.

After initial cycles of in vivo coding, I additionally used open coding (Saldaña, 2013). Open codes "provide the researcher with analytic leads for further exploration and 'to see the direction in which to take [this] study' (Glaser, 1978, p. 56)." (Saldaña, 2013, p. 101). Since my study focused on experiential knowledge produced by the participant through their own reading responses, attention to patterns within the participant words proved valuable. During this process, I used the participants' in vivo codes to look for patterns that held similar meaning analytic value. Following the process of open coding "proposed codes during this cycle are tentative and provisional. Some codes may be reworded as analysis progresses." (Saldaña, 2013, p. 101). Therefore, I used the in vivo codes to create topical open codes and reworded the participants' language into my own categorical language. For example, Elena's in vivo codes of "I related to Lily and Kathleen" "that really struck a chord with me" collapsed into an open code of "transaction-character connection." Thus, in this stage of coding I tried to maintain the heart of the participant meaning but shifted towards a more analytical category for further thematic analysis to emerge within the process. I then used the open codes to refine, combine, and eliminate existing codes to create themes within the three sections of the findings. For example, all open codes across participant data that were coded as "transaction-character connection" later became grouped into the thematic finding for how readers transact with YAL through "connecting with characters."

The organization of first and second round coding in this order allowed for themes to emerge from participant data and guide the findings of the study. Finally, in addition to thematic findings to answer research questions, I also added a fourth section in my findings to demonstrate clearly how these themes combine in participant profiles for overall identity influence. Even though my thematic findings were true across all participants, I selected three

participants out of the ten to highlight the interconnected nature of transactions, self-described identity influences and roles YAL served for participants. Elena, Malaya, and Alexis were selected as exemplars to illustrate three different experiences of how transacting with YAL involves identity work. Because I was interested in analyzing my participants' words, experiences, and their connected meanings for their identities connected to their reading of YAL, these forms of data analysis were productive and meaningful to this instrumental case study. To further validate the identification of these patterns across codes and subsequent themes, I conducted member checking in which participants were given the opportunity to review the findings to determine if I had accurately conveyed their responses and interpreted meanings (Birt et al., 2016).

Data Quality Considerations

As noted by several qualitative scholars, determining quality or validity markers in qualitative research found in quantitative research traditions typically seems incompatible and overall has lacked consensus in defining said markers (Cain et al., 2022; Kvale, 1995; Lather, 1993). However, as outlined by Cain, Williams, and Bradshaw (2022), when quality indicators are "engaged and critically examined" they can provide a "flexible framework of quality" (p.4). So, I acknowledge that the quality indicators I've chosen are marked by my own ontological, epistemological, and methodological beliefs.

Within this study, I chose to engage the quality indicators considerations of authenticity, centering ethical considerations, credibility, critical subjectivity, member checking, reciprocity, and worthy topic (Cain et al., 2022; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lather, 1986; Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2020). To begin the indicators of authenticity and worthy topic are inextricably linked as I designed this study to be situated within the literature of my field–YAL–

but I seek to "consider new perspectives and applications of established knowledge in order to add to the field" (Cain et al., 2022, p. 31). By choosing to research readers' experiences with YAL through design based on their choice and agency incorporated, I sought to move the field forward in considering participant (reader) voice and how this research can benefit them in the process. Thus, by engaging a worthy topic, I incorporated authenticity through study design and process that aligns fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, and hopefully, educative, and catalytic authenticity (Cain et al., 2022).

Similar to authenticity and worthy topic, the quality indicators of credibility, member checking, and reciprocity are tied together within my research. To provide credibility, I used multiple forms of data centered in the participants' voice and checked against participants' own experiences of the process. Member checking of the fully written findings and their specified sections allowed for feedback from my participants about their view of the data findings and interpretations as valid as well as provided reciprocity or mutually beneficial sharing of power and benefit (Cain et al., 2022). Additionally, throughout the research process I formed relationships with my participants that align with the larger sense of reciprocity: mutual sharing, trust, and caring bonds. The core of my research centers around participant (including my own) emotions and experiential knowledges disclosed vulnerably through sharing space in the classroom and interview setting. Through this vulnerability woven into both course/study design as well as romantic interviewing (Roulston, 2010), I sought for my study to have reciprocity as a quality marker.

Finally, in order to incorporate my own ethical, reflexive, and positional situatedness within this study I used critical subjectivity and centering ethical considerations as quality markers. By thoughtfully and reflexively engaging with my own beliefs prior to and throughout

my study, I incorporated critical subjectivity into the design, carrying out of the research, and dissemination process of my study. As provided in previous sections, I've asked myself the questions of what my beliefs about knowledge, evidence, analysis, and lived experiences did to create subjectivity in my practice. I have disclosed these considerations within this chapter "so that readers can understand [my] process and how [I] approached the study" (Cain et al., 2022, p.11). This critical subjectivity also involved the centering of ethical considerations as I sought to allow for my research to not just meet basic IRB standards, but also through sharing my ethical decision-making process throughout the study to provide transparency. As noted, many of these indicators intersect and rely upon one another to provide rich, rigorous data quality. My goal for each of these factors to be incorporated into my research in order to achieve a thorough study that acknowledges the complexities and entanglements created by my design, decision making throughout, and publication of findings.

Chapter 3 Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to introduce the methodology of instrumental case study used in this dissertation as well as the data analysis procedures used to answer the research questions guiding the study. Instrumental case study design was utilized to explore both the specific and the broad themes across data collected to determine how YAL readers transact with YAL texts and their subsequent connections to how these texts influence or shape their identity. Both course artifacts and qualitative interview data was gathered from 10 self-identified YAL readers which have been described in depth. All data went through an iterative data analysis process of in vivo coding, open coding, and thematic analysis to answer each of the three research questions. Researcher positionality, ethical, and reflexive considerations were provided

to make clear any subjectivities to hold in consideration. Findings in the following chapter were determined through these methods and reflexive practices.

Chapter 4: Findings

This study was conducted to explore the experiences of self-identified YAL readers to understand how reading YAL influences holistic identity formation over the course of readers' lives. Specifically, the research questions guiding this study are as follows:

- What types of transactions with YA texts have occurred with self-identified YA readers? Why have these transactions proved meaningful for the reader?
- In what ways does reading YAL texts contribute to the identity making of self-identified YA readers?
- What role(s) do reading YA texts play in the identity development of self-identified YA readers over time?

As chapter three outlined, a semi-structured romantic style interview (Roulston, 2010) was conducted with each of the ten participants. These individual interviews provided space for naturally unfolding conversations to take place while researcher and participant co-constructed narratives about the participant's reading life over time; specifically addressing aspects of the reader's history (past), current reading habits (present), and potential roles for YAL in the continued process of reading, living, and acting in the world (future). From interview data in addition to reader response and reflection data from participant coursework, the researcher followed an intentional coding process (Saldaña, 2013) which revealed key thematic findings for each of the three research questions.

This chapter shares the findings in four sections. The first section outlines participants' descriptions of five distinct types of transactions they enacted during their reading processes over the course of their reading lives. Participants' explanations of *connecting to characters, navigating emotions, learning about others and the self, affirming the self,* and *transporting into*

situations and experiencing new stories demonstrate YAL reading transactions as distinct building blocks of meaningful understandings of themselves and their worlds. In the second section of this chapter, findings centered on the contributions reading YAL has had and continues to have on participants' identity formations are shared. Contributions range from *reflecting to deepen holistic personal growth, strengthening perspective taking and empathic skills, seeing and hearing the self, expressing one's voice and stepping into one's power, to engaging the world and building community* through reading YAL. The third section of findings reports on the diverse roles YAL has played –and continues to play–in participants' identity development over time. The roles reveal identity development takes place in both the individual transactional experience as well as the contextual, social act of sharing one's reading life with others. Finally, the fourth section of findings offers three participant profiles to demonstrate how the combination of transactions, contributions, and roles synthesize into one reader's life and identity journey.

Section 1: Transactions & Their Meanings to Readers

Through analyses of each of the participant's reading responses to the YAL coursework and reflective answers during their individual interviews, consistent themes emerged to explain distinct types of transactions that occurred in the process of reading YAL throughout the participants' lives. As reviewed in chapter two, Louise Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional theory of reading defined transactions as the "lived through intercourse" (p. 14) readers have with texts during the reading process. Rosenblatt (1994) explained transactions take place relationally between the reader and text where, "each component of the reading process functions by virtue of the presence of the other" (p. 14). Therefore, within this study readers' experiences with texts (relationship, momentary feelings, images, metaphors, and continuing meaning created) are

referred to as transactions. This section overviews each type of transaction and the ways YA readers engage with YAL stories over time and within different contexts.

Connecting to Characters

In their reading responses to YAL and the stories they shared about themselves as YA readers, all ten research participants described *connecting to characters* during their transactions with YAL texts. While these connections differ, one key aspect that participants discussed was the way YAL stories offer readers relevance. Specifically, participants noted the connections formed with YAL characters that had shared age, identities (gender, race, religious affiliation etc.), conflicts, and life experiences. In these connections with characters, participants describe how specific characters meet readers at specific ages and moments of their reading lives. For example, Elena reflected in her interview:

> I have kind of noticed like a pattern, from when I was younger versus when I was older, I always kind of gravitate towards books where the characters are around my age…So, I think I think like, not always, but I do think I kind of gravitate towards characters that are around my age because I feel like I connect with them more and I feel like I can kind of like see myself a little bit in the story more.

These transactional experiences of being the same age as the characters for Elena proved meaningful as she built relationships with the characters and grew alongside them. Elena shared the influence of seeking characters the same age to connect her own story with the characters' stories as formative because it created a pattern of her overall reading life with YAL. Alexis also noted that pattern of being the same age as specific characters; most notably for her the experience of being the same age as Anna Beth while reading *Percy Jackson* (Riordan, 2005) which provided her an opportunity to grow into her intelligence as she read about smart and

tough Anna Beth. Similarly, Veronica and Beth shared in their interviews that connecting to the characters were meaningful experiences because of the shared journey of becoming. Specifically, Veronica stated, “I feel like I was kind of growing with them in the stories. It was like they were experiencing themselves for the first time and figuring out what they were doing with their lives for the first time, and I was doing the same thing…” Beth also observed:

> I could feel like myself growing up with the characters, even if our situations weren't the same at all, I could just like connect with them, because even if how they were growing up was different. They were still learning like how to grow up, and I could… I could still connect to that, regardless of like how either of us was going through that. It was just kind of like, we're both on the same journey.

Through these reflections on journeying with the characters, Veronica and Beth demonstrated that transacting with YAL stories and characters growing into themselves mattered as they met these characters in time with their own process of self-discovery. Lana shared the same observation of attachment to the characters experiencing similar life stages or conflicts but mentioned these as phases or time periods of her reading life. She stated, “I could read books, where like the characters were also doing that, and I would attach to those books for a period of time…” Connecting to characters this way provided her opportunity to partner with a fictional person as she grew into herself during those specific time periods.

These participants’ experiences with following a character’s journey and relating over time not only occurred throughout their interview reflections, but also presented in their course responses. Alexis noted a simple but clear connection to strong female characters; she shared,

> Katsa's perpetual strength and her growth within herself throughout the novel reminded me of a lot of the strong women that I know, including myself. Women go through so much, but we find ways to survive, and somehow come out even stronger.

Alexis's connection to Katsa's progression and persistent strength throughout the story of *Graceling* (Cashore, 2008) mattered because of her own lived experience and observation of solidarity and witness of the strength of women over time Additionally, Elena while writing about her reading of *Graceling* (Cashore, 2008) stated:

> Katsa learns that she has misunderstood what her grace was, and she continues to discover more about herself and figure out her own goals that she chose. I feel that I can relate this to myself because right now I am at the point in my degree where I need to start figuring out what I want to do after graduation.

During her reading process, Elena continues to connect to characters and relate their experiences and stages of self-discovery to her own. This finding demonstrates that Elena has this transactional pattern across time and texts. Like Elena, Lana shared specific connections to the character of Xiomara in *The Poet X* (Acevedo, 2018):

> I related to spending Sunday after Sunday being told that I was inherently too loud or too tempting. Xiomara's experience of being told to read Proverbs 31 (the description for a godly woman) more closely is one that is shared by many girls who grow up in the church. The part where she was made to kneel before Mary and later confess to her priest really hit home for me. It reminded me of my experience coming out to people I trusted in the Church. Instead of being met with love, I was immediately told that I needed to spend more time at church and pray. Like Xiomara, I began to question what I had always been told. Jesus told us to love everyone, so how is who I love so sinful? I

> understand how Xiomara felt when her parents made her continue to go to church even though she no longer felt connected to it.

These connections to Xiomara for Lana were specific to timings and events in her own life showing how YAL texts meaningfully bond characters to their readers. Not only did Elena and Lana show the finding of character connection across interview and reading responses, but Beth also noted this pattern in her reading responses. Beth shared a connection with Quinn, a protagonist in *All American Boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015):

> I relate to Quinn not only because I am white, but also because I was privileged with being ignorant about most race issues until I reached late middle school. The main way that I accessed information about race issues was through social media and not really through my family because they were privileged and didn't realize the severity of such issues either. Once I went to high school and was surrounded by a more diverse group of friends, I started learning about bigger/more significant race and social justice issues…

This reading response demonstrates the finding that Beth connected to Quinn through shared racial identity, but more so the implications and inner conflict created through the particular stage of life and circumstance shared. Veronica's reading responses demonstrated this finding in her unexpected connection to Nala's character in *Love is a Revolution* (Watson, 2021). She wrote:

> Nala tried so hard to be everything she thought Ty wanted. The entire act she put on to simply impress Ty was saddening. I felt that. I have not always been who I am. I wanted to try and be like other people too. While my situation was not attention seeking or wanting to make a boy like me, I was trying to fit in. By dressing like others, starting to

> talk like others, and sometimes acting like others, I was changing my identity. It took me a while to fully accept myself as who I am and own it.

Veronica's connection to the character's experience and timing of learning true belonging to self vs. fitting in proved meaningful to her own acceptance journey. The findings across both interview data and reader response data demonstrates connecting to characters as a key way YA readers in this study transact with texts.

Navigating Emotions

Though at times closely related to connections with characters, the second finding of a distinct transactional experience navigating their emotions–presented across all ten participants. In both responses to texts during coursework and within the discourse of the interviews, participants described the ways in which reading YAL allowed them to access, process, and connect to their feelings and deeper emotional landscape. These emotional transactions ranged from experiencing enjoyment to processing grief and trauma. For example, Malaya demonstrated this navigation across the spectrum of emotion in a reading response to *We Deserve Monuments* (Hammonds, 2022):

> Jas Hammonds has layered so many things in this book. As a reader, I feel many things -- amazement, grief, joy, hope, and so much more. Amazement at the relationships within this story, especially the relationship that Avery has with her parents. Grief over the life that Ray could have had, the childhood Zora could have had, for worlds being upended in good and bad ways. Joy at the friendships that Avery, Jade, and Simone made. The silly interactions between Mama Letty and Avery. Hope -- hope that if people try, relationships can be mended, not perfectly but where both people can see the love that they have for each other beyond the pain that they have been put through.

Additionally, Malaya's navigation of multiple emotions came through in another reading response to *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet* (Ferguson, 2022):

> Reading this book has made me feel so angry and sad on their behalf. It makes me feel so sad that we live in a world where their stories go unheard. Their lives are diminished to stereotypes of gamblers or drunks. How we don't think about how this land, the land we live on is theirs. It makes me wonder how different the world would be if Indigenous people are the ones in charge. The way I felt throughout the book changed, during the bitter parts I felt afraid, small, and I wanted to throw the book but during the sweet parts I felt warm and hopeful. Jen ended the book on a sweet note, and I think that is to keep the readers hopeful. We live in a dark world and often the bitter moments tend to stick with us, but she chose to give us the gift of hope. Hope that with our own small actions we can make a great impact within our community and lives.

Through these two examples, Malaya transacts with YAL texts by navigating multiple emotions throughout the reading process that serve her connection with characters and connection to her world. This depth of emotional navigation also could be seen during Malaya's interview when she described:

> I've been using books as a way to explore emotions, feelings. Yeah, it's yes…. I feel like without… If I didn't read these books, I feel like I would just be… I wouldn't have been able to get to a better place emotionally. Hmm. you know, if when I'm reading books it's like…yeah…like a little bit of magic. So, it brings some joy to my life, and I'm able to confront certain emotions that I perhaps wouldn't have in there in any other setting.

This chance to confront emotions and feel the way through transactions with YA texts also presented in Bree's interview and reader responses. More specifically, Bree discussed the

power of YAL texts in her own confrontation of trauma and the emotional aspects that entailed. During her interview, Bree stated:

> I think reading makes me identify, like, the trauma that I've gone through in life, but it is like, I've found most people, if it happens, and I don't really want to remember it. I just forget it like it's outside of my mind. So, I think reading makes me realize like this happened. And this happened. And like from reading, I maybe need to go back and realize, like, you know, maybe I need to heal this. This. This is something I need to like, actually think about, because it's if I'm forgetting it, I'm forgetting it for a reason, because that means I don't want to deal with it.

This also resonated in her reader responses during coursework. For example, in the reading transaction with *Tears of a Tiger* (Draper, 1994), Bree wrote in her response:

> As an African American, I have faced many of the same issues as the characters in the book. I am not from the nicest neighborhood; in high school, the student body faced and dealt with death quite often. The same cycle of counselors coming into the school for a few days smiled and vanished as if grief wasn't a process. This book magnifies what many minority students face and still do in America—being in an identity crisis, having family issues, and facing the stigmas of mental health in the minority community. It made me reflect on my own experience… it shows that grief is a process, and everyone doesn't have the same timeline on how they feel about traumatic situations.

Though Bree shared about these harder emotional transactions, she also observed how romantic comedy YAL texts revived her love of reading. She stated:

> I'm just like this hopeless romantic that I just think that everybody has this chance to fall in love, and I think that's what how I kind of connect rom com to my everyday

> life…*Excuse Me While I Ugly Cry* was a really good one…[it's] the reason why I started back reading. I think reading that made me realize that I really missed reading. I really missed the sense of like following the story line and seeing the plot twist…

The emotion of enjoyment and love of story and character also proved to be a strong finding in other participants' transactions of navigating emotions. In their interview, Skye repeatedly discussed key texts of *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005) and *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008). These particular books provided space for escape but brought multiple opportunities to navigate emotions. Skye shared:

> I love love. It's …I like seeing that like growing. And the… *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* both have love triangles, and they're different but they are there. It's like you can be loved in different ways and be able to choose that love is really interesting to me and was really interesting to me.

These enduring favorites existed as space to "love love" for Skye, but more importantly gave them insight into identifying and accessing more difficult emotions. For example, Skye explained the importance of this transactional process for their navigation of emotions as a neurodivergent person:

> And sometimes books put words to feelings… in *Twilight* when the girl who turns them in, she ends up getting killed for it, and that, like you see your sister's grieving. And as a kid, you don't really understand how painful that is. But being able to see it in a book, it helped me like, oh, this is what that feeling is…

Similarly, Maeve shared the transactional experiences of navigating and naming emotions through reading YAL. For example, Maeve discussed the way reading provided space to access emotions. She stated,

> I feel like it's given me a lot of sense of introspection, and how I'm feeling and like thinking and things like that. It really helps me. That sort of intellectualize my thoughts sometimes in a way that I otherwise couldn't. I suppose…thoughts and feelings like if I don't really know what I'm feeling. Maybe I'll remember a character felt this way about this thing. I'm like that sort of makes sense. Maybe that's sort of the deal sort of looking at that. So, it's definitely good for helping me figure myself out.

Sharing a key text with Skye, Maeve also explained the spectrum of emotions her favorites of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) and *Eragon* (Paolini, 2003) offered her. She observed, "…just those books really taught me, you know, grief, and growing up and discovering who you are, empathy, living through hard times, but you know, still finding joy in the little things. Things like that is really important." The ways each of these participants discussed emotional resonance and processing with YAL exemplifies how readers from this study transact with YAL by navigating their own internal lives and feeling their way through story characters and situations.

Learning about Others and the Self

In addition to connecting to characters and navigating emotions, participants noted *learning about others and themselves* as a third transaction type. This explicit naming of learning through the reading process appeared across all ten interviews and throughout different reader responses and course reflections. Rose's interview illustrates the way she learned multiple different lessons through her transactions with YAL texts. For example, when talking about escaping into fantasy stories and fueling her imagination, she stated:

> …there's still like stories that are important and taught to you. But through this lens of a fictional world. And so, it's like subconsciously teaching you things and like helping you

> with things that you just wouldn't expect kind of like, like the most iconic Pop culture example is Harry Potter. And like how important friendship is to those novels …But just realizing how important and just like subtle the instruction on friendship, and just like the value of that is weaved throughout the it. The story is incredible to me,

Through this description, Rose explained a more subconscious process of learning about herself and others through paying attention to relationships between characters. However, within her interview she shared a more explicit example of learning about others across difference or context. Rose specifically discussed her transaction with *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006)*;* she said:

> But like the book. It's like that was cool and also in a different form that I had never seen before, the like the graphic novel young adult literature hadn't dipped my toe into that. And that's really cool. So, I think it's pushed me, at least socially, on a broader scale of just looking for authors that are not always in the mainstream, or people that have been overlooked just from my experience. I had just never encountered them before. So, looking for stories that are like cross-cultural, and just like going to teach me different things about different people and what they experience in life. And just like kind of broaden my horizons, I guess, just because I hadn't really read things like that before.

Through this excerpt, Rose demonstrated how multicultural YAL expanded her learning by presenting opportunities to learn about other cultures and human experience. Additionally, Rose's reader response to *The Marvellers* (Clayton, 2022) discussed not only how she learned about others, but how this learning deepened her own understanding of the publishing world. She wrote:

> ...younger me, an avid reader, wondered where other cultures and different experiences and people of color were in novels, stories, and fiction. The story in *The Marvellers* was diverse and exciting, I felt plunged into a new world—not just because it was one filled with magic but because I caught a glimpse of people from around the globe. The students at the Arcanum Training Institute are characters that I nearly never saw in books growing up. Younger me did not connect the lack of diversity to the fact that many works of people of color don't get published or are less promoted and more difficult to find. I now wish that younger me had looked harder. Children and young adults from different cultures deserve to see themselves, their experiences, and their possibilities in works of fiction. Fiction can validate experiences and it can inspire new ones— it can encourage imagination and change someone's life. If I had been without characters to relate to and stories to enliven me, I think I would be a totally different person today.

This reflection on her new learning showed the power of transacting with new stories for Rose, but also provided a keen observation about the ways these transactions contribute to readers' identities.

This transactive process of learning about others and the self also presented in Bree and Maeve's interviews and reader responses. Bree shared an explicit purpose in selecting queer YAL. She communicated, "I'm reading that because I want to know more about the community. And I feel like there's a lot of truth in reading fiction books, even though people don't really see it that way. So, I want to learn more about it." Similarly, Maeve explained her reading choices in connection to the transactions of learning about others' experiences. She stated:

> So, I feel like what's important for me is to read books by people, of color, BIPOC people …. see what they're feeling, centering them…And I feel like there's definitely, so much

> more learning that you don't even think of. It's like so many experiences that you just don't have that you read about books like I had no clue, absolutely no clue. So, I feel like it's really important to keep diversity in our books…

Through these choices, both Bree and Maeve seek knowledge, but also exemplify how reading transactions teach them new ideas and offer experiential learning through the centered storytelling of others. Maeve continued to explain how reading transactions provide self- growth and learning when she stated:

> reading is sort of how I've grown as a person, and so sort of what I want to learn. Then I look for books like, sort of figure it out. So, dystopia, I sort of figure out how like the political science stuff works. All that sort of thing. Anything that's inclusive through any genre is sort of important, because I feel like that's sort of like me wanting to learn to be better with my empathy and sort of utilize it in a more important way. And so, by doing that through reading, you can learn a lot of important skills. So, by being a reader, that's how I learn how to do those things in my life and that sort of how I've learned how to grow.

Through this exploration of different stories and genres, Maeve shared how transactive learning while reading pushes new opportunities to grow into herself. Not only did Maeve express this, but Beth also shared, “I was using reading as the process …as kind of like a way to just kind of like learn about myself.” Similarly, Alexis stated, “I think about what I can take away from the books to make myself better.” Thus, signaling the ways readers learn in the transaction process with YAL.

Not only did participants share about learning about self and others, but they also noted key informational and observational knowledge gained through their reading processes. For

example, Elena showed in her reading responses learnings from novels that explored specific historical and societal conflicts. When considering her reading of *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (Lo, 2021), she wrote:

> Something I've learned from this novel is how even though this story takes place almost 70 years ago, there's still issues that our society is facing today. And sometimes it feels that even though we have made a lot of progress on these societal issues, it felt very familiar reading through.

Also, when exploring her reading experience with *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet* (Ferguson, 2022), she explained in her response:

> I really enjoyed reading *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*. I felt that it touched on a lot of heavy and important topics occurring in society today. I personally have not read many books, if any, that featured an indigenous main character, and I learned a lot about their culture and how they are treated in today's society. Something that I felt was eye-opening for me was how indigenous people are treated…Reading this book, which takes place over 100 years later really made me realize how little has changed with society's treatment of indigenous people.

Similarly, Malaya wrote about her informational takeaways from reading and transactionally learning through *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (Lo, 2021). She wrote:

> Malinda Lo has given me so much new information about Asian Americans and our history in this country. I did not know that the term "Asian American" was not coined until the 1960s around the Civil Rights Movement. I have recently become more curious about the history that Asian Americans have and found out that the first Asians that were

> documented to be in the US was Filipinos in 1587 during the Galleon Trade. This book reminded me that there is still so much history that I need to learn.

Malaya alongside Elena indicated the educative power of reading YAL. Though differing in forms across interviews and reader responses, the participants in this study revealed the ways that learning through reading transactions distinctly operates to inform and grow capacities to learn about others and the self.

Affirming the Self

Affirming of the self during the reading experience also occurred for the many of the research participants. Affirming the self in terms of this study is defined by the participant's expression of feeling accurately represented and emotionally encouraged in their sense of self. Nine out of ten participants shared specific ways in both interviews and reading responses that they see their lives represented and feel affirmed in who they are and are becoming. For example, participants Lana and Veronica discussed the way they felt affirmed by stories of the South and the representation of both homeplace and identity. Lana wrote in response to Jeff Zentner's (2021) *In the Wild Light*:

> Another reason I loved this book so much was because it was set in [the South]. This was the first time I had ever read a book that took place where I'm from. It was so cool to be able to recognize the places and understand the culture on such a deep level.

Similarly, Veronica wrote in response to the same novel:

> It was nostalgic for me. When Cash would talk about sitting on the front porch with his papaw and just listening to all of the sounds and taking in all of the sights was something that I used to do with my papaw and granny. It's something that I still like to do at home. Especially on a fall morning with a cup of coffee in hand…. I can relate to towns he's

> talking about because I have lived in these towns my whole life…The familiarity of the locations and words made it so comforting to me. People making fun of the way I talk has been something I've dealt with my whole life, so to find that as a problem someone has in a book, I'm reading made it that more dear to me. To finally have a book where not all southern people are seen as redneck hillbillies who aren't capable of thinking was so nice to finally see.

This representation of Southern characters and settings affirmed Lana and Veronica's experience of being from a place and having that place as part of their lived experience and selfhood. Alternatively, Maeve talked about the importance of fantasy YAL stories that provided affirmation in the representation of atheist beliefs like her own. She stated:

> There was also a lot of joy. So, it was really nice being able to see, like these other worlds, these other characters who were like me within those worlds, especially when you grow up in the South, you don't typically see a lot of people like you. And then you can read them in books so that was really nice to see.

So, while all three participants shared some connection to the same region and culture, both realistic and fantasy YAL texts provided affirmation of participants' various identities held within that context.

Similar to Maeve, Rose discussed the importance of seeing her faith experience represented in YAL. She shared reading transactions that affirmed her and helped calm doubts about writing from her specific faith identity:

> Sometimes I convince myself that nobody is going to read it because of that. But so when I find stories that are… they're not outright marketed as like Christian literature. But I read, and …I can see that symbolism and that, that beautiful story told. But there, the

> message is still there, and it's like beautiful and not out rightly Christian. I'm encouraged…*American Born Chinese*. There's metaphor in that. There's heavy Christian metaphor…that stood out to me because I was like, okay, it is possible to write things that people who don't necessarily have the same faith as me are still going to read and enjoy and find interesting. And there's been some other stories that I've read like that too… *The Chronicles of Narnia*. People love that, know that very well…So those kinds of texts are kind of confirming to me, and cool to see to that part of my identity that I think is probably the most important.

Rose's discussion of two YAL texts centering Christian metaphor, allegory, and character representation demonstrates the finding that through the process of transacting with texts readers affirm facets of themselves.

Faith and place-based identity facets weren't the only representations that participants from this study discussed or wrote about in their responses. Skye and Bree also discussed ways that YAL texts affirmed facets of themselves. Skye specifically shared the power supernatural YAL had during their growing up and self-affirmation process. They stated:

> Because it's really hard when it when you're growing up. And again, you're neurodivergent and you're a little bit out there. When you're able to see these things in first and third person. It can solve a lot of like self-doubt and confusion. I'm like, oh, I'm just a weirdo who doesn't like dresses. Oh, this character also does. And they are just a normal girl, or they're non-binary or trans: OH. So, it basically, YA can be a balm to some of that.

More specifically for Skye, Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight Saga*'s fourth installment *Breaking Dawn* (2008) provided affirmation through the written voice and perspective. They reflected, "I

don't know why… it is the weirdest of those books, but being able to be in a male perspective was really important…So, it's like, oh, you can be male and super sympathetic, and really still getting away from male rage in YA." For Bree, she also reflected during her interview on her transactions with *The Skin I'm in* (Flake, 1998) and *Cinderella is Dead* (Bayron, 2020). She shared how each of the texts affirmed her. When discussing *The Skin I'm In,* she noted the affirmation of her racial identity and the importance of finding acceptance of her own beauty both inward and outward:

> …the main character in the book is this dark-skinned girl and she's going through school and she gets picked on because of her skin. And It. It just kind of takes us to the journey of like her and like how she feels about herself. And then it also shows us her inner thoughts of like how she allowed the thoughts of other people to like kind of like jump on her skin. That's how I see it in my head like the words jump on her skin, so I mean, I was a funny looking middle schooler. I just know I wasn't. I wasn't the cutest. I had glasses, I had braces, and like I had to realize that, like I couldn't let how other people perceive me be the way that I perceive myself like I have to find what made me, me, what made me (Participant 3), and I think a lot of that book helped me get to that point.

Then again when discussing *Cinderella is Dead* (Bayron, 2020), Bree shared a retroactive experience of self-affirmation of her gender expression varying from expected norms while reading:

> And it kind of like made, my younger self say, like, you're not weird, like, it's okay that you like jeans. And it's okay that you like to sometimes go and play outside with the boys. It's like it was just kind of that that moment like, I wish I would have had this when

> I was younger, because if I would have read it when I was younger. I think I would just feel better about kind of me.

Though one novel was from her youth and one novel was read later in Bree's life, these two reflections show how affirming the facets of the self occurred for her during the reading transaction. Overall, these reader responses and interview excerpts across participants reveal the finding that affirmation happens while transacting with YAL.

Transporting into Situations and Experiencing New Stories

Finally in this study, participants described *transporting into situations and experiencing new worlds* or stories in their transactions with YAL. As defined in chapter two, transportation in this study is marked by "a combination of attention, imagery, and feelings, in which an individual becomes immersed in a narrative world" (Green & Brock, 2000; Green & Brock, 2002). These types of transactions provided simulations for participants to ask the questions of "what would I do?" or "how am I experiencing something new?" by placing themselves in the point of view of the characters or setting(s) of the YAL text. Elena shared multiple times the ways in which transporting into YAL worlds –whether realistic or fantasy – offered opportunities to consider these questions while reading. In her final reflection, she wrote "Reading young adult literature has allowed me to experience different situations in a safe environment that I never have to experience in real life, but I still learn the lessons that these stories teach which have helped me grow as a person." This finding also presented during her interview when she stated:

> I think some of the situations have kind of, like, shaped or allowed me to, like, experience things that I wouldn't normally experience might also kind of be able to formulate like, Oh, I… it's kind of like a safe way to, like, experience, like maybe extreme situations and kind of give me that experience or kind of background like, okay, like I'm not actually

> experiencing I probably never will, but it's allowing me to kind of like sit down and think like, okay, how would I react to this situation? Kind of give me that background or that mindset.

This data point of transporting into narratives and simulating situations through experiencing new stories also presented in Elena's reading responses to different novels. For example, in her response to *Highly Suspicious and Unfairly Cute* (Hibbert, 2023) she wrote:

> I think my experiences from reading this book will form my future thinking in a way as a reminder to stay true to myself. While now at an older age I have learned to stay away from pretending to be someone I'm not, sometimes I still feel the need to do so in certain situations. Reading about Celine showed me that it's okay to stay myself and the relationships that I make doing so will become more meaningful.

Elena's situational simulation while reading this text provided a meaning making transaction as it allowed her to place herself in Celine's point of view but consider how she would react and what she could learn and apply to her life.

Similar to Elena, Alexis shared in her interview ways that transacting with YAL texts provide her space to transport into situations and consider her own actions. She explained:

> I think that YA specifically is good for that, especially for young adults, for people my age, because being a teenager is hard. And being able to read about other teenagers who are doing hard things, are doing whatever, and are overcoming obstacles. It is really beneficial to teenagers themselves to be able to put themselves to either escape into that other YA world and get out of whatever's happening in their life, or to be able to put themselves in that person's shoes and be like I can get through whatever this is. And I think that I've kind of done both of those things at different points in my life.

For Alexis, the escapism into narrative fiction of YAL provided her specific transactional space to question and decide what she would do in the same situation or how she could have courage to take action in difficult situations because she had read about it. Specifically, Alexis noted one such instance while reading *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) and considering the ways Katniss acted in alignment with her values even when she failed or faced consequences. Alexis commented, "That was the right thing to do. She always stuck to her values, no matter what the consequences would be…when I fail, I want to remember, Katniss did this, even when she had the threat of death." Alexis' ability to transport into Katniss's point of view and setting provided her the opportunity to simulate her own experience and therefore, make meaningful connections to how she wanted to act in challenging situations in her own life.

In addition to Elena and Alexis, Beth also discussed the ways her transactions with YAL embodied transportation into a fictive situation that feels realistic and enables her to transfer meaning into her life. She noted:

> And so, it feels like very real to me when I read, and so like connecting it to the real world and using that to grow like it almost seems like natural, because there's not a lot of separation between, like oh this imaginary world that, like I'm reading from and the real world, I guess. And so, like as I'm seeing these different perspectives. And just even just thinking new things or asking questions that I didn't have before. It's really easy to transfer it to the real world.

This process of stepping into the perspective of the character for Beth offered a transactive process for inner dialogue and situational application from fiction to reality. Specifically, she asked questions of situational dilemmas that attended to her personality and future. For example, she explained transporting into fictional worlds noting, "It seemed like there were so many

options of who I could be in the world, whether it be like actual career choices or just like, what do I want my personality to be? What type of friend do I want to be?" and "Okay, should I like, let my emotions be out there? Or should I just kind of like, ball them up and be like an aggressive or just like shut off person?" These questions and experiencing new stories and fictional situations provided Beth the opportunity to negotiate and decide what attributes and actions she wanted to take into her personality, career, and relationships.

Veronica also explored how transporting into YAL narratives proved important to her reading and meaning-making process. Through her interview she voiced the questions and ways these transactions of simulating situations had impact for her,

> Do I really think that you know this is… this is right? Or do I really think that, even…oh, that conversation could have got a different way...That's where I find myself, you know, thinking for myself, and so in in a book, if I'm like that could have gone a totally different way, I would have done it this way. I think that's where I insert myself into the book. And that's where you know, we kind of have a back-and-forth battle of, you know, it could have gone this way, but it went this way. Why did it go that way? And then I start thinking about, you know, the worldly problems into that. So, it went this way because this was going to happen, or because this did happen, that the world influenced. And I think that's where I find myself, like, questioning things. So, you know I do… sometimes question, do I really think this? And you know, so I'll either reinforce it or I have to, think about that a little bit longer for me to totally be convinced that's… That's how I think, or sometimes I'm still on the fence about something. And it's okay to be on the fence about something…that was something I had to learn, too, that books kind of helped me with that not everything has to have the final, you know… It doesn't have to be

> completed. It can be a cliffhanger for a little bit and still be okay. So that's where I find myself questioning myself. But then I'm questioning the world at the same time because I'm like, why, why did this happen at all? … there could have been a change here. And then it's like, well, why haven't we seen a change yet?

These transactions of Veronica "inserting" herself into the book proved the unique way transporting into stories and experiencing new worlds form questions and connections for readers that they can apply meaning to reinforce their knowledge and lived experience or create new ways of thinking and pursuing change in their lives. This engagement and transportation into new stories focalized as a salient point in the data across participants. More specifically, readers in this study noted the ways that YAL offered deeper pathways to consider their own ideas for situational understanding of various conflicts, relational connections, or social/political dilemmas. Malaya explained, "Whether that's sexual assault or falling in and out of love, losing friendships, moving…there's just so many ways that YA is helpful." Part of this "helpful" characteristic of YA to participants remains the diversity of situations and stories. The intrigue, unexpected turns, and overall ability to provide readers the experience of losing themselves in new worlds notably proved impactful for participants. For example, Elena shared:

> I think for me is the ones that stick with me are like the ones that tell like a new story that I haven't read before…the ones that like, kept me engaged…Books I just couldn't put down and I would like, read like in a day. Those are the ones that stayed with me for a while just because, like, I think I was just so enamored and fascinated with the story that they just, like, stayed with me for a while.

This enamored feeling presented for Rose as well when she explained the way new situational dilemmas in *The Waking Forest* (Wees, 2019) made her engaged:

> …that book. I picked it up and read it. I was like, this is so weird. I love it. And then just things happen in the book that I'm like I did not see that coming, and it's just like been enduring favorite of mine because of that. So, I think it's just like the excitement of not being able to predict it.

Not only did participants note unexpected plot twists, but also genre bending and twists on classics for YA audiences enabled new experiencing and entry into old tales for participants. Maeve wrote in her response to *Everything Sad is Untrue* (Nayeri, 2020):

> I loved reading stories about Khosrou's Persian culture, and I especially loved the connections with One Thousand and One Nights - I had heard a lot about that story but learning about it from the perspective of the culture it was from made it so much more real. The stories that touched on love have so far always ended unhappily, Khosrou describing most of them as poisoned in some way. Including the love he experienced and witnessed in his immediate family, which was a different genre of tragedy. Even when all the previous love stories were sad, I loved the story about his grandmother Ellie and her fictional librarian lover. That made it all the more heart-wrenching when Ellie's and the librarian's story ended in tragedy, and she was exiled. The combination of real life, metaphor, and genuine fiction is definitely enticing.

Similarly, Skye discussed the way new tales reinvigorated their reading and transported them into pathways where they could learn,

> *Legendborn* was important to me on a couple of different levels. One I had no experience in Afrofuturism at all. So that was eye opening as an entire genre…But *Legendborn* was also… You can actually take Arthurian legends and make them actually good. Because I hated them in high school. I hated them in high school. Couldn’t read them. But this is

like, oh, we can still talk about these classics, and people enjoy them and them be rejuvenated. And it was just I felt like that book taught me something.

Overall, this final distinct transactional experience of transporting into fiction worlds and situations demonstrates the way interactions and engagements with YA texts offered participants multiple new experiences through reading.

The findings presented in this first section answer the first question of this research study, What types of transactions with YA texts have occurred with self-identified YA readers? Why have these transactions proved meaningful for the reader? The findings indicated participants in this study transact with YA texts in five distinct ways: *connecting to characters, navigating emotions, learning about others and the self, affirming the self, transporting into situations and experiencing new stories*. Through these connections, emotions, learnings, affirmations, and situational, new experiences participants note the transactions as meaningful because of the different YA stories' ability to safely connect them with themselves, others, questions, ideas, and experiences they would otherwise not have accessed. Overall, meanings attributed to participants' identity development and growth will be explored in the following section.

YAL Contributions to Identities

As discussed in the introduction of this chapter, not only did this study explore what types of transactions YA readers engaged in during their reading experiences, but ultimately what meaning, contribution, and role YAL texts and transactions have made to participants' sense of self and holistic identity over time. This second section shares findings of how YAL contributed and continues to contribute to participants' identities. The participants of this study outlined YAL's contributions to be summarized in the following themes: *reflecting space for self-growth and integration, growing perspective taking and empathic skills, seeing and hearing*

the self to confirm identity, expressing one's voice and stepping into one's power, and finally, *engaging the world, standing up, and building community*. These contributions span across time and reading transactions as a collective, developmental progression.

Reflecting for Self-Growth and Integration

When participants discussed and wrote about their identity in relationship to YAL, they overwhelmingly discussed the ways in which YAL texts provided space for reflecting and growing into their identities. Participants shared that reflection and growth included integration of their backgrounds, beliefs/values, personalities, and understanding of themselves and their stories. For example, during her interview, Malaya shared, "It's made me realize how books have really helped me like a reflection. Help me see like, oh, how I've like been seeing myself…" This finding of YAL contributing to her identity showed in the questions Malaya asked about herself in reflecting on different texts. When thinking about a familial story line in *Highly Suspicious and Unfairly Cute* (Hibbert, 2023) Malaya posed, "Who am I outside of them? What parts can I keep and what parts can I choose to change?" Additionally, this internal reflection and questioning of who she wants to become as she navigates the world showed up in her response to *We Deserve Monuments* (Hammonds, 2022), particularly in reflecting on how to allow her identity to authentically take up space:

> …how often black and brown people without even realizing it code switch or conform to white culture and the work that we do to fit in the "larger" culture and hide parts of ourselves so that we can be accepted. How we shrink ourselves because we are not given the grace to embrace our space. How can I change that? Where can I expand and feel the discomfort so that I can embrace more of my identity without the fear of being chastised?

Through these reflective questions, Malaya used the reading experience to contemplate how to move forward and press into discomfort for her growth in stepping more fully into her identity as a woman of color. Finally, Malaya also questioned and pushed herself towards self-growth by reflecting on how she enacts who she is in the world and her beliefs when she wrote, “It reminds me to think about the deeds that we do as humans – what’s my motivation? Is it self-serving? Do I do these things out of personal gain or just to be kind?” Through these questions asked in reflecting on her different reading experiences over time Malaya demonstrated one way in which reflection in response to YAL helped contribute to her current and ongoing identity development.

Similarly, Veronica shared the process of self-growth and integration through reflection during and after her reading of various YA texts. Veronica explained:

> So, at the beginning of reading, I was… I was very much unsure of things like my self-identity. I wasn't sure of, and you know, how I thought of myself as a person I was really not sure, like where I fit into the world, and so like, when I was able to read these things, it was like, okay, I think I found my place. You know, I was able to start making, you know, bigger connections and start to find out who I am and how I can and will and eventually fit into the world.

This process for Veronica of reflecting and discovering her identity came through reflection on her personality and who she wanted to be in the world, but it also came through questioning and challenge in the various ideas and scenarios presented to her during her reading life. She described:

> …it's an inner conflict. I think that's what, you know, helps me grow, and that is because it's not, you know, an outside conflict where somebody is telling me something, and I'm you know, having a rebuttal or combating it. It's an internal thing that only I can change,

> or you know, only certain things can, you know, aid in a change to something. And so, I think the internal conflict is what it helps me with that. It's not, you know, another outside source who's telling me, you know, this is why I should think it. It's me doing the research on my own, or, you know, thinking on my own. And me coming up with my own an idea of what I should be thinking.

In this instance, Veronica explained her self-growth as inner conflict while reading and searching through the various fictional worlds, characters, and ideas presented by YA texts that offer her space during reflection to choose her own beliefs, values, and who to be in the world. These reflections and space for integration of ideas ultimately led her to state, "So, I really like the books that challenge me to think that as well. It might not always be… yeah, my cup of tea. It might not be what I was looking for… But maybe it was what I needed."

Reflecting for self-growth also emerged as a key finding in Lana's interview. She explained the way that reading YAL provided introspective self-exploration. Lana elaborated:

> I think for me…reading is also a way for me to explore parts of myself that are maybe hard to explore in real life…I think like especially kind of like my journey, and like leaving the Christian Church… it was… I could read books, where like the characters were also doing that, and I would attach to those books for a period of time, or reading books with queer protagonists like those were things I've latched onto recently. Because it helps me explore parts of myself, that maybe I'm not ready to explore publicly, or it's hard to explore just myself thinking right?

This observation showed Lana perceived reflecting on YAL as a contributor to her overall identity through self-growth and integration of different life experiences or identity facets. Her reader response reflections also reiterated that value and contribution. Lana wrote, "…this book

reminded me that my search for identity is important. It also showed me that my identity is my own and cannot be defined by anyone else."

Bree also noted the importance of reflection while reading and how it has contributed to her overall understanding of her identity and acceptance of parts of her personal story. Bree shared about her experience reflecting on *Long Way Down* (Reynolds, 2017):

> …it kind of really made me rethink my experiences, and like the things I've experienced in life in general, because some of the things I feel like happened to me like happened in the environment that I was in when I was younger. I didn't realize it like sometimes I can't remember it, but like when I tell somebody like, where I'm from, they'd be like: Oh, my goodness like, are you? Are you from there for real? So, it's like reading his book made me realize like you have to take you have to take the reading and like. See how it is a reflection of you. So, when I, when I got finished reading, that I took a very long period to reflect on it, and how I connected to it… that book really challenged me because it challenged me to really reflect on like: Why this book was so hard for me to get through? Why, the book was a little bit triggering to me? Why I could like see my life or see people in my life? Or like why I can imagine high school at this point? It was just all those little things…

Through the process of not only reading, but then reflecting on challenging aspects of the text, Bree explained how this process allowed her to tap into questions and find answers to how she was viewing her own life story, context for growing up, and thus, those aspects of her identity.

Though only four participants were explored in depth, findings indicated reflecting as self-growth across all ten participants. Reflection for each participant provided space to process the transactional experiences they had with characters, their own emotions, various situations,

and their own ideas about who they are. Amid this reflection, realizations and integrative thinking and feeling occurred. As Alexis shared, “I've realized just how much I've grown as a person.” This growth only continued because as the next finding will explain reflection not only provided space for self-growth, but also for growth in perspective taking and building capacity to consider others.

Growing Perspective Taking and Empathic Skills

Another key finding in this study remains the ways in which participants attributed growing in perspective taking and empathic skills to be a contribution to their overall identities. Nine out of ten participants specifically noted reading YAL as affecting their perspective taking, understanding of others, ability to pause before judgements, and empathy development. During their interviews both Elena and Bree shared how reading has contributed to their open-mindedness as people. Bree succinctly stated, “I think in general young adult literature has made me a lot more open minded to just different things in general. How my views, the biases I had that didn't even recognize before reading…” This growing in perspective taking for Bree allowed her to see her own thoughts in comparison to characters, situations, and ideas present in different texts; thus, growing her ability to reflect on biases she might have not seen otherwise. Elena’s perspective taking journey spanned differing effects and identity contributions. First, Elena also noted open-mindedness as a byproduct of her reading life. She shared in more detail when she explained:

> I also think just reading a lot has kind of like attributed to like my open mindedness because like different like books and like reading all these different characters, each character is different. They kind of have their own like personality. And so, I think like kind of reading the books and their perspective and seeing their different personalities

> and then hearing their backgrounds and kind of how their backgrounds made them that kind of person has allowed me to see, well, everybody has their own kind of background. And while maybe I don't agree with this person or like either, there are very different ideals in this person… it's their background that shaped them and allowed them to have these different ideals. So, I think reading has allowed me to kind of come to understanding …where people come from with different things that are important to their lives.

This ability to perspective take and stay open minded for Elena proved important. She shared, "it's just given me like a broader perspective and helped me kind of break free from, just a structured, mindset or thinking." Additionally, Elena noted how the ability to perspective take and explore that process in reading affected her ability to pause before making judgements. Particularly for her, this became important after reading a YA text and meeting a character she came to love who reminded her of a previous acquaintance whom she did not initially understand. Through the reading, Elena questioned whether she could have become friends with this person in the same way she connected with the character over time in taking on the character's perspective. This made Elena realize a need to consider others' backgrounds and experiences. She explained:

> …if I meet someone, I don't really like them at first. I think a lot of times, I want to place that judgment on a person, I don't like them because of this, this, and this. But, if you, don't interact with that person, or don't know them. I feel like… it's like kind of like maybe like pause for a second…So, I definitely think now before I formulate any strong opinions about anybody… [reading has] made me pause a little bit. I'm like, okay, like maybe I should just get to know this person before I make a decision on whether or not I

> like them or not…But yes, I think it's just made me pause and realize kind of my own quick judgment. And I just made me just be more aware of it…kind of going back and being like, everybody is the way they are because of their past experiences, and I don't know why they're this way. Maybe I should get to get to know them more …Overall, it's just kind of made me give myself like a pause before I like, judge anybody now.

This expansion in perspective taking and pausing before judgment proved to be a defining identity contribution for Elena as it also showed up in her reader responses with reflections like, "this story showed me how most things aren't as surface layer as they seem… this story has given me a different perspective" or "this story will inspire me to read more stories about people from different cultures to mine. I think it is very important to expand my viewpoint and learn about other's experiences."

Maeve also demonstrated the finding that growing perspective taking and developing empathic skills proved a contributing piece of her burgeoning identity. Similar to Elena and Bree, Maeve shared the draw towards openness and pausing before judgement. She stated:

> …definitely a lot more patient as a person I feel like I've also come to think about a lot of opinions I probably normally wouldn't have. There's less confirmation bias there for me than I think there would have been otherwise. Sometimes I'll hear something, and I'll go, No, that's absolutely wrong, no way. But I'm like, well, think about it for a second, you know. Try and listen and try to figure out where they're coming from. Sometimes it makes sense afterwards. I'm like, that's interesting. Sometimes it doesn't. But…

This growth in perspective taking and pausing for Maeve led to deeper development of patience towards others and the ability to engage with new ideas for herself. She elaborated:

> I feel like it creates growth and change because it's sort of like I have to constantly keep challenging myself and my opinions and ideas with something new like… and then maybe I'll have forgotten something, but then it'll be brought back up, and I have to remember through my experiences or someone else's experiences. And it's just like constant introspection to sort of figure out new things and new ideas. I might not have thought of before, and also listening to other people and those new ideas and things that I might never thought of or never believed until I actually listen to the reasoning. I'm sort of like…. oh yeah!

Through varying perspectives and listening to characters in YA texts, Maeve saw growth and change in her identity through the expansion of her ideas and beliefs. Through this, she directly named multiple times the development of empathy and empathic skills. For example, Maeve expressed:

> …reading helps me feel, understand, and see what other people are going through, and how that sort of affects their opinions and their lives. And it also just helps me see other people live so much more differently than I do, and they are just vastly different, like opinions that it's impossible for us to overlap. But there's like a background behind that. It's not just… They're a terrible person or that sort of thing. So, I definitely feel like for me the empathy is learning to work with other people that I don't completely understand, and sort of trying to understand them, even though I know I can't, and respecting them anyways, whether or not that I can.

This development of patience, perspective taking, and digging into a committed empathic listening stance defined much of Maeve's discussion of YAL. She observed:

> I definitely feel like reading has given me a lot of empathy that a lot of other people who may not have read as much... It's really easy for me to put myself in other people's shoes because of how many times I've done that fictionally, I sort of feel like I can sort of have a good guess with other people's feelings, and how they're doing, and that sort of deal.

This naming of empathy development for Maeve not only contributed to her patience and perspective taking skills but motivated her to keep "diversity" in mind while selecting her YA texts.

The importance of perspective taking and developing empathic skills especially in regard to cross cultural readings revealed itself as an important finding in this research study. As Lana explained the power of reading widely and from multiple perspectives across identity-based experiences in her interview. She commented:

> I think it's kind of one of the only ways that you have to understand other people. Because unless you're part of a culture or identity, you can't…. You just can't understand it on your own organically, it's not you. It's not you. So, when you're reading stories about other people, and other people's experiences. It helps, you understand, especially when it's like, you know, you're reading about someone through their eyes, about their culture and their identity. It's kind of getting to step into their shoes, and, you know, understand… Not like if I was this…. But I guess kind of like, if this was me, this is what would happen to me, and it contextualizes all that in a way, you can understand.

This process of contextualization and stepping into the perspective of others in order to understand revealed itself in other participants' interviews as well. For example, Beth discussed the importance of growing outside the boundaries of what she had traditionally read in YAL and

using it as a window to see other people's life experiences. She shared about her more recent experiences:

> I was able to like experiment a little bit more with YA, than maybe I would have wanted to when I was younger. And so, I feel like now YA is kind of becoming more of a like looking at other people, and like other perspectives rather than mine. And I think that aligns kind of like with my personal journey, of trying to just like get to know people that otherwise… and like their perspectives and beliefs that… otherwise, if I stay to my little bubble like I wouldn't know, or wouldn't hear about, and it's just like getting outside of what I've always known. And YA being like a part of that.

This experimentation with new YA texts led Beth to step into a listening, empathic stance towards others' experiences of pain. Beth clarified how this impacted her identity growth and development of empathic skills:

> …just like listening to POCs like share their pain. And just kind of like taking responsibilities or just letting them speak about their pain instead of being like oh, well, I didn't do that. It's like: Oh, that was in the past. And I'm not saying I would have done that as a teenager like, outwardly. But I feel like that would kind of be like my first response, even though, like, I know, that's wrong to think about that, because their pain is totally valid. So yeah, I guess, just like my identity kind of felt, not even threatened, but just like I felt a little exposed for the first time. Kind of reading those things, and just kind of like: Oh, my! Gosh like people who look like me are kind of the villains in the story. And so that was like uncomfortable. But it's also just like this has been reality for a lot of history, and not trying to like defend myself, or like white people or things like that, and just letting those people like share their pain and their perspectives was like really hard

> for me at first. Because again I wanted to be like: Oh, I'm so sorry like this is happen, and like just me wanting to keep speaking and being engaged. And it's like, no, I just need to sit back for a minute like this is not about me. Even if I am trying to sympathize like it's not about me.

For Beth, perspective taking and using reading as a window caused her to listen and decenter her racial identity and as a result become more committed to practicing this in other areas of her identity. For instance, she also recounted:

> But again, it's kind of like a: Hey. Christianity has done some really bad things in the name of Christianity. Whether or not we can argue that was a true representation or not is doesn't matter. But like, when people hear Christianity like a lot of people here pain when they hear that. And so that was kind of like again another thing where I felt uncomfortable. But it was also kind of like those moments where it's like let them let them speak. Let them be heard, because, like they have gone through this pain. And so yeah. It's kind of like that, considering the other perspectives, even if I've initially felt intimidated or threatened. Based on like some things that have been said in young adult literature in general.

Through the practice of leaning into discomfort and listening to others' experiences and perspectives, Beth grew in her capacity to perspective take and practice empathy in its true sense of believing others' when they share their stories.

Rose and Malaya also noted the importance of reading outside of their own identity and perspectives of the world to gain understanding and growth in empathic skills. Rose discussed the importance of reading new YA texts that brought new perspectives:

> …I read a lot of books that I had never heard of that were under represented communities, and like the black community and the Asian community as well and just, stories written by people in those communities and for people in those communities, but I could also appreciate it as a white person… uncultured, very cultured white person, and be like this is so cool when I'm learning about somebody else's way of life and somebody else's experiences that was previously pretty removed from me. And I feel like there's so many books that I've just totally looked over that a whole new world has been opened. And that just goes back to my problem with buying books, and I just keep buying them. And it's because I'm excited to read about and learn about other people's experiences.

This excitement to learn more and grow in her capacity to perspective take remains one way in which Rose named YAL's contribution to her developing self. Similarly, Malaya expressed the ways in reading from multiple perspectives deepened her desire to foster curiosity. She pointed out:

> …it reminds me like this is why you need to stay curious, because you know, you don't want to close yourself up in a tiny bubble which is hard to do even though we have the Internet. And we can be connected like people still get stuck inside a bubble where it's like this is my own world. And this is all I'm willing to hear and see. But like reading different types of YA books helps me realize like: Okay. I need to stay open. I need to stay curious. There's tons of social issues. I'm still so unaware about and suffering of people that…that I should be aware of. And that I should tell others about as well…

For Malaya, this growing of perspective taking and empathic skills pushed her to recognize the need to stay engaged and put her empathy and perspective taking into action through learning from different perspectives outside of herself as well as sharing that knowledge with others.

For participants in this study, growing perspective taking and empathic skills proved to be a key finding for a way that YAL contributes to holistic identity development. Through broadening the stories they engaged with, participants expressed themselves to be more patient, open minded, understanding, and willing to listen and believe others' which some expressed produced empathy. Another important facet of this contribution remains the ways in which participants discuss the repeated exposure and development over time of these skills. For some participants, they began perspective taking by stepping into characters' point of views while others considered circumstances. Overall, participants in this study demonstrate the importance of reading YAL in connection with their ability to integrate specific identity traits of empathy and perspective taking into their understanding and enaction of who they are in the world.

Seeing and Hearing the Self to Confirm Identity

Another contribution mentioned by all ten participants revealed itself in participant language of being seen and heard through YAL which helped confirm and elucidate varying identities across a range of texts. This contribution exhibited itself as not just representation, but accurate, timely, and nuanced representation that led participants to experience the transactive seeing of self that deepened over time into a knowledge of self and provision of language to name their own identities and facets of their life stories that did not exist prior. One key example of this progressive finding appeared strongly in Skye's interview. As a starting point, Skye described the importance of YAL characters existing in their stories as fully themselves. Skye elaborated:

> You know, these characters are close to me, and you know, being able to just learn that you can exist is really important because you know no one questions Bella Swan…no one questions… But you know she is head over heels in love. They're just facts, and I feel

> like translating that into the real world you can exist. And if someone's giving you shit for it. They don't. There's no reason for it…it's that there's something for everyone with YA, and that's how the world should be. There is a place for you. There is a space for you. You know, you are who you are is a lot… that's in a lot of YA, you know, you, you change as you develop in YA. Obviously, you know, Katniss of ends up being more of badass, and Bella Swan turns into a vampire. But they're still who they are. And there's a lot of that element of just be true to who you are that I learned from YA.

For Skye, the seeing and hearing of other characters' identities and experience of knowing that they can exist as exactly who they are mattered as a beginning building block for their identity confirmation journey through reading YAL. Because of their original love for the genre and the affirming experiences in their transactions with YA texts like *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) and *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005), they continued reading and seeking identity confirmation and elucidation through their reading life as they began to find new texts. Specifically, Skye found nuance and language within *Felix Ever After* (Callender, 2020) that provided internal confirmation and space to evolve and grow into their identity. They vocalized:

> *Felix Ever After* like that…. That being able to come to a new identity isn't a bad thing, and I, as many queer books as I've read, it's not a common theme of oh, I'm this label, let me shift a little bit. And really seeing that was eye-opening because I don't talk about my gender journey. But this is probably the closest I've come to like seeing it in fiction and again that came out in 2020…Because I remember I was at home a lot. I wasn't around community spaces. So, it was…. It was a talking back book that was really important, because I don't know what I would have done without it. It was really supportive and fresh, and it kept me going.

The new and flexible learning exhibited in Felix's character provided Skye the momentary experience of seeing and hearing the self, but for them that moment added a contribution to their gender identity journey. Skye explained this contribution again later in their interview. They shared:

> I think I'm more settled because, especially like *Felix Ever After*, it was probably the one that this kind of hits with. It's like I'm allowed to change, and I'm allowed to be who I am, and especially with some of earlier stuff I read, it's like it doesn't matter how strange I am, that's who I am. So, I should be comfortable with that…And again like, *Felix Ever After*, you know, oh, I can be outside of trans binary…so trans woman, trans man. I can diverge a little bit. Oh, I… that that is who I am.

Through this experience of seeing and hearing the self in YAL, Skye solidified and as they shared "settled" into their non-binary identity.

Being seen and heard through YAL also contributed to Beth's identity development over time. *We Were Liars* (Lockhart, 2014) remains a key text for Beth and the way mental health representation gave her the opportunity to find self-compassion and self-forgiveness to carry forward as a marker of her identity. For example, Beth explained:

> And I think that kind of helped with myself because it was like: Hey. It's not all your fault, or like, if you're not mad at this girl who's done like I mean, I haven't murdered anyone by setting out. You're not mad at this girl for doing all this. Then, like, maybe you can like, be a little bit more graceful to yourself, and the mistakes that you've made. So that was just a book that really impacted me because I was able to love this character who made a lot of mistakes and just went through a lot of bad things, and it's like she was still lovable. She was still a good character. I could still relate to her. So, it's like it helps me

> kind of see, like: Hey, Maybe I can forgive myself too, a little bit, and not be so hard on myself.

The process of seeing and hearing her own mental health struggles within YAL provided Beth the opportunity to recognize mental health as one facet of her growing identity and accept herself more fully. She further explained the way the YAL solidified her identity when she stated:

> I feel like young adult literature, has done a lot of solidifying those main markers of my identity.… like young adult literature, explores all these different things. And so, I guess, like seeing all these different things as kind of like allowed me to say: No, this is who I am like. This is how for the things I... I guess, like I can't change the fact that I'm white, but like I could change how I identify like my gender, or whatever. And so, I guess it's just kind of like solidified like, hey, this is who I am. This is how I see the world. But also, it's kind of been like a balancing act of like my core values, and who I've always just like knew who I was, have been solidified. But then, also, just seeing like. Hey, but there's people that aren't like me. That has been kind of where, like the more open mindedness, and like the shift, has been so I feel like young adult literature has contributed to both of those things, just like being sure and like, confident in who I am. But also realizing that again that not everybody is like me. And so, I can still like be exposed to those things.

For Beth, the reading of YA texts over time provided multiple opportunities to see and hear herself as well as compare her identity markers with others and decide the way she wanted to grow into who she is. This identity confirmation process allowed Beth to securely process her "emotional instability" and come into confidence in declaring "I decided this is who I want to be."

Maeve also expressed the importance of seeing and hearing the self in order to confirm her identity. She delineated this contribution when she described:

> Well, I guess I mean a big part of it is just, you know, growing up, discovering who you are and then who you are as you identify. And that was definitely a big part of my life in middle school trying to figure out. Who am I? What do I want to do with my life? That sort of thing so growing up and then seeing that, and then seeing it, all these characters who we're queer, or were just atheist, or doesn't believe in a God or anything like that, was really important for me to discover. Instead of just listening to all these songs about growing up as Christian in the South and all that or watching these movies. They were all just inspirational, I found God sort of deal, and that wasn't really me. So that was really helpful.

The process of accessing multiple YAL stories with varying identity facets that Maeve questioned for herself proved consequential for her identity confirmation and additionally contributed to the value she places on empathy and caring for others as a part of her identity. She elaborated:

> I mean, as a kid reading those books was really important, because it made me feel seen in a way that I feel like I really needed in the moment. And then. So now that I've been seen, I've been heard, I feel like I've been listened to, I have the ability to see other people and try and see who they are, how they're feeling so I can uplift them, too. And I feel like this sort of important cycle in a way. So, I've definitely grown through being seen being heard, and I feel like it's helped me understand myself, but also understand others.

Additionally, she concluded by repeating the importance of seeing and hearing of the self in contributing to her identity:

> I feel like through YA, I'm getting to like, see myself and my identity in those books for a long time I was able to center myself, and then also I was able to look beyond myself and see those other characters that I didn't relate to…and figure them out once I'd figured myself out, so I feel like it was really important in the identification process. If you understand yourself, it's a lot better to understand other people.

For Maeve, the overall process of reading YA texts across her life and into today continues to expand her ability to see and hear her own identity and come to deeper understanding of herself in ways that then allows integration of the trait of understanding into her holistic identity.

Similar to Maeve, Lana also discussed the importance of nuanced representation in YA texts that contributed to her larger sense of self. She explained:

> I think it's kind of that thing again about representation. Sometimes…. The only place you get to see yourself, especially like in a community like I did growing up where there is very like one type of person, you're like allowed to be… and that's kind of all that's ever modeled to you. And that's kind of like the trajectory of your identity and personality because that's all you're told you're supposed to be that's the only option. And then, when you read these stories of other options… and your like, I was able to find stuff that more fit me. And then kind of followed those stories in my own life.

Lana's experiences with YAL within the context of her younger life gave her opportunity to see and hear herself in a way that promoted growth and self-discovery which led to a pathway that confirmed and solidified her identity. Lana repeated:

> For me, I think when I read something, and I want to keep it. It's constantly just like hits you, like punches you in the gut a little bit, and it's like: Oh, that resonates with me! I should think about that for a little bit. And sometimes for me I just have to like, put the

> book down for a little bit, think about it, and come back to it, and I think it just kind of at some point over time, just like… like I don't know… just like it takes hold like. If you like, tell yourself something enough times, it becomes true. It's like, if you read something enough like that, I guess, is the same concept kind of… if you read enough that you can be whatever you want, and you can decide your own path in life like you're going to eventually believe that. And that's kind of what happened for me. Seeing people in books decide to break away from what was expected of them, or whatever, and choose to go off and do what they believe is important.

The accumulation of multiple YA texts contributed to Lana's journey of stepping into herself and contributed to her ability to pursue her own beliefs and embody her identity traits outside of expectations and contextual pressures. Similar to Beth, Lana reflected that YA, "…will help me be a little kinder to myself because it reminded me just how much I had to overcome to be who I am today."

Another salient point within the identity contribution of seeing and hearing the self for identity confirmation revealed itself in the number of participants who discussed specific integration of characters' traits or abilities into their own personalities. Alexis, Lana, Maeve, Bree, Skye, Rose, and Elena all noted this type of contribution. Specifically, Rose and Elena both shared that the experiences of seeing and hearing the self and then embodying certain traits remain apparent to others. Rose succinctly stated:

> I think young adult literature has helped my sense of self in that or like helps form my sense of itself in that the things that somebody would point out about my personality like… I love people. And I like to be around people a lot and make friends. I think that has been really heavily influenced by young adult literature.

Similarly, Elena explained how her roommate's reading of *A Throne of Glass* (Maas, 2012) provided insight into Elena's personality for him because of the way she has come to embody some of the protagonist's character traits. Elena recounted:

> He's like but reading this I understand why you like it. He's like, I can feel reading it... I see a lot of your personality in the book. I feel like I can understand more of why you react in certain situations or why you like certain things…I just thought it was interesting that he picked up on that. So, it's not necessarily something I've necessarily thought of, but based on that kind of [conversation] I know that does happen…certain things that I've read have appeared in my personality in the way I react or like view things.

The integration of personality traits based on YAL texts and characters proved to be salient across the data and one additional way that participants in this study demonstrated the finding that seeing and hearing the self to confirm their identity contributed to their continued process of becoming who they are.

Expressing One's Voice and Stepping into One's Power

The fourth key finding for how YAL contributed to participants' identities revealed itself in the ways participants discussed and demonstrated in their reader responses their creativity, self-expression, and confidence gained from their reading lives. One of the main findings of creativity and self-expression appeared in participant reader responses to individual texts and overall creative reflections on YAL they've read in their lives. For instance, Alexis in response to the ending of the YAL course she participated in expressed the importance of YAL texts and characters through a poem. She wrote:

> I'm like Hermione
>
> The girl with her nose always buried in a book

But I am not only like Hermione

I am a collection of all that I have read;

Whimsy, the girl who is So Good at Smiling

Katniss, the Girl on Fire

Tris, the Divergent

I am an archive of the heroes that saved me

I weld their stories like Inej's daggers

I use them to survive like Katsa

The girls from the stories are all living within me

and I am living because of them

In her interview, Alexis shared that this poem came from her real feeling that no one character representation showed her identity, but rather the many heroines, "are pieces of the of the puzzle of me." Thus, she desired to express each character's contribution to her identity through creative verse.

Similarly, Rose and Bree exhibited creativity in response to their YA reading through poetry. For example, Rose reflected on the connection between identity, YAL, and her own creative endeavors of writing in response to *Monster* (Myers, 1999). She expressed:

Who am I?

I ask that, not

in wondering who

but in wondering what

my purpose is.

I have purpose and

place.

I had to figure at least part of that
out before I stepped into this campus,
this moment,
this reading and writing,
into the future.

I found that
like Myers I want to be, “landscape artist.”
I want to build worlds,
explain my own, understand
someone else’s, tell someone
that theirs

isn’t empty.

It’s full. Flowering and peopled.
It should be.
And every page I
ingest, digest, and
speak back into
a room full of ready ears and eyes—

everything I read and write

should be peopled,

should be

human.

Because everyone asks,

who am I?

Rose used her experience with YAL to help contribute to her identity as a writer and to express the interconnected ways she views storytelling. In her interview, she explained this drive towards writing from her reading. She stated:

> …my reading right now is preparing me for writing, and I'm picking up on things that that are appealing, that I like, and that I remember liking, and that other people liked. So, my fiancée loves to read as well, and I've been able to pick his brain like, what are the things that you like to read growing up? And why? Like, why were those appealing to you? What do you think when you read a book? How does it affect you? And I ask a lot of people, those questions when I find out that they love to read. Because I want to know what am I going to write that is actually going to matter to somebody. And I'm learning as well that it's okay to just write what I love as well, because if I'm writing what I love, chances are somebody else is going to like it, too. So just finding out what I was interested in like, this kind of thing is really helpful to me because I'm reflecting now. And I'm like, it's this reason, I think, looking back on it now that really attracted me to this or that book and how it, how it affected me. So, I think a lot of my reading in college,

> and right now is influenced by how I'm going to write and how I want to share stories with other people.

For Rose, the ties that bind her reading, writing, and creative self appeared as a clear contribution she sees YA texts making in her identity formation.

Creativity and self-expression also presented in Bree's reader responses through videos about *Raybearer* (Ifueko, 2020) and also in poetry in response to *Say Her Name* (Elliott, 2020). She wrote:

> One
>
> I was taught
>
> That I am a Black Girl Miracle
>
> To never be ashamed of who I am
>
> To stand for what I believe in
>
> Two
>
> I was also taught
>
> Ladies are to be seen and not heard
>
> So sometimes I cower
>
> Like a Mouse
>
> Because as Black women
>
> You're either over sexualized, fantasize, or look too good to where
>
> Someone just has to have
>
> Has to have
>
> Has to have
>
> What they just can't

Have

Three

I was taught

To ride For My People

But all skin folk ain’t kinfolk

So you have to be careful

Four, Five, Six

I was taught

They Fear Your Shadow

Not in the literal sense

But in the figurative sense

Because if your Hands ain't Up

Then they are scared for their life

As if your life ain’t as important or Sacred as theirs

So this is For Saundra

Who never made it home

Another Black woman slain

Another Black woman gone

Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten, Eleven

I was taught

To laugh in the face of ignorance

We are taught young on How to Protest

Even How to Resist

You get angry

You get mad

But you must feel

You must feel when we say We Can’t Breath

Or we Just want To Be Free

How we are tired of singing

We Shall Overcome

Why sing when nothing has been getting done

Now I ended with

Twelve

With Twelve names that we must always remember

Twelve names who deserved life

Twelve names that I was taught

And watch in fear that one day

I would be the name smeared on the TV to remember

One Emmet Till by the hands of a white mob

SAY HIS NAME

Two Breyonna Taylor killed while laying in her

SAY HER NAME

Three Tamir Rice by the hands of cops

SAY HIS NAME

Four Freddie Gray by the hands of cops

SAY HIS NAME

Five Trayvon Martin by the hands of George Zimmerman

SAY HIS NAME

Six George Floyd by the hands of cops while yelling I CAN'T BREATHE

SAY HIS NAME

Seven Mike Brown by the hands of cops

SAY HIS NAME

Eight Saundra Bland by the hands of cops

SAY HER NAME

Nine Mary Turner by the hands of a white mob

SAY HER NAME

Ten Stephon Clark by the hands of cops

SAY HIS NAME

Eleven Ahmaud Arbery by the hands of white mob

SAY HIS NAME

Twelve Elijah McClain by the hands of cops

SAY HIS NAME

SAY THEIR NAME

Bree's powerful poem demonstrates the way emotive transactions with texts integrate into the creative and self-expressive identity of a reader. Bree incorporated language from Zetta Elliot's collection of poetry to express words she needed to communicate her embodied experience of being a woman of color. Additionally, Bree discussed the importance of carrying forward the traits of self-expression and storytelling with her future career in education. In her interview, she shared:

> And even in that sense, I realized I'm going to be working with kids with the same stories that I've come from. And I think…I told myself, like, if I'm in the situation, I'm not going to be one of those teachers that just say, oh, no, don't do it. I'm going to tell them my story so that way, it's not like I can't connect with them or like I don't understand what's going on. I think a lot of teachers lose touch somewhere between like that teacher, adult and being a person…I just realize, I don't want to be that person… that figure in the room that doesn't show, you know, I have a story to tell you.

Bree's observations about how often people fragment parts of their identity because of certain roles or life stages they enter into, and for her, creativity, storytelling, and self-expression remain contributions to her identity she desires to integrate into her holistic self.

Another way that participants discussed the contribution of self-expression provided through YAL reading emerged through their voicing of how language was given to experience and therefore, they felt they could learn to express their emotions, beliefs, etc. For example, Malaya shared:

> I can really relate to this book because, like, the main character is talking about things that are so personal, and I think anybody who is struggling with anxiety or any kind of depression. Being those words being expressed, I think, would be helpful in their journey of being like: Oh! Like this character, though fictional, is able to express these feelings in this setting. Perhaps I can also do that for myself in my own life. And what could that possibly look like? Could it possibly look like reading more books similar to this? Is, is there a practical thing that I can apply my energy to so that I can, you know, help myself with my own anxiety, with my own demons?

Similarly, this power of naming repeated for Malaya in her observation that, “when I'm reading… And I'm like, Oh, my gosh! This book is so powerful …like it's giving me words to be able to express some things that I had like not been able to find words for.” This process of finding the words and expressing them even if just in reflection proved powerful for Malaya. Specifically, in her interview she explained the ways reading *The Lovely Bones* (Sebold, 2002) at a particular time in her life contributed to her identity and allowed her to step into her power and voice as a survivor of sexual assault. Malaya explained:

> I had gone through like a sexual assault and reading that book like in the time after the assault happened… I feel like really helped me see that there is like hope to be had…that like I can control the narrative of my own story. But you know as like a teenager that was going through it… if you're like blaming yourself because you're like: there must have been something I had done …. And it's like that book helped me process those emotions of like that was a scary thing… and it happened to me. But it's going to be okay, like, I, like just like her, I will… I will fight my own demons. I mean, I'm sure in the moment as like a teen girl, I did not think that…but now, you know, I can like look back… That was like, you know, years and years ago, I can look back and think like: okay like that…That book gave me courage to like push through.

Through the processing of a fictional YA story, Malaya found the words to express her emotions and find the confidence and courage to share her story. This experience provided Malaya the opportunity to take control of her narrative and demonstrate her power over her own story and its meaning for her overall identity.

Veronica and Lana also discussed and wrote about the ways reading YA texts provided them a way to integrate expressing their voice and stepping into their power through developing

confidence in their identities. For Veronica, the connection to characters while reading gave her space to see the value in her own self-expression. She stated:

> It definitely helps with, you know, you know, solid, solidifying something that I had thought of, or something that you know, I hadn't thought of before, or you know, a lot of it is self-identity and self-expression, too, because these characters they can be, whoever they want to be they were who the author created them to be, but they found their way in, you know, so they help develop all sorts of things that I wouldn't have ever thought of, you know, or realized that I had, you know, been able to relate to a fictional character in any way.

Veronica's connections with these characters in YAL allowed her to see how one can step into their own identity and participate fully in their life and claim who they are. She repeated the importance of this in discussing *In the Wild Light* (Zentner, 2021). Veronica explained:

> It was her growth and development as a character that I definitely think helped me. Because I was like, if I can see this fictional character make a change, I think I can, too. And so that really helped me with my self-esteem, and who I grew… grow to be as a person…And seeing that in in Delaney was, you know, confirmation that okay, I can do this right. I did this right. That was… that was important for me to find because I thrive on, you know, affirmation and stuff like that. And it was comforting to find really it was… It was more comforting than it was anything because I knew that I was okay, and that I can do and be the person that I was in high school, and you know, it doesn't matter now, because high school was totally different, you know. And so, I was able to see that in her. And it was, it was really nice.

Veronica found self-expression and confidence in relationship to the character of Delaney, but also this momentary connection grew into a more personally held value that integrated into her own expression of confidence in herself. She wrote, “I am now a little more confident in my Southern roots. I'm not ashamed that I have an accent or that I use words that sound made up, because that's all a part of my culture and way of life.”

Similar to Veronica, Lana also expressed how critical reading *A Wrinkle in Time* (L’Engle, 1962) became in her development of confidence and self-expression. She expounded:

> …to me this message in that and the movie that came out a few years ago was more of like about like accepting yourself and like, physically, your body and like you have…having confidence and stuff. And that helped me a lot. Growing up just, you know, accepting myself and insecurities and things that are common to, you know. Teenage girls, I suppose.

The importance of self-acceptance and stepping into her physical body like the protagonist in *A Wrinkle in Time* (L’Engle, 1962) mattered deeply to Lana. Another key takeaway that Lana expressed came through in her interview when talking about the way self-expression, creativity, and confidence provide her power to fail forward. She reflected the way YA texts gave her that belief. She said, “Because it's like, oh, yeah, I can fail in real life, and it will be okay, like, it's not the end of the world. I can take my time and figure out what I need to like these people have.” Overall, the expressing of one’s voice and stepping into one’s power presented itself as an impactful finding in this study and connected to the final findings in this section as self-expression and confidence deeply relate to the participants’ ability to engage with the world and build community.

Engaging the World, Standing Up, and Building Community

The final finding of how YAL contributes to participants' identity appeared through participants explanations of gaining purpose and drive to engage their worlds, stand up for themselves and others, as well as in the process build community across readers. This finding presented in nine out of ten participants. Engagements with social worlds revealed themselves differently across participant discussions. For some participants, engagement revolved around issues of social justice and participation in civic activism and responsibilities. For example, Beth discussed the ways in which YAL offered opportunity to reflect and then participate in action towards social justice causes. She shared:

> Just like… obviously, I see a lot of injustice in the books that is a main plot... It's like something's wrong, and we need to fix it with no matter like how high or low the stakes are. And so, I feel like as I read those things… it just kind of like motivates me to solve an issue, whether it has to do with that book or not. And just like solving injustice because, like, obviously with fantasy, books like, there's some injustices that aren't real, but it's like the principle is real. Like most of the time people are being taken advantage of or people aren't being provided for and that obviously crosses over to our world. So, I feel it opens my eyes to injustice. And then, I kind of transfer it to like back to the real world.

Though Beth remarked on the way YAL helps her slow down and listen and learn first, she also indicated the way this learning transferred into problem solving and practice in the real world. She explained that she continues:

> …trying to take what I'm seeing in these books, and seeing that power and the passion that these fictional characters have, and being able to like… become that passionate and

> kind of convince other people, or show people why they should be passionate about like these real world issues, and maybe not like necessarily answering the questions, but just being like, Hey, this is why we should care. We might not solve it. We might not like do something great this time, but like just caring about it and being aware is kind of at least where I stand. I don't feel like, I'm going to solve any major issues. But I'm still contributing even in like a small way.

These small acts of learning and engaging others about varying social issues presented in YAL contributes to Beth's identity as it allows her to embody her beliefs and values of openness, compassion, learning, and communication. One of the main ways Beth discussed her participation in social action and civic engagement involved standing up against censorship and book banning that continues to rise in the U.S. She observed:

> So yeah, just thinking about how much young adult literature has impacted me and how much I know it has impacted like my peers. That just makes me want to continue to stand up against book bans and allow these books just to exist, because even if it's not meant for me, it very well is meant for somebody else. And so, I feel like it just It makes me want to continue to just like value books, not just in the classroom, but just everywhere, like value books and not try to like, put a censor or a lock on them…Definitely more on, the protecting reading. Because I know how powerful it can be. And that's not a bad thing. That's not something to be afraid of. If anything reading has done for me, it's allowed me to be secure in who I am, because I've seen the other alternatives rather than kind of like I feel like people are scared of…They're going to brainwash you into thinking you're somebody you're not, and that's not been the case, at least not my case, and I don't know of anybody who that's been the case for. If anything, it's going to make

> you secure in your identity or allow you to explore and become the person that you do want to be…

Beth's commitment to access and literacy proved important to her as YAL remained a key contributor to her identity formation and security in herself.

Similarly, to Beth, Elena voiced the ways she saw YAL contributing to her ability and her peers' abilities to stand up and engage in the social world. She elaborated:

> I used to be very, very shy and I was very reserved and I had a fear of like meeting new people….And so I think like reading in a way, early on some books have allowed me to…I think, especially dystopian because it's like younger people kind of like standing up and just doing all these really risky things and kind of standing up to like a higher government or some kind of higher power. And I think that has helped me. I'm like, well, I think I could do that…

She continued later in her interview expounding on how this genre of YAL has in her view created a phenomenon of social engagement and standing up for themselves and others. Elena stated:

> I remember like previously in the semester we were talking about like dystopian novels and we were talking about like kind of like this teenagers, like standing up to the higher power of the government and how you can kind of see how that has affected the generation because now, I feel like a lot of people like my age are not afraid to express what they believe and their thoughts or stand up to those higher powers. And I think that is specific example… I can kind of see that in myself, now, I'm kind of not, not as much afraid anymore. I say what I believe or stand up for like what I think is right.

For Elena, the particular experiences with dystopian YAL texts affected her confidence and overall self-expression that contributed to her identity and ability to stand up and engage in social and civic conversations.

Similarly, Skye expressed the importance of reading *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) and their attribution to its role in their identity marker of activist. They said, "So for *Hunger Games*, you have community being able to read with people and the constant pushing back, testing boundaries, doing what you wanted, doing what was right…because that activism is big for me." The push back against ideas or actions from positions in power proved key for Skye's activist personality. They repeated that seeing characters stand up against people in power whether parental, school, governmental bodies showed them, "you can be an activist. You can… You can fight back against the system." Through these examples, Skye explained overall the way that YAL contributes to their embodiment of this identity. They explained:

> It makes me more proactive. That is probably the best way I can describe it. It makes me more proactive…Sometimes it'll light a fire under my butt. If I don't realize something's been going on for so long like, oh this book was written in 2022. We're still talking about X. All right. What can I do? So, it makes me proactive. It wakes me up, and especially with like the history stuff I read. Not all of its recent but the problems in it are. We're talking about issues of equality. I need to do something. So, it really does make me proactive and kind of lights a fire under my butt. As I said, if I'm not reading a certain genre enough and I realize that while I'm reading the genre, pick up another book. So, it makes me proactive. It makes me actually have to do something.

For Skye, YAL propels them forward into action and movement towards living out and into their values for society.

This momentum towards action and speaking out based on participants' reading also appeared in Maeve and Rose's interviews. For Maeve, she discussed her initiation of connecting reading to practical application now that she is in college. She stated:

> …It's also the time for growth. Anyways, you know, try new things. I've never tried before meeting people that sort of thing. Also, it's really gotten me sort of into political activism in a way, I guess. Yes. Encouraging…Go vote, you know. Go do your part sort of deal. Make sure your voice is heard.

Maeve's active pursuit of diverse YAL offered her a multiplicity of perspectives and issues to consider engaging with in social and political contexts; thus, contributing to her identity as a budding activist and voter. Like Maeve, Rose discussed the importance of YAL contributing to her intentions to move away from fear and allow her to engage with others. Rose explained the way YAL affected her by reminders of her capacity to pursue, "…doing hard things. Like doing hard things, and speaking up, and that kind of thing and not letting fear control me, I think was another thing." Over time and different reading transactions with YA texts, Rose expressed empowerment and formation of her abilities to engage in action to voice her convictions.

A salient point in the findings across half of the participants arose in the way participants discussed building community and critical relationship bonds because of their YAL reading. For some this community involved specific books and timings while others talked about the way those momentary reading communities turned into lifelong friendships. For instance, Skye shared in regard to reading specifically *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) during middle school, "So, like there's that community aspect too. It's like, oh, I'm reading this, and everyone else is reading this, and we can talk about it. So, it's almost community forming at that point," Additionally, Elena observed a similar experience reflecting the criticality of reading YAL to her

growing identity. She stated, “I think for me it was like, I guess I would say it kind of helped me build like a sense of community. So, I think that's why, like even today reading has always just like stuck with me and been a very important part of my life.” Rose also expressed the influential and contributing factor of YAL when she concluded, “So, I think that maybe if I was going to name 2 things that were really important, that I think were heavily influential on me from books. It would be making friends and valuing friendship.” These few excerpts demonstrate the relational contributions to participants’ identities as well as their values for reading and connecting with others. More explicit discussion of YAL’s role in connecting participants to their social and career worlds will be discussed in the next section as building community could not have occurred without the role of a connector.

The findings presented in this second section answered the second question of this research study: In what ways does reading YAL texts contribute to the identities of self-identified YA readers? Participants indicated in this study YAL’s identity contributions in five distinct ways: *reflecting for self-growth and integration, growing in perspective taking and empathic skills, seeing and hearing the self for identity confirmation, expressing one’s voice and stepping into one’s power*, and finally, *engaging the world, standing up, and building community*. Overall, through these findings the participants shared that YA texts and transactions with these texts proved contributory to their identities. The roles YA texts possessed for participants will be explored in the next section.

Roles of YA Texts Over Time

Across the participants’ interviews and reader responses YAL proved a pivotal contributor to the development and reinforcement of participants’ varying identities. To reiterate, identity in this study is defined as, “an individual’s sense of self defined by (a) a set of physical,

psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that is not wholly shared with any other person… involves a sense of continuity… the feeling that one's memories, goals, values, expectations, and beliefs belong to the self" (APA, Dictionary of Psychology, 2023). This section of findings shares the role(s) YAL texts have played in YA readers' identities over time. These roles include *role model, caregiver and safe, comforting space, instigator,* and *partner*. Additionally, participants' stories and responses demonstrated roles of *companion* and *connector*. Throughout the data, these roles appeared at differing times and all participants talked about the roles developing over the span of their reading lives.

Formative Role Models for Developing Sense of Self and Relationship to Others

Out of the many roles YAL played in participant lives, the role of a mentor or model emerged as a distinctly named role. Several participants mentioned the importance of watching characters grow up alongside them or seeing them approach situations and using those scenarios to consider their own approach as outlined in the first section. Thus, following the fictional characters' examples– whether positive, negative, or neutral–came up when asking participants directly about what role YAL has played for them over time. Most succinctly, Alexis envisioned this role model or mentor through the metaphor of family which demonstrates the importance of the transactive process of *connecting to characters*. She explained:

> I would say that YA has been kind of like the older sibling that I never had. I am an only child, and so I never really had anyone to like… First of all, I never really had anyone to like hang out with, probably why I was always buried in the book, but I think without realizing it. We're…I'm just doing so much without even knowing it. Without realizing it. I probably based a lot of my personality off of these characters that I read about which I

> don't think it's turned out to be a bad thing so far. I think I'm a pretty decent person. Like how a younger sister would try to be like her big sister.

This relational role of an older sibling proved salient for Alexis as YAL provided her over time multiple examples of who she could become and what type of personality and choices she could make within her own life. Similarly, Veronica shared that YAL acted as a model for who and how she could grow into herself over time. She stated:

> I feel like I was kind of growing with them in the stories. It was like they were experiencing themselves for the first time and figuring out what they were doing with their lives for the first time, and I was doing the same thing. I was able to, you know, kind of see, like…you know, like form stronger opinions about certain things, and be able to have multiple perspectives. Then, you know, I previously did. And so, while they were, you know, first finding themselves, I think I was starting to kind of like complete myself in a sense. That I was being able to see these things that were happening in these fictional characters lives and relate them back to my own. And it kind of like reinforced different things that I had implemented in myself. But it was… It was a reinforcement really it was stronger glue, or more wood, or something that I was able to put into my life…

Veronica's experience over time of reading different fictional stories with characters who provided "multiple perspectives" allowed her to see growth first and then decisively choose to follow in their footsteps or use the example to reinforce her own ideas. Thus, YAL acted as a mentor for her path of identity formation. In addition to Alexis and Veronica, other participants implied this role of mentor or model in the ways they discussed incorporating personality traits (e.g., pursuing intelligence like Hermione and Anna Beth), fashioning their hairstyles and

outward appearance (e.g. wearing a braid and pin like Katniss), standing up for their beliefs (e.g. attending Black Lives Matter protests like Starr), or enacting friendship (e.g. bonding like Harry, Ron, and Hermione). The role of mentor and role model also intersected with other roles, especially the following role of safety and comfort provided through YAL stories that created enjoyment, escape, and experiential learning.

Safe and Comforting Space for Enjoyment, Escape, and Experience

According to all ten participants, YAL functioned in the role of a safe, comforting space for them to enjoy and escape into a story or experience varying scenarios in safety. This marker of safety led Beth to remark, "So, I feel like young adult is such a safe like space for me…like when I think of reading, that's what I think of…" Similarly, Alexis noted how she returns to specific stories from her youth for comfort. She stated, "those are my comfort books… it was like, if I can get back in my little reading spot, and if I can be in this fantasy world with these characters again, it'll be fine." Additionally, Elena reflected:

> Reading young adult literature has allowed me to experience different situations in a safe environment that I never have to experience in real life, but I still learn the lessons that these stories teach which have helped me grow as a person.

Elena viewed YAL as a safe space for her to grow in her understanding of herself and the world because the stories provided vicarious, new experiences. Escapism for Elena marked her choices for YAL reading due to the demands in her everyday life. She explained the role of comfort and safety through escape when she shared:

> I want to escape, I want to read something that like I'm not going to experience in everyday life... after, like taking all these really hard science classes and doing research and being a very, very factual, scientific person and kind of getting a break and I'm like,

> we'll just go on like a fantasy world for a while…almost get like a mind break from all that other stuff.

Though YAL functions in the role of a safe and comfortable way to escape her everyday life, Elena also noted that through the safety and comfort of fantasy worlds she not only experiences enjoyment, but also explained that the escape into other spaces strengthens her creative and problem-solving abilities. Similarly, Rose described the way reading provided safety and comfort in the midst of discovering her neurodivergent identity. She elaborated:

> …the fact that reading was such like a tune out thing for me like I could just tune out. The whole world is not making a lot of sense in light of the fact that I'm figuring out I have some attention deficit problems in that…when I read, I can just take a step back from everything and just be like, I'm just going to go to a different place right now. And it's interesting to look back now and see little me using reading as like, not an escape, because, like, I wasn't trying to run away from anything. But just as a time to just tune out So I think that that's probably part of my identity that's really connected to reading or has some like… plays some role in why I enjoy reading so much.

For Rose, she viewed reading YAL "not as an escape" but a safe space to go when facing too much stimulation or external attention demands; these experiences promoted enjoyment and vicarious experience that she attributes to her identity growth over time. Finally, additional short statements from Lana and Bree point to the way YAL functioned as safe, comforting space to enjoy themselves and escape. Lana wrote:

> One of the reasons I enjoy reading so much is because they provide an escape into a different world. I grew up in a time where the world was facing one tragedy after another, so even the brief distraction of a book has always been welcome.

For Lana the escape into reading YA gave her a sense of comfort and safety from the worldly tragedies across her lifetime. Bree briefly shared a similar sentiment when discussing why fantasy YA continues to be a comfort space and genre for her. She stated, “I think fantasy is like a sense of escapism in a way like you can just dive yourself into this world, even if you've never seen the world, you can just dive yourself into a world where it's just not as much going on as like real life things.” The diving into another world for Bree, like Lana, gave her safe retreat from the conflicts, obstacles, and responsibilities of everyday life. Throughout all participant interviews and reader responses, YA texts took on the role of safe, comforting space to enjoy, escape, and experience. The safety and comfort proved to be a critical role as participants possessed the ability to then grow and learn as will be explored further in the next role.

Instigator and Partner in Learning and Growth

In addition to the roles of formative models and safe spaces, participants in this study also shared how YAL functioned to both instigate and partner in their personal learning and growth over time. As the first section discussed, all participants mentioned the process of learning through their momentary transactions with YA texts, but YAL continued to spur more questions, answers, and partnered with participants outside of the bounds of a single reading transaction. Lana most clearly discussed this in her interview. She explained:

> I think that for me a few years ago would have been the like the instigator of my, the evolution of my identity. But now for me…It's just kind of…I guess a partner in it. Something that I can come back to and explore with and lean on as I continue to evolve and change because I'm still a college student. A lot of growing to be had. So, I, yeah, I think it's just something that I do come back to all the time of like this is a topic I want to

> learn about in the world or in myself. And here's how we're going to do it. We're going to do it with this partner, I've made in this character in the book.

For Lana, YAL served a role of instigating her learning about herself and others, but then shifted into more of a partner over time that she returns to when seeking knowledge and growth. Through the returning to YAL, Lana, like other participants, continues to shape and explore how to form her identity.

Similarly, Skye discussed the way YAL functions to instigate and partner through the metaphor of caregiving. When asked what role YAL played in their life, Skye elaborated:

> I was going to say, Gardner, but it's basically… so it's not a parent. All right, it's not directly telling me and giving me a reinforcement. It's a caregiver. So, it's there when I need it. Whether that is in a: All right. Here's this little nugget of knowledge or get your ass up out of the bed. You need to do something. A caregiver is that kind of… it's a step back from like a parent or sibling that comes in. And while, I have to obviously initiate that by picking up a YA book, but the YA book at that time is in charge. I feel like I'm in charge, right? Because, you know, I've accepted the YA book or the caregiver, but it's doing the heavy lifting and making me do the other heavy lifting.

Skye's metaphor of caregiver as YAL's role falls within the bounds of the overarching thematic role of instigator and partner. As they explained, the YA texts instigate learning and development of "knowledge" when needed while also partnering with the reader to work through the "heavy lifting" together. Skye and Lana alongside other participants like Beth, Malaya, and Bree specifically noted transactions or contributions made to their identities that embody this role of instigator and partner. One reason for this remains the nature and qualities of YAL. As Bree mentioned, "I feel like young adult literature is the literature that people steer clear from because

it has like… it's written like in in a sense of truth, if that makes sense, but has a lot of lessons within it." For participants in this study the connection to this "sense of truth" mattered as YAL filled the role of being a driving force toward discovering the truth about themselves and others despite any stigmas or detraction surrounding the genre. Overall, these participants demonstrated partnership with YAL throughout their reading lives to develop deeper awareness and understanding of their identities.

Companion in Loneliness and Exploring Emotions

One distinct type of partnership participants disclosed within their interviews and reading responses appeared as the unnamed role of companion and specifically, in the sense of companion and present helper in times of loneliness and emotional exploration. Across the data, this study found participants' recollections of how YAL made them feel less alone. Malaya shared this finding when she explained, "I feel like a lot of YA texts, that's what it like it does. It makes you feel like you're not alone in the circumstance that you're in… It doesn't resolve your loneliness, but it's a beginning of perhaps one's journey to processing the emotions." The beginning of processing emotions and the companionship for Malaya found in YAL proved crucial not only because it provided language for her experiences and a sense of being "not alone." YAL also gave the sense of "not alone" through the way it validated emotions and experience. Malaya stated, "Young Adult Literature makes me feel seen and heard, and in ways that I feel like sometimes I don't feel in my real life. You know, sometimes, like… it helps me realize that my experience is real, and that the feelings that I have…. They are valid." For Malaya the companionship of YAL affirmed her and gave her a sense of connection to herself and others in the midst of loneliness or emotional exploration. Similarly, Bree described YAL's

presence and companionship throughout her life and specifically, her time in educational spaces. She reflected:

> I think at a time when you're not like exposed to authors that look like you as much, especially in education, if you're not exposed to authors that look like you on top of not being exposed to teachers that look like you. I think, when I did grasp a like a piece of literature, especially YA literature that had characters of… Black people characters, basically. I really hung on to those stories as much as I could.

The loneliness and lack of exposure to Black teachers and creators for Bree caused her to find YAL acting in the role of companion during her educational life. The stories she "hung on" to provided her a connection to herself and her community.

Veronica also discussed the role of companionship but using dual roles of friend in loneliness and therapist in realms of emotional exploration. She explained:

> …it was also a place where I could relate to people that were, you know, like feeling the same way I did. So, you know, like I had friends that didn't have a clue about all of these things that I was going through. But you know, you pick up a book, and they do. And so, it was kind of like. I guess a role of a friend is what it kind of played in in my life, because it was something I could relate to and could understand. And it would help me in almost the role of a therapist to like, not clinically or anything, but it was something that it made me think and helped me work through something. So, it played, you know, kind of big roles in how I think and interact with people as a whole. And I think a friend helps with interaction and a therapist helps with how I'm thinking. So that's an odd analogy. But that's the only way I know how to put it.

For Veronica, the dual roles of friend and therapist proved critical for her development over time as she sought out YA texts to explore the emotional landscape of her life in a way that her relational ends couldn't meet. She found a companion in YAL full of understanding for her feelings, but also aiding her in thinking through the varying circumstances she faced in identity development. Maeve also noted this critical companionship. She recounted, "…when I was a teenager it felt like absolutely no one understands what I'm thinking, what I'm feeling, except these books." Maeve voiced the way YA texts met participants in this study and made them feel less alone.

Finally, Rose also shared across multiple stories the role of companion during loneliness YAL had for her spanning from childhood into young adulthood. One specific story she shared explored the way YA texts met her during a particularly hard season of relational and emotional turmoil. She communicated:

> At one point I think my eighth-grade year I went to the same school, my entire life so Pre-k to senior year of high school and my eighth-grade year the one friend that was like my close friend. She kind of got interested in other things, and kind of left me in the dirt and it was like I was in a school where I knew everyone and had no friends, and it wasn't a big school, but it felt big in that moment, and it felt lonely. So, I started my eighth-grade year. I vividly remember going to my mom an orientation day and just like weeping. And I was like, I'm so lonely like. Nobody wants to hang out with me, and I don't know how to make friends… And I think that I knew the value of friendship deeper through books at that point, because I would see it in the things that I would read. Just like relationships are pivotal. They change you; you meet people, and they change your lives. And that's something that shows up in fiction for a reason because it's important to

> our actual reality. And so, I think that was something that I learned and appreciated from books, especially young adult literature. I think that's like such a valuable facet is it like makes you feel a little less alone and encourages you to do hard things because you have these characters that are your age that are doing crazy things. And yeah, it's fiction. But you can apply that same abstract… You can do crazy things to real life. You can apply that to your life. So, I think things like doing hard things, doing the things that the hero would do, for like, to speak in a little bit of cheesy terminology. Doing what the hero would do is kind of cool, and not to like make yourself the main character. But to just like, you can do things like you don't have to live in fear, because I think fear is something that I really struggle with, especially when I had these moments where I was all alone.

Through this story, Rose shared the way YAL acted as a companion in a time of loneliness and provided her reinforcement on how to value friendship and how to do the "hard thing" of making new friends despite feeling alone. Overall, participants in this study show how during times of need and desire YAL stepped into the role of companion whether that companionship provided validation, presence, emotional resonance, friendship, or encouragement.

Connector to Social and Career Worlds

The mentorship, comfort, safety, instigation, partnership, and companionship of YAL for participants in my study certainly intersected with the connections made across their social lives and career trajectories. The last role participants overwhelmingly discussed in reader responses and interviews **formed in the role of connector—connector to social worlds and connector of ideas, pathways, or questions involving their future careers**. To begin, Elena outlined the way that reading YA texts across different phases of her life has often contained an element of social

connection. For example, early on in her reading life she connected with her elementary best friend through the *Maximum Ride* (Patterson, 2005) series which served as a key entry point into her reader identity. She explained:

> I feel like that kind of introduced me into like just being a more avid reader and like, kind of getting into like those young adult books. So, I got into middle school. I started expanding into like the young adult dystopian novels, and then I met another girl in my band class and like she was reading the same book as me. And so, then we connected, and we were still like really good friends today. We actually… I hadn't talked to her in a while and we caught up last week, but we like really connected through reading and like that's kind of how we made our friend group in middle school. But just I think like really has always been at least a part of my life and like a part of like kind of creating some of like the long-lasting friendships I've had.

The social connection through YA texts for Elena proved pivotal not just for deepening her reader identity, but also gave her a pathway to create social connection in her life across time. She elaborated later in her interview when she discussed the social aspect and impact YA texts have relationally even across technology. Elena articulated:

> … there was more of a social aspect to it. Because of these books, I really loved to enjoy reading, and then I also kind of had this community of people that I could like talk about them with…And we all had book Instagrams where we would like make posts and talk about our favorite books. If there's a movie about it coming out, we'd make posts about the movies and then we'd just talk about it to each other and on little group chats.

She went on and discussed how this social connection and use of technology further affected and incorporated into her reading habits and social connections today. Elena observed:

> …also getting into the social aspect of it with like now. So now it's more Tiktok. But at the time it was like Tumblr, Instagram, you like follow for like accounts and like celebrity posts about people would post kind of reviews and like different books that they've read, and I'd like go through. I'm like, Oh, like this person. They like a lot of the same books as I do, and they love this book. I'm probably going to like it too, and I'm going to go try and like read it.

The bonds formed over YA texts as early as her childhood proved an important developing factor for Elena and the role YAL played in connecting her to social networks of like-minded readers continued to shape Elena's identity and action in the world through her social life.

Similarly, Rose described the way that *The Series of Unfortunate Events* (Snicket, 1999) taught her about friendship and companioned her through loneliness until those specific books connected her to a new social world. She explained:

> I made some friends and really bonded over *The Series of Unfortunate Events*, and we had a little club, and it was sort of a joke, but it was also just like it ended up tying the 3 of us together for a long time and like, I can go back and think about those times and be like we like… We were doing all these silly little things and connecting it to the book series. But we were also just like needing each other and like hanging out together. And it brought us together, which was cool.

Not only did her reading of YAL connect her with new friendships, but Rose also voiced how YA texts became a way to bond with her sister. She expressed:

> *The Green Glass House* book, the book that my sister picked out for me. I think that I read that that same year that I was struggling and feeling very alone, and it was also around the same time that my sister and I started getting close. So that was important to

> me, because it was like I was no longer the annoying little sister. I was bonding with her, and that was just cool…. And then I ended up sharing that love of writing and wanting to write books with people that I became friends with, and those were some of the same people that I bonded over The Series of Unfortunate Events with so, it was just that that time in my life like eighth grade year. So right before high school started, right as coming out of the awkwardness of middle school. It was super pivotal for me.

Rose's passion for reading and writing became a salient, sticking point for her over time. She reflected deeper on the way YA texts have shaped her social world:

> There was a point in my high school where I had this revelation, where I was like, okay, I think I…I think books have really influenced the way that I've made friends, and the way that I've made connections with people and I used to think about that a lot…the way it encourages you to make friends and to like care about people and like fellowship with people was really important to me. And I definitely saw the way that that impacted the way I was making friends and pursuing people. And I think that as we've been talking and I've been kind of like drawing out, okay, how has reading impacted me? I think that that is something that I can come back to and harp on is the way it has allowed me to connect with people is tremendous both from the outside. Like literally, we can talk about this book that we both read and bond over it, but also in the stories just the way that friendship is encouraged… And so, I think that that is something that I'm like realizing. That young adult literature… brings people together…it's like it encourages people to understand each other better and to not just understand but make connections with and reach out to other people. And I think I did that like with like enjoying books together with people. And then also learning from characters in the stories.

Rose's stories over the course of her reading life revealed the role YAL played as a social connector for her and remained one of the most important attributed effects on her overall identity that she discussed. While Rose and Elena had more in-depth stories of the social connective role YAL played over time, as discussed in previous sections Skye also found a sense of community through YA texts. Additionally, like Rose, Malaya mentioned one of her favorite memories surrounding the reading of YA manga at the Barnes & Noble in New York City. She reflected the way it connected her to her sister. Malaya shared, "it's something that me and my older sister read like together." This togetherness brought on by YAL proved an important finding in this study.

Not only did participants discuss the way reading YAL played a role in their social connections, but many participants also connected their career worlds to their reading lives. Mentioned or referred to across the data, one of the clearest instances presented during Maeve's interview. When asked about YAL's effects on her identity, Maeve declared:

> I guess that sort of to begin with, I think it sort of helped shape my career. And what I want to do with my life. I mean, definitely, I've gone into political science, because, you know, you want to understand like, sort of the gist of political science is who gets what, why and how that sort of thing. And its sort of understanding interactions between people and how it affects literally everything. So, I guess definitely, reading sort of helped encourage my interest in that sort of way. It also just teaching me the life lessons that I feel like are really important, such as being empathetic, being respectful, and listening sort of those ideas, and then understanding that people are who they are. And that's really important. So definitely, it's helped influence my career. And I feel like it will help influence the decisions I make throughout my career, whatever it might. So, if I'm ever…

> I doubt it… But if I was ever like a public official, or in a public office or anything I feel like it would definitely help me shape my opinions in those ways, because the lessons I learned through those books I'd be using through my career.

Maeve directly tied the reading of YA texts especially dystopian YA favorites like *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) to her career trajectory and world. This connection to her career came through in her reader responses as well in the ways she attended to concepts of revolution and liberty within political systems shown in YA historical fiction like *I Must Betray You* (Sepetys, 2022) or the emphasis she placed on analyzing leadership qualities in the protagonists of *Raybearer* (Ifueko, 2020). Direct ties and implicit connections to Maeve's career world came through as a distinct role YAL played for her.

Other participants also directly named the way YA texts connected them to their career worlds. Lana and Malaya both mentioned their career goals and motivations while responding to texts. Malaya wrote in response to *The Girl in the Castle* (Patterson & Raymond, 2022):

> As someone who hopes to go into the mental health field, stories like this makes me realize how important it is to stay vigilant and be on the lookout for our peers because there are so many that struggle with their inner demons. It was terribly difficult to read her story, but I know that there are many among us who face that same struggle and what a difference it makes to have someone look out for you and remind you that you are loved and wanted.

This concern for and attending to mental health aspects of the stories and characters proved a key way Malaya read YA texts. Her clinician or mental health provider lens came through in reader responses and in her interview when she discussed *We Are All So Good at Smiling* (McBride,

2023) and noted how a text centering clinical depression could serve her future clients. Similarly, Lana wrote in response to *The Marrow Thieves* (Dimaline, 2017):

> I am a Climate Change major, so the world that the characters are living in is what caught my attention. Even though this book is fiction, the world isn't that unrealistic compared to what scientists are saying ours may look like. In the book, they talk about whole cities falling into the sea and constant rain. In class, we are learning about how these kinds of things are actually what we may be facing in the future if the climate crisis doesn't improve. This part of the book has really made me think about what kind of world awaits my kids if nothing gets done about it. It definitely motivates me to stick with my major.

The connections made across dystopian YA and Lana's desired career in Climate Change science demonstrates how YAL served a role of connector to her career interests and motivations. Both Malaya and Lana showed how YAL consciously and subconsciously connected participants to their career goals.

In addition to these specific written and voiced examples, multiple participants who desire to go into education also demonstrated a connection to their future careers by reflecting on how specific YA texts could be used in the classroom, the role of youth in the stories, or visualizations of themes, plots, characters in educational settings. Similarly, participants named preferential genre choices based on career interests. Veronica loves mystery and crime novels because she is a criminal science major and oppositely, Elena prefers fantasy as escape from her engineering science career trajectory, but noted how it helps her problem solving and creativity in workspaces. Beth and Alexis also mentioned in their interviews how reading YA recently caused them to add minors onto their specific career paths; Beth pursuing a social justice minor,

and Alexis adding on an English minor. Overall, all participants in this study revealed the finding that YAL connected them with their social and career worlds.

In conclusion of this third section, the findings in this study demonstrated that participants answered the question of "What role(s) do YA texts play for self-identified YA readers?" in multiple ways. First, participants shared directly named roles of *role model, caregiver* and *safe, comforting space, instigator*, and *partner*. Additionally, participants' shared roles of *companion* and *connector* presented throughout their reader responses and interviews. Thus, illustrating that YAL served participants in this study in varying ways across differing contexts and times of their lives helping to shape their identity.

Identity Work Within the Transactional Process

This last section of findings reports a synthesis of the collective meaning found in the threefold strands explored by analysis of how self-identified YAL readers explain their transactions with YAL texts, the contributions they see as formative to their identities, and the roles YAL has played overtime in their lives. When braiding together the cumulative layering of findings, participants' data demonstrates that transacting with YAL texts are not separate, isolated instances. Rather, participants' interviews and reader responses show evidence of transacting with YAL as iterative identity work. To explore this finding in depth, three participant profiles follow to connect the layering of predominant transactions and the identity work occurring through these transactions over time for each reader. Participants selected were chosen due to the various collective ways their transactions and identity work offer a strong picture of the overall findings across all ten participants' data.

Alexis's Connection Making and Exploring the Current and Future Self

Across Alexis's interview and reader responses the intertwining of identity work and transactional processes with varying texts was apparent. First, Alexis's predominant transactive process was *connecting with characters*. She noted that within her reading of YA texts connection based on age and gender helped her explore similar identity factors of herself. For example, her experience of being the same age as Anna Beth while reading *Percy Jackson* (Riordan, 2005) provided her an opportunity to grow into her intelligence as she read about smart and tough Anna Beth**.** Similarly, when reading *Graceling* (Cashore, 2008) Alexis connected with the strong female character of Katsa. She explained:

> Katsa's perpetual strength and her growth within herself throughout the novel reminded me of a lot of the strong women that I know, including myself. Women go through so much, but we find ways to survive, and somehow come out even stronger.

For Alexis, these two character connections one in her earlier life and another in her more recent transactions with YAL mattered to her overall identity development because of her own experience with growing into her strength as a woman and the witnessing of strong women—both fictional and real—over time. Not only did Alexis demonstrate *connecting to characters* as a key transactive process for identity work, but she also pointed out in her interview how the transactional space with YAL allowed her to *transport into situations* and therefore, consider her own actions. Alexis elaborated:

> I think that YA specifically is good for that, especially for young adults, for people my age, because being a teenager is hard. And being able to read about other teenagers who are doing hard things, are doing whatever, and are overcoming obstacles. It is really beneficial to teenagers themselves to be able to put themselves to either escape into that

> other YA world and get out of whatever's happening in their life, or to be able to put themselves in that person's shoes and be like I can get through whatever this is. And I think that I've kind of done both of those things at different points in my life.

The escapism into narrative fiction described by Alexis provided her space to question and affirm what she would choose to do in similar situations or how she could develop courage to take action in difficult situations because she had read about those situations and characters who make those hard choices. For example, Alexis shared a specific instance of this while reading *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008). She noted the ways in which the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, acted in alignment with her values even if it meant struggle, failure, or consequences. Alexis stated, "That was the right thing to do. She always stuck to her values, no matter what the consequences would be…when I fail, I want to remember, Katniss did this, even when she had the threat of death." Alexis's ability to not only connect to a character, but also transport into the situations and point of view of that narrative provided her the opportunity to simulate her own experience; therefore, meaningful connections to how she desired to act in challenging situations occurred through her transactions with YAL building her sense of self.

Another finding of creativity and self-expression appeared in Alexis's reader responses and creative reflections on the individual texts and overall meaning associated with YAL she has read in her life. In response to the ending of the YAL course, Alexis wrote a poetic expression of the importance specific texts and characters provided her. She wrote:

> I'm like Hermione
>
> The girl with her nose always buried in a book
>
> But I am not only like Hermione
>
> I am a collection of all that I have read;

Whimsy, the girl who is So Good at Smiling

Katniss, the Girl on Fire

Tris, the Divergent

I am an archive of the heroes that saved me

I weld their stories like Inej's daggers

I use them to survive like Katsa

The girls from the stories are all living within me

and I am living because of them

Through this poem, Alexis expressed the collective layering of *connecting to characters* and the meanings made for her own identity along the journey of each transaction. In her interview, Alexis explained that the poem originated from her feeling that no one character could represent her identity, but rather the many heroines, "are pieces of the puzzle of me." Therefore, she used the creative, embodied knowledge of self-expression to share each character's contribution to her own identity.

The cumulative importance of YAL characters and opportunities to transport into situations and perspectives allowed Alexis to envision YAL's role as one of a role model or mentor through the metaphor of family. Specifically, Alexis explained in her interview:

> I would say that YA has been kind of like the older sibling that I never had. I am an only child, and so I never really had anyone to like… First of all, I never really had anyone to like hang out with, probably why I was always buried in the book, but I think without realizing it. We're…I'm just doing so much without even knowing it. Without realizing it. I probably based a lot of my personality off of these characters that I read about which I

> don't think it's turned out to be a bad thing so far. I think I'm a pretty decent person. Like how a younger sister would try to be like her big sister.

The relational role Alexis gave YAL as a metaphorical older sibling proved salient for her ability to see multiple examples over time of who she could become and how her personality could take shape within her own life. Through these role models, a variety of choices, values, beliefs, and ways to step into herself were provided, and resulted in confidence that she—like the characters ahead of her—could be strong, smart, cunning, emotional, and powerful all at the same time.

Malaya's Navigating Emotions and Learning the Path to Resilience and Compassion

Malaya's overall experiences with YAL also demonstrated the finding that identity work occurs through the transactional process. Predominantly transacting through *navigating emotions and learning*, Malaya's interview and reader responses showed the emotional and intellectual development that participants noted as crucial to their experiences with YA texts. A spectrum of emotions comprised Malaya's responses to *We Deserve Monuments* (Hammonds, 2022). She wrote:

> Jas Hammonds has layered so many things in this book. **As a reader, I feel many things** -- amazement, grief, joy, hope, and so much more. Amazement at the relationships within this story, especially the relationship that Avery has with her parents. Grief over the life that Ray could have had, the childhood Zora could have had, for worlds being upended in good and bad ways. Joy at the friendships that Avery, Jade, and Simone made. The silly interactions between Mama Letty and Avery. Hope -- hope that if people try, relationships can be mended, not perfectly but where both people can see the love that they have for each other beyond the pain that they have been put through.

Additionally, the navigation of multiple emotions appeared in Malaya's response to *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet* (Ferguson, 2022). She shared in her written response:

> Reading this book has made me feel so angry and sad on their behalf. It makes me feel so sad that we live in a world where their stories go unheard. Their lives are diminished to stereotypes of gamblers or drunks. How we don't think about how this land, the land we live on is theirs. It makes me wonder how different the world would be if Indigenous people are the ones in charge. The way I felt throughout the book changed, during the bitter parts I felt afraid, small, and I wanted to throw the book, but during the sweet parts I felt warm and hopeful. Jen ended the book on a sweet note, and I think that is to keep the readers hopeful. We live in a dark world and often the bitter moments tend to stick with us, but she chose to give us the gift of hope. Hope that with our own small actions we can make a great impact within our community and lives.

Through these two examples, Malaya demonstrated how she transacts with YAL by navigating multiple emotions within the reading process and thus, develops her own emotional life as well as her connections with the characters and her connection to her own world. Malaya further described the depth of this emotional navigation in her interview when she shared:

> I've been using books as a way to explore emotions, feelings. Yeah, it's yes…. I feel like without… If I didn't read these books, I feel like I would just be… I wouldn't have been able to get to a better place emotionally. Hmm. you know, if when I'm reading books it's like…yeah…like a little bit of magic. So, it brings some joy to my life, and I'm able to confront certain emotions that I perhaps wouldn't have in there in any other setting.

Not only did Malaya share her emotional growth, but also her intellectual growth through transactions of *learning* through reading YAL. She wrote about her informational takeaways from Malinda Lo's (2021) *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*:

> Malinda Lo has given me so much new information about Asian Americans and our history in this country. I did not know that the term "Asian American" was not coined until the 1960s around the Civil Rights Movement. I have recently become more curious about the history that Asian Americans have and found out that the first Asians that were documented to be in the US was Filipinos in 1587 during the Galleon Trade. This book reminded me that there is still so much history that I need to learn.

Through this example, Malaya communicated the way that her intellectual learning about the Asian American community contributed to her own connection to her Asian American identity and the history she still seeks to learn about herself and members of the Asian diaspora.

In addition to her transactions of *navigating emotions and learning*, Malaya also began to express the deeper meaning taken from the ability to *transport into stories*. More specifically, like other readers in this study noted, YAL helped Malaya consider her own ideas for situational understanding of conflicts, relational connections, or social/political dilemmas. She explained in her interview, "Whether that's sexual assault or falling in and out of love, losing friendships, moving…there's just so many ways that YA is helpful." Part of this "helpful" characteristic noted by Malaya and other participants throughout the data remains the diversity of situations and stories provided within YAL.

It is through the diversity of situations and stories that YAL texts provided space for reflecting and growing into various identities. Malaya shared, "It's made me realize how books have really helped me like a reflection. Help me see like, oh, how I've like been seeing

myself…" It is through reflection that Malaya and other participants discussed the process of examining and integrating their backgrounds, beliefs/values, personalities, and understanding of themselves and their stories. Malaya demonstrated this in the questions she asked about herself in reflecting on different texts. For example, when reflecting on Talia Hibbert's (2023) *Highly Suspicious and Unfairly Cute,* Malaya posed questions about the familial storyline when she asked, "Who am I outside of them? What parts can I keep and what parts can I choose to change?" Additionally, in response to Jas Hammonds's (2022) *We Deserve Monuments,* Malaya asked internal questions surrounding who she wants to become as she navigates her world particularly in reflecting on how to allow her identity to authentically take up space. She observed:

> …how often black and brown people, without even realizing it, code switch or conform to white culture and the work that we do to fit in the "larger" culture and hide parts of ourselves so that we can be accepted. How we shrink ourselves because we are not given the grace to embrace our space. How can I change that? Where can I expand and feel the discomfort so that I can embrace more of my identity without the fear of being chastised?

Malaya's internal dialogue and reflective questioning used the reading process to contemplate and discern for herself how to grow through pressing into discomfort and stepping more fully into her identity as a woman of color. These reflections not only pushed Malaya to grow in her own identity, but also her reflections extended into her embodied beliefs and personal response to the world when she wrote, "It reminds me to think about the deeds that we do as humans – what's my motivation? Is it self-serving? Do I do these things out of personal gain or just to be kind?" Malaya's continued questioning and reflection demonstrated not only her ongoing identity development, but also indicated another way her identity continues to be shaped. Malaya

expressed throughout her interview the ways that multiple perspectives offered through YAL helped her foster her curiosity. She shared:

> …it reminds me like this is why you need to stay curious**,** because you know, you don't want to close yourself up in a tiny bubble which is hard to do even though we have the Internet. And we can be connected like people still get stuck inside a bubble where it's like this is my own world. And this is all I'm willing to hear and see. But like reading different types of YA books helps me realize like: **Okay. I need to stay open. I need to stay curious.** There's tons of social issues. I'm still so unaware about and suffering of people that…that I should be aware of. And that I should tell others about as well…

This commitment and fostering of curiosity for Malaya also connected to perspective taking and empathic skills. She realized her need to stay engaged in community and to put her empathy into action through learning from other's perspectives.

Lastly, Malaya's experiences with *navigating emotions* and *learning* not only helped her explore her emotional life and ways to reflect and grow, but also helped her to name specific emotional experiences and find ways to heal specific facets of her life. Malaya shared:

> I can really relate to this book because, like, the main character is talking about things that are so personal, and I think anybody who is struggling with anxiety or any kind of depression. Being those words being expressed, I think, would be helpful in their journey of being like: Oh! Like this character, though fictional, is able to express these feelings in this setting. Perhaps I can also do that for myself in my own life. And what could that possibly look like? Could it possibly look like reading more books similar to this? Is, is there a practical thing that I can apply my energy to so that I can, you know, help myself with my own anxiety, with my own demons?

Similarly, this process of naming and considering ways to express herself repeated in her observations that, “when I'm reading… And I'm like, Oh, my gosh! This book is so powerful …like it's giving me words to be able to express some things that I had like not been able to find words for.” This process of identifying and navigating emotions proved powerful in contributing to her overall identity and ability to find ways to express and heal personal wounds. Specifically, in her interview she explained the way Alice Sebold’s (2002) *The Lovely Bones* helped her step more fully into her identity as a survivor of sexual assault. Malaya explained,

> I had gone through like a sexual assault and reading that book like in the time after the assault happened… I feel like really helped me see that there is like hope to be had…that like I can control the narrative of my own story. But you know as like a teenager that was going through it… if you're like blaming yourself because you're like: there must have been something I had done …. And it's like that book helped me process those emotions of like that was a scary thing… and it happened to me. But it's going to be okay, like, I, like just like her, I will… I will fight my own demons. I mean, I'm sure in the moment as like a teen girl, I did not think that…but now, you know, I can like look back… That was like, you know, years and years ago, I can look back and think like: okay like that…That book gave me courage to like push through.

Through this reading transaction with a fictional YA text, Malaya discovered courage and found the confidence to share her own story. This experience contributed to her overall identity by providing her the opportunity to take control of her own narrative and demonstrate her power over who she is and will become. Malaya shared the importance of YAL’s role in companioning her in her own journey of self-discovery. Malaya stated, “Young Adult Literature makes me feel seen and heard, and in ways that I feel like sometimes I don't feel in my real life. You know,

sometimes, like… it helps me realize that my experience is real, and that the feelings that I have…. They are valid."

This experience of navigating emotions and finding a companion to her own journey also connected to her future as a mental health provider. Multiple times within her transactions with YAL, Malaya described her clinician or mental health professional lens. Malaya's response to James Patterson and Emily Raymond's (2022) *The Girl in the Castle*. She wrote:

> As someone who hopes to go into the mental health field, stories like this makes me realize how important it is to stay vigilant and be on the lookout for our peers because there are so many that struggle with their inner demons. It was terribly difficult to read her story, but I know that there are many among us who face that same struggle and what a difference it makes to have someone look out for you and remind you that you are loved and wanted.

The concern and attention given during reading to mental health aspects of stories or characters' experiences proved a salient way Malaya explored this budding professional identity as she read YA texts. Overall, Malaya's collective transactional process demonstrates the ways in which identity work occurs for readers as they interact with YAL.

Elena's Transporting into New Worlds and the Development of Self, Social Networks, and Solving Problems Creatively

Elena's individual profile provides one final exploration of the cumulative and layered transactional processes individual readers experience and how those experiences are spaces of identity work. Elena's predominant transactive process of *transporting into new worlds* provided her multiple opportunities to question, connect, pause, and explore new possibilities for her identity over time. Early in her reading life Elena noted a pattern of escapism into the narrative

worlds of YA fiction. She shared that whether the story was realistic or fantasy-based *transporting into the world* gave her opportunity to question. In her final reflection, she wrote "Reading young adult literature has allowed me to experience different situations in a safe environment that I never have to experience in real life, but I still learn the lessons that these stories teach which have helped me grow as a person." She further explained in her interview:

> I think some of the situations have kind of, like, shaped or allowed me to, like, experience things that I wouldn't normally experience might also kind of be able to formulate like, Oh, I… it's kind of like a safe way to, like, experience, like maybe extreme situations and kind of give me that experience or kind of background like, okay, like I'm not actually experiencing I probably never will, but it's allowing me to kind of like sit down and think like, okay, how would I react to this situation? Kind of give me that background or that mindset.

For Elena, the simulation of situations in narrative worlds provided her space to explore her own ideas and decide for herself what aligns with her identity. This also came through in her reading response to Talia Hibbert's (2023) *Highly Suspicious and Unfairly Cute*. Elena wrote:

> I think my experiences from reading this book will f**orm my future thinking** in a way as a reminder to stay true to myself. While now at an older age I have learned to stay away from pretending to be someone I'm not, sometimes I still feel the need to do so in certain situations. Reading about Celine showed me that it's okay to stay myself and the relationships that I make doing so will become more meaningful.

From this example, Elena shared how her reading allowed her to place herself in Celine's point of view but consider how she personally would navigate the scenario and what she could learn and apply to her own life.

Building on her transactional experience of *transporting into new stories*, Elena noted the growth in her perspective taking ability and the ways expanding points of view allowed for identity development. Specifically, Elena shared how reading has helped her develop an open mind. In her interview she explained:

> I also think just reading a lot has kind of like attributed to like my open mindedness because like different like books and like reading all these different characters, each character is different. They kind of have their own like personality. And so, I think like kind of reading the books and their perspective and seeing their different personalities and then hearing their backgrounds and kind of how their backgrounds made them that kind of person has allowed me to see, well, everybody has their own kind of background. And while maybe I don't agree with this person or like either, there are very different ideals in this person… it's their background that shaped them and allowed them to have these different ideals. So, I think reading has allowed me to kind of come to understanding …where people come from with different things that are important to their lives.

Elena's open-mindedness remained one of her self-identified traits that proved valuable and core to her identity. She shared, "it's just given me like a broader perspective and helped me kind of break free from, just a structured, mindset or thinking." This ability to stay open and consider others' perspectives affected her development of mindful pauses before jumping to conclusions. Particularly, Elena explained the way she questioned whether she could have become friends with an acquaintance she previously assumed she wouldn't connect to; Elena realized a need to consider others' backgrounds and experiences. She explained,

> …if I meet someone, I don't really like them at first. I think a lot of times, I want to place that judgment on a person, I don't like them because of this, this, and this. But, if you, don't interact with that person, or don't know them. I feel like… it's like kind of like maybe like pause for a second…So, I definitely think now before I formulate any strong opinions about anybody… [reading has] made me pause a little bit. I'm like, okay, like maybe I should just get to know this person before I make a decision on whether or not I like them or not…But yes, I think it's just made me pause and realize kind of my own quick judgment. And I just made me just be more aware of it…kind of going back and being like, everybody is the way they are because of their past experiences, and I don't know why they're this way. Maybe I should get to get to know them more …Overall, it's just kind of made me give myself like a pause before I like, judge anybody now.

This cultivation of a practice of pausing before judgment proved key in Elena's identity development. She also demonstrated this finding in her reader responses when she wrote, "this story showed me how most things aren't as surface layer as they seem… this story has given me a different perspective" or "this story will inspire me to read more stories about people from different cultures to mine. I think it is very important to expand my viewpoint and learn about other's experiences." For Elena, YAL texts provided her multiple opportunities to encounter situations, characters, and conflicts that pushed her to question her initial judgments and ideas which led to more development of openness and willingness to expand her own thinking.

The role YAL played in Elena's identity development and understanding of her world also connected to her predominant transaction of *transporting into new worlds*. When discussing the role of YAL Elena described it as one of a comforter and safe place. She explained the role of comfort and safety through escape when she shared:

> I want to escape, I want to read something that like I'm not going to experience in everyday life... after, like taking all these really hard science classes and doing research and being a very, very factual, scientific person and kind of getting a break and I'm like, we'll just go on like a fantasy world for a while…almost get like a mind break from all that other stuff.

Connected to her desire to have an open mind, Elena enjoys the feelings of escapism provided through YAL fiction. Throughout her life entering new worlds and experiencing new stories grew Elena's enjoyment of reading, but also Elena noted that this escape strengthens her creative and problem-solving abilities. One way in which this showed up in Elena's interview was in her belief that YAL has grown her ability and her peers' abilities to stand up and engage in the social world. She explained:

> I used to be very, very shy and I was very reserved and I had a fear of like meeting new people….And so I think like reading in a way, early on some books have allowed me to…I think, especially dystopian because it's like younger people kind of like standing up and just doing all these really risky things and kind of standing up to like a higher government or some kind of higher power. And I think that has helped me. I'm like, well, I think I could do that…

Elena further expanded on this sharing:

> I remember like previously in the semester we were talking about like dystopian novels and we were talking about like kind of like this teenagers, like standing up to the higher power of the government and how you can kind of see how that has affected the generation because now, I feel like a lot of people like my age are not afraid to express what they believe and their thoughts or stand up to those higher powers. And I think that

> is specific example… I can kind of see that in myself, now, I'm kind of not, not as much afraid anymore. I say what I believe or stand up for like what I think is right.

These examples show how Elena has contributed meaning to the development of confidence and overall self-expression in her identity even in moments of necessary problem solving and creativity despite the risk or fear provoked by the situation.

One final facet of Elena's named contributions of YAL to her overall identity development remains her building of social connection through reading. Just as her open-mindedness and willingness to see multiple perspectives connects to her creativity and problem solving, Elena's growing ability to enter social and civic conversations can be linked to her sense of belonging to community. In her interview, Elena noted the critical role YAL has had in her development of her social network. She explained, "I think for me it was like, I guess I would say it kind of helped me build like a sense of community. So, I think that's why, like even today reading has always just like stuck with me and been a very important part of my life." Elena went on to reflect on her early reading life with YAL:

> …I met another girl in my band class and like she was reading the same book as me. And so, then we connected, and we were still like really good friends today. We actually… I hadn't talked to her in a while and we caught up last week, but we like really connected through reading and like that's kind of how we made our friend group in middle school. But just I think like really has always been at least a part of my life and like a part of like kind of creating some of like the long-lasting friendships I've had.

This development of her social connection through reading YAL proved pivotal for Elena's life as a reader and person. She further discussed the social aspect and impact YA texts have relationally even across technology. Elena noted,

> … there was more of a social aspect to it. Because of these books, I really loved to enjoy reading, and then I also kind of had this community of people that I could like talk about them with…And we all had book Instagrams where we would like make posts and talk about our favorite books. If there's a movie about it coming out, we'd make posts about the movies and then we'd just talk about it to each other and on little group chats.

These examples provide a picture of how over time the bonds Elena formed over reading YA texts with others proved an important developing factor for Elena. Thus, the role YAL played in connecting her to social networks of like-minded readers continued to shape Elena's identity and action in the world through her social life. Overall, Elena's transactions over time with YAL demonstrate once again how individuals engage in identity work throughout the transactional process of reading.

Chapter Summary

This chapter served the purpose of exploring the key findings of the instrumental case study. Within the first section, I presented five specific ways participants in this study transacted with YAL—*connecting with characters, navigating emotions, learning about others and the self, affirming the self,* and *transporting into situations and experiencing new stories*. Through these thematic findings, participants voiced the meaningful ways these transactive experiences influenced their identity. Therefore, in the second section of this chapter I described the five thematic contributions YAL made to participant identities and continued process of becoming. *Reflecting for self-growth and integration, growing perspective taking and empathic skills, seeing and hearing the self for identity confirmation, expressing one's voice and stepping into one's power,* and *engaging, standing up, and building community* emerged as contributory aspects of YAL to participants identity over time. The third section of this chapter explored the

roles YA texts served in participant lives over time. Participants named the roles of *role model, caregiver, safe, comforting space for enjoyment, escape, and experience*, as well as shared evidence of roles of *companion in loneliness and emotional exploration* and *social and career connector*. Finally, I shared the fourth finding of transactional processes as identity work space and provided three participant profiles to demonstrate the layered nature of the connections between reading and identity. These findings provide explicit participant expressions of the meaning, value, and identity contributions YAL has had in their lives to help answer the question of how reading YA shapes its readers. In the next chapter, I will provide discussion and implications of these findings in connection with relevant research. Lastly, I will conclude with future suggestions for research in children's and young adult literature, literacy, and literary criticism as well as suggestions for literacy and English education practice.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to inquire into the ways in which YAL readers transact with YA texts, how those transactional processes contribute to their holistic sense of identity, and the role(s) over time YA texts play in readers' identity development processes (Rosenblatt, 1994; 1995). The research questions that guided this study were:

- What types of transactions with YA texts have occurred with self-identified YA readers? Why have these transactions proved meaningful for the reader?
- In what ways does reading YAL texts contribute to the identity making of self-identified YA readers?
- What role(s) do reading YA texts play in the identity development of self-identified YA readers over time

To answer these questions, I situated the study in Reader Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1994;1995) to frame discussions about the experiential process of reading YAL. Connected theoretical concepts of engagement (Ivey & Johnston, 2013), narrative transportation (Green, 2004), social imagination (Johnston, 1993) and narrative empathy (Keen, 2007) were utilized to deepen the understandings of readers' language and explanations of their transactional experiences with YAL. To bridge the reading process to participant understandings of their identity formation, this study employed a synthesized definition of identity (APA, Dictionary of Psychology, 2023) connected to theoretical concepts encompassing individual's contextual circumstances (Holland et al., 2001), dialogic relationship with the self and text (Bakhtin, 1981; Lysaker, 2006), and self-authorship and self-mediation process while reading (Rowe, 2019). In this chapter, I offer a discussion and summary of the findings in chapter four and conclude with limitations and implications for future research and practice.

Discussion and Summary of Findings

This study illustrates the complex, nuanced, and multiplicity of ways in which YA readers transact with YA texts and utilize the experiences of those transactive processes to develop their understandings of their holistic identity. As outlined in chapter two, the transactional model of reading (Rosenblatt, 1994; 1995) accounted for the ways readers bring their unique set of identities and contexts into relationships with texts as they read; however, this study explored the specific ways readers explain these relationships and the ways these relationships contributed to their identity formation. The findings demonstrate that YA readers primarily process this relationship with the text through specific transactional processes of *connecting to characters, navigating emotions, learning about others and the self, affirming the self,* and *transporting into situations and experiencing new stories*. Based on these transactional experiences, participants outlined formative identity contributions from their transactional processes such as: *reflecting to deepen holistic personal growth*, *strengthening perspective taking and empathic skills, seeing and hearing the self, expressing one's voice and stepping into one's power*, to *engaging the world and building community.* Throughout findings, participants demonstrated empirically theoretical concepts outlined in the review of the literature and extended current empirical understandings of how transactional experiences and engagement (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; 2015; 2018; Ivey, 2014) with YA compound across a reader's life to shape their process of identity formation.

Though thematic findings were applicable across all ten participants, the following explanations share summarized connections of transactional processes and subsequent identity contributions and their links to the theoretical and empirical literature within the field. First, Alexis and Bree, for example, drew upon their social imagination/ToM (Ivey & Johnston, 2013;

Johnston, 1993; Zunshine, 2006; Lysaker et al., 2011; Lysaker & Miller, 2013) when forming relationships with strong, female characters. Both readers in their transactional process of *connecting with characters* "imagine[d] [themselves] as each of [their] characters, thinking, feeling, and acting" (Johnston, 1993, p.428) and from this imaginative process shared the identity contribution of *reflecting to deepen holistic personal growth.* Both Alexis and Bree shared how specific characters caused them to reflect on how they viewed themselves or how the world (their context, family, friends etc.) viewed them and through that reflection determine who they wanted to be.

Malaya and Beth offered specific instances of how their relationship with YA texts and characters provided space for navigation of their own emotional landscapes. Malaya's transactional process of *navigating emotions* through several YA texts proved to be critical in her identity journey and allowed for the development of *expressing one's voice and stepping into one's power.* Most poignantly, her reading of Alice Sebold's (2002) *The Lovely Bones* provided her space to engage in narrative empathy (Hammond & Kim, 2014; Keen, 2007) through both *character identification* through emotional experience and *narrative situation* through relating to the plot conflict of sexual assault (Keen, 2007, p. 93). Thus, provoking for Malaya self-compassion and willingness to reclaim "the narrative of her own story." Similarly, Beth used the transactional process of *navigating emotions* to cultivate deeper self-knowledge and compassion on her path to forming her identity and shared how reading YA texts contributed to her ability to *see and hear the self.* One critical example of this for Beth was her reading of E. Lockhart's (2014) *We Were Liars*. She reflected, "I was able to love this character who made a lot of mistakes and just went through a lot of bad things… I could still relate to her. So, it's like it helps me kind of see, like: Hey, Maybe I can forgive myself too, a little bit, and not be so hard on

myself.” Through this, Beth shows how she is using social imagination (Johnston, 1993) and narrative empathy (Hammond & Kim, 2014; Keene, 2007) by feeling with the character during and after the reading process to extend her own understanding of herself and ways of being in relationship with herself in the future.

Elements of narrative empathy (Hammond & Kim, 2014; Keene, 2007) also came up in the findings for how participants discussed the transactional process of *learning about others and self* and its identity contribution of *strengthening perspective taking and empathic skills*. For example, Rose, Bree, and Maeve reflected deeply on the ways reading YA texts with a variety of diverse characters helped them learn about themselves and others across identity differences. As outlined by Keen (2007), narrative fiction “invites empathy, even when the fictional character and reader differ from each other in all sorts of practical and obvious ways” (p. xii). This relationship between reader and fictional character across difference has been a point of critical scholarship around narrative empathy and YAL as well as social psychology research regarding how empathy is defined (Falter, 2022; Metheny, 2022; Brown, 2021); the findings of this study support this criticality and emphasis on detangling concepts of sympathy and empathy. All three participants emphasized the intentional choice of perspective taking (cognitive empathy) and feeling with the characters (affective empathy) by “listening” (Beth and Bree) or “centering” (Maeve) the perspective of the character rather than trying to place themselves and their feelings at the forefront of meaning making and learning; thus, moving into a more critical definition of empathy (Brown, 2021; Fair & Florell, 2019; Fletcher, 2021; Junker & Jacquemin, 2017; McCreary & Marchant, 2017; Wolf, 2018). Beth observed:

> …it's like, no, I just need to sit back for a minute like this is not about me. Even if I am trying to sympathize like it's not about me… it's like let them let them speak. Let them be

> heard, because, like they have gone through this pain. And so yeah. It's kind of like that, considering the other perspectives, even if I've initially felt intimidated or threatened. Based on like some things that have been said in young adult literature in general.

Maeve and Bree also noted the importance of recognizing bias through this transactional process of learning and identity growth through perspective taking and practicing empathic skills. Maeve shared:

> Sometimes I'll hear something, and I'll go, No, that's absolutely wrong, no way. But I'm like, well, think about it for a second, you know. Try and listen and try to figure out where they're coming from… I feel like it creates growth and change because it's sort of like I have to constantly keep challenging myself and my opinions and ideas with something new like… and then maybe I'll have forgotten something, but then it'll be brought back up, and I have to remember through my experiences or someone else's experiences. And it's just like constant introspection to sort of figure out new things and new ideas. I might not have thought of before, and also listening to other people and those new ideas and things that I might never thought of or never believed until I actually listen to the reasoning. I'm sort of like…. oh yeah!

Bree also noted the importance of transactional learning and cultivation of perspective taking through critical listening. She stated, "I think in general young adult literature has made me a lot more open minded to just different things in general. How my views, the biases I had that didn't even recognize before reading…" For Beth, Maeve, and Bree, the *strengthening of perspective taking and empathic skills* involved Keen's (2007) understanding of narrative empathy, but also extends comparison to characters, situations, and ideas present in different texts past momentary

connection to longer term reflections on bias and ways in which character perspectives offer new ways to grow in their understanding of themselves and others.

Veronica, Maeve, and Skye spoke to the power of representation in YA texts and the affirmation that occurred due to seeing themselves or aspects of their life experiences in narrative form. Thus, these participants' experiences with the transactional process of *affirming the self* led to identity contributions of both *seeing and hearing the self and expressing one's voice and stepping into one's power*. As the YAL community of scholars and writers have noted, representation matters (Bishop, 1990; Myers, 2014; Krishnaswami, 2019; Toliver, 2021). The findings of this study demonstrate the anecdotal, theoretical, and empirical statements about the importance of accurate representation and its impact on readers' sense of self. Additionally, these particular examples strengthen the empirical ties to the concepts of narrative intimacy (Day, 2013) and narrative transportation (Green, 2004). For example, Veronica discussed multiple experiences of *affirming the self* that ultimately led to a more confident expression and embodiment of her identity as a southern, Appalachian woman due to the intimate disclosures shared by the narrator, Cash, in Jeff Zentner's (2021) *In the Wild Light*. She described:

> People making fun of the way I talk has been something I've dealt with my whole life, so to find that as a problem someone has in a book I'm reading made it that more dear to me. To finally have a book where not all southern people are seen as redneck hillbillies who aren't capable of thinking was so nice to finally see.

Similarly, Maeve expressed the importance of seeing representation of her atheist and queer identities through the process of narrative transportation (Green, 2004) in fantasy YA texts. She reflected:

> There was also a lot of joy. So, it was really nice being able to see, like these other worlds, these other characters who were like me within those worlds, especially when you grow up in the South, you don't typically see a lot of people like you. And then you can read them in books.

Skye also discussed the power of representation through narrative intimacy (Day, 2013) and narrative transportation (Green, 2004) in Meyer's (2008) *Breaking Dawn* and Callender's (2020) *Felix Ever After*. First, Skye shared the importance of representation while transporting into an intimacy created through the voice of Edward Cullen's narration. Skye reflected, "I don't know why… it is the weirdest of those books, but being able to be in a male perspective was really important…So, it's like, oh, you can be male and super sympathetic, and really still getting away from male rage in YA." By being able to enter into the character's most intimate thoughts and disclosures, Skye experienced narrative intimacy (Day, 2013) that significantly shifted their perspective on their own gender experience. The ability to see into a male perspective that according to them, "[gets] away from male rage" offered new possibilities for understanding how male gender can be expressed. They elaborated, "You know, these characters are close to me, and you know, being able to just learn that you can exist is really important." Skye also conveyed the continued importance representation and experience of narrative intimacy (Day, 2013) across time. They explained how nuanced gender representation within *Felix Ever After* (Callender, 2020) and narrative intimacy (Day, 2013) created through the first-person narration contributed to furthering their understanding of their non-binary identity:

> *Felix Ever After* like that…. That being able to come to a new identity isn't a bad thing, and I, as many queer books as I've read, it's not a common theme of oh, I'm this label, let me shift a little bit. And really seeing that was eye-opening because I don't talk about my

> gender journey. But this is probably the closest I've come to like seeing it in fiction and again that came out in 2020…Because I remember I was at home a lot. I wasn't around community spaces. So, it was…. It was a talking back book that was really important, because I don't know what I would have done without it. It was really supportive and fresh, and it kept me going.

Through the transactional experiences of *affirming the self* Skye not only discussed the contributions of *seeing and hearing the self,* but also the way this furthered their ability to *express their voice and step into their power*. Veronica and Maeve also shared these findings and solidify the continued call for more, better, nuanced representations of a multiplicity of life and identity experiences.

Narrative transportation (Green, 2004) also connected to participant transactional experiences of *transporting into new worlds and experiencing new stories*. Elena, Lana, and Rose pointed to how transporting (Green, 2004) into fictional worlds created opportunities to experience, question, and grow their capacity for creativity, wonder, and understanding of varying situations and characters. Through this, they also noted the contribution to their various identities especially the power to *engage the world and build community.* For Elena, multiple times she noted her and her peers transportational experiences into dystopian worlds as formative to their desire to engage their worlds. She shared:

> …we were talking about like dystopian novels and we were talking about like kind of like this teenagers, like standing up to the higher power of the government and how you can kind of see how that has affected the generation because now, I feel like a lot of people like my age are not afraid to express what they believe and their thoughts or stand up to those higher powers. And I think that is specific example… I can kind of see that in

> myself, now, I'm kind of not, not as much afraid anymore. I say what I believe or stand up for like what I think is right.

Not only did these novels provide an entry point to learn, question, and explore engaging with the world's social issues and civic responsibilities, but they also provided a unifying interest for the building of community. Elena noted, "I think for me it was like, I guess I would say it kind of helped me build like a sense of community. So, I think that's why, like even today reading has always just like stuck with me and been a very important part of my life." Similarly, Rose discussed the ways *transporting into new worlds and new stories* built community between herself and her sister with the reading of *The Green Glasshouse* (Milford, 2014) and *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1998) as well as friendships formed through reading *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (Snicket, 1999). She explained the contribution to her relational identity, "So, I think that maybe if I was going to name 2 things that were really important, that I think were heavily influential on me from books. It would be making friends and valuing friendship." Finally, for Lana narrative transportation (Green., 2004) into the worlds of both *A Wrinkle in Time* (L'Engle, 1962) and *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) as a child contributed to not only her sense of wonder and questioning, but also has contributed to her professional identity and community in the theater world as she seeks to embody or help others embody specific characters and create the fictional worlds through set design.

In all of these examples, findings demonstrate how YA readers' transactional experiences influence and contribute to their holistic identities; additionally, these findings connect to theoretical understandings of the relationship between identity and literacy. From the above summarized findings, Malaya, Beth, and Skye offer insight into the dialectical (Bakhtin, 1981; Lysaker, 2006) and internal identity exploration as well as the ways in which through the reading

process and dialectical relationship to the text participants engage in self-authorship and self-mediation (Rowe, 2019). For Malaya, she accepts and steps into her identity as a survivor. Beth comes to terms with her own need for self-compassion and forgiveness, and Skye takes up the pen to author their identity with nuance and confidence. In addition to the more internal, dialectic relationship between literacy and identity, the findings in this study also demonstrate Holland et al.'s (2001) assertion that identity is both agentic and subjective to external social and cultural environments. Alexis, Bree, Veronica, and Maeve demonstrate this in the various ways their gender, race, accents, and religious beliefs position them in the world and how specific stories and characters that share and differ from these identities provide them as readers opportunity to resist expectations and choose who they want to be in the world. Elena, Rose, and Lana also show a synthesis of both the internal and external relationship between identity formation and literacy practices in their personal connections and identity contributions taken from their reading process and their choices to build community and engage the world. This study points to the significance and intricacy of each readers' transactional processes and how those processes build over time to contribute to an individual's sense of who they are and can become. Additionally, participants in this study signal the criticality of the genre of YA and point to the roles YA texts specifically played in their lives—*role model*; *caregiver and safe, comforting space*; *instigator and partner; companion* and lastly, *social connector*. Based on these important roles, the findings of this study confirm the value of enabling texts that build textual lineages for readers across time (Tatum, 2008; 2009; 2012) and the need to center reader choice to avoid presumed relevance (Sciruba, 2014; 2017; 2018). Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that, in fact, reading YA does and can influence identity and change who we are and will be.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

This study implies a multiplicity of empirical, practical, and theoretical pathways for furthering research, practice, and policy in regard to YAL. First, the findings of this study suggest YAL as a genre possesses criticality and importance to readers' engagement with and creation of reading lives. Additionally, the way those reading lives produce spaces for transactional processes that create identity growth over time hold impactful emphasis for who readers become both internally and externally within the world.

For Research

Much research is still needed regarding readers' transactional processes and the way that genre, time, environment, and identity all work together to create change or transformation. Though there are several teacher educators exploring these connections and their implications for preservice educators (Falter & Kerkhoff, 2018; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019; Glenn et al., 2012; Haddox & Price-Dennis, 2013; Thein & Sloan, 2012; Wender, 2015; 2016), the need for studies focused on adolescent and young adult readers needs attention. Additionally, studies that consider multiple methodologies such as autoethnographies of YA readers' identity forming experiences with children's and YA texts (Beal, 2022; Watts, 2023) and co-constructed ethnographies of YA readers' experiences (Lawton & Cain, 2022; Wender et al., 2020) offer new ways to empirically investigate both momentary identity influences of YAL on readers' lives as well as longitudinal implications. Overall, the field of reading psychology, literary criticism, and YAL could deeply benefit from investment in longitudinal studies that follow readers throughout their lives and into adulthood to further understanding of how both academic and pleasure reading of children's and YA texts provoke identity influences and change over time.

Another point of additional research results from the unexpected findings of this study regarding access, choice, and investment in YA specific courses. Although outside the bounds of my study, it is a salient point to note that multiple participants in this study indicated the way having access to a YA specific course within their college experience increased their experiences of enjoyment and engagement with reading as well as provided them space to consider new texts they might not have selected themselves, multiple interpretations of the texts, and opportunity for new social community. For example, Veronica noted the criticality of the course to reignite her reading life in her course reflection:

> This class has re-sparked a love I had for reading that has been put on pause for too long. I read books that otherwise I would not have. The different genres that we read in this class have opened new books to me…My overall feelings are deeper than I imagined this class would lead me to. Books are a great way to escape, enjoy, or feel. They are so diverse and dig deeper than you would think.

Elena also shared the importance of access to the course and its ability to expand her reading life:

> …all that stuff we read this semester, like I probably would never have picked up. I'm like, really glad that I read it and like, I don't think I would have ever like, had these thoughts or this experience if I hadn't taken this class and like, picked up this book. And I'm really glad that I did. And now it's inspired me to like, maybe like not so much to judge a book by its cover, but like, read something that like, I don't think I would have an interest in, but that I think might kind of help expand that view.

Lana reflected on the importance of the YA class and its social connectivity aspects as well as its cultivation of dialogue across various perspectives and reading experiences:

> I really enjoyed this class because of the discussion. It was interesting to go to class with certain thoughts and opinions in mind, only for someone else who read the exact same thing to have different thoughts and opinions. Being exposed to different viewpoints was really stimulating for me and I would love to continue having honest conversations as I did in this class. I learned that everyone sees the world differently because we have all led different lives. It means that no matter what, our worldview will always be colored with our personal pair of rose-tinted glasses so it's important to understand where other people come from. I think that's pretty cool.

Though these are only three examples out of the 36 times participants mentioned the impact access to a YA course had on their reading lives, these salient points suggest that more research could be done to explore how YA courses offer self-identified or beginning YA readers opportunity to expand their readings across diverse authorship, characters, and topics. Especially notable for colleges, these findings also suggest reading YAL matters to college students right now as they are entering the diversity of courses related to a wide array of fields and career pathways. These opportunities gave students reflective space to consider their future careers and identities within the world as they transition from young adulthood into new adulthood. This remains an unexplored, fruitful area for more study and scholarship.

Also, each course offered students the opportunity to choose or co-create their curriculum readings and though that remained outside the scope of this study, more research on co-creation of YA curriculum and importance of student choice could greatly impact the field of YAL and English education. The intentionality and partnership between teacher knowledge of the field of YAL and student interest/history in text selection as a contextual background of this study suggests that the co-creative structure provided by the teacher matters. It is the relational flow

between teacher knowledge and student participation that creates transformational space for both instructors and students. Moving forward in my own research, I believe further investigations of the reader and text relationship and the emotional, social, and spiritual impacts YAL specifically has potential to create for readers' lives will remain at the center of my work. Additionally, as a person interested in the growth of a soul over the timeline arc of life, particularly the growth into a person of love, I hope to continue to form bonds with fellow researchers in Education and YAL to explore the role YA texts can play in the cultivation of love in individuals and communities. The findings of this study suggest YA has power and deep meaning to its readers' lives and many fruitful pathways of investigation remain.

Limitations and Future Research

Focused in the tradition of qualitative work, the findings of this study outlined in chapter four and summarized above sought to understand individual YA readers experiences and constructed meanings within their social and cultural contexts through their own words and narratives (Mishler, 2000). As explained within chapter three, I chose to conduct this study through qualitative, instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995; 2000; 2008; Yin, 2009; 2018). Thus, as a component of qualitative work, the researcher is implicated within the process of the research; therefore, I conducted all data collection and analysis. In doing this, my data first filtered through my own subjectivities. Additionally, as outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (2013), qualitative research does not seek to generalize, but rather to understand in depth the experiences and narratives of people. Therefore, this study does not seek generalizability but rather focused thematic findings to ten individual participants. Though participants self-identified demographically as possessing a variety of racial, gender, cultural, religious, and sexual orientations, there were still some demographics not encompassed within this sample size.

Additionally, this study sought to understand a very specific self-identified genre reader (YA readers) and therefore, transactional processes of other genres and their identity contributions over time need further investigation.

Future Directions

Based on the findings and overview of continued pathways for future research, it has proved an important reflective space for me as a scholar to bring my varied research experiences full circle. The progression for me from the initial questions of how reading YAL changes and contributes to who we are towards development of this inquiry through the autoethnographic process (Lawton & Cain, 2022) has allowed for me to see the importance and need for reader experiences and reader voices in the field of YAL and qualitative studies in English education and reading psychology. While working on the duoautoethnographic study (Lawton & Cain, 2022), I realized the wide gap in the field in both diverse methodologies and exploration of readers' voices and meanings made from their engagements with YAL. In this study, the findings demonstrated the process of escape, self-discovery, and empathic engagements with social justice two readers experienced through their history as YA readers. From these autoethnographic reflections, the curiosity for more reader experiences and inquiry into connective possibilities were formed. Therefore, the progression into this instrumental case study furthered the exploration of YA readers' experiences and meanings made of their engagements with YA texts over time. This instrumental case study has demonstrated the expansive ways readers make sense of their reading lives and the contributions reading YAL makes to individuals' sense of identity and self. Thus, my work in each of these studies has helped me to realize the value and need of continued future research towards creating studies that offer participants contemplative, meaning making space whether through autoethnographic, narrative

inquiry, arts based, or case study methods. Future directions for this research remain open as the field, our world, and YAL continues to grow and change.

For Theoretical Development

In addition to future research implications, the findings of this study suggest a need for further theoretical development for how we think about who the reader of a text is, the assumptions we make about how reader response functions, and the binaries we create between scholarship fields for what theories and texts have most relevance for specific readers and settings (Ebarvia, 2024; Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016; Sciurba, 2013; 2015; 2018). Throughout my time in graduate school preparing for this study, I sought deeper learning opportunities about RRT and the field of narratology to narrow my focus in how the reader is situated within the reading process and how texts act upon readers. I quickly found that though the fields of reading psychology, teacher education, English education, and literary criticism all have investments in reading theory—each domain used different vocabulary and had differing interests in theories of reader response which created unfortunate binaries between English departments and scholarship and Education departments and scholarship. As a scholar operating from both English contexts and Education contexts, I often found myself asking the question: Where is Reader Response situated? How do we think about the reader? And why do we consider the reader more in preservice education training than in literary analysis training? How can we bridge the gaps and create more holistic theoretical concepts that speak to the importance of the reader and their relationship with the text within the reading process?

Not only did I struggle to find myself between these two scholarly domains, but the findings of my study suggest participants also feel stuck within the binaries of what is for English class contexts to study and what is centered in elective YAL course contexts. Though

reading a range of texts and deep study are required in each space, the binary between how we read, who or what matters when we read, and for what purpose we read proved prevalent which begs the question: why are transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1994; 1995) and reader response theories in general not more developed to strengthen the bonds and interdependence between literary critics, teacher educators, preservice teachers, and the readers who are implicated in this work? Therefore, my study suggests that we need more theoretical development that attends to how readers themselves matter in the work of reading texts whether classic canonical stories of ill-fated lovers from warring families or more recent dystopian tales of strong young people standing up to powers that seek to control them and their worlds. As Rosenblatt (1994) suggested in her transactional theory of reading and Ebarvia (2024) argued, "We know that reading is a complex and complicated process: there's so much that happens from the moment our eyes see marks on a page to the ideas and questions that take shape in our minds." Thus, more theoretical development to explore this process and the way that reading itself proves to be fruitful ground for identity work needs to be done to break binaries, build partnerships, and center readers.

For Practice & Policy

Based on the findings of this study, participants signaled several areas for consideration when addressing pedagogical practices as well as policy implications. To guide this section, I've chosen to focus on three key implications for the teaching of YAL whether in k-12 ELA, preservice teacher education, or YAL specific course work settings. Regarding practice participants noted the criticality of 1) centering the genre of YAL in their reading lives to develop literacy and identity 2) opportunity for choice and co-creation in the YA texts curriculum and 3) classroom space and prompting to reflect and consider applicability of the affective and efferent (Rosenblatt, 1994; 1995) transactional process.

To begin, though YAL served as the driving force of genre investigated in this study, participants noted multiple times the differences between their transactional processes and overall engagement with YAL in comparison to classic or canonical text choices. All shared the ways YAL encouraged the development of their readerly identity, and when faced with "reading droughts" as coined by Beth or "slumps" as described by Bree, YAL texts reconnected them to their experiences of joy and pleasure during the reading process. Participants shared that introduction and access to YAL through parents and caregivers, teachers, librarians made the love of reading central to their personal experiences and value for developing "reader" as part of their identity. As the findings shared, all participants noted the deep connections and relatability of characters, circumstances, and conflicts held within YA texts. Through these transactional experiences, participants explained the depth of meaning and long-lasting influences YA texts had upon their sense of self and how they view and act within the world. Therefore, as many researchers and educators have argued centering the genre of YAL in classroom and school contexts matters to the social, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual growth of students' reading lives and understanding of their own and others' identities (Alsup, 2010; Cart, 2008; Buehler, 2016; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019; Ginsberg, 2022; Groenke & Scherff, 2010). Whether it be intellectual growth of an ACT score through increase of volume of reading YA noted by Alexis or emotional growth through facing and processing experienced traumas shared by Malaya and Bree, YA texts have formational influence and serve as a powerful tool for students and teachers to build deeper knowledge of themselves and each other. Thus, the connection of pedagogical practices of continuing to center YA texts in curriculum, as well as classroom, school, public, and home libraries for readers to discover and choose their own reading remains strongly tied to policies and issues of access. The findings of this study demonstrate the need to develop

educational policy that preserves the access to YA texts and diverse perspectives despite the rising tensions surrounding book banning and censorship (Haupt, 2022; Harris & Alter, 2022; PEN America, 2022). As participants shared, access to YA throughout their reading journeys and specifically, in critical times of loneliness, trauma, or learning helped support the open, exploratory nature of critical thinking that leads readers to their own identity development over time.

In addition to the implication of centering YAL in classroom contexts and continuing to support policy that provides access to YAL, the findings of this study suggest the importance of opportunities to choose *which* YA texts to read and participate in the co-creation of YAL curriculum. Participants in this study shared the ways that partnership with educators and other students within the class to select YA texts to explore provided expansion in their personal reading selection as well as increased social connections and opportunity to engage in diverse perspectives through class discussion. Though already self-identified YA readers before entering the course, the structuring of each course to provide varying degrees of choice in text selection and discussion participation offered participants a stake in their own learning and supported the epistemological view of students as knowledge holders and capable of shaping the educational space for themselves and others (Ginsberg, 2022). The implementation of student choice and co-design to curriculum remains a critical pedagogical implication to support engagement and student learning outcomes as well as the development of social-emotional and socio-relational skills and habits. This study demonstrates that both teacher knowledge of the field and student choice is important; thus, text selection and curriculum creation need to be complicated. Therefore, educators must read widely and deeply to provide a plethora of high-quality options that are inclusive and culturally accurate so that readers of all kinds have the opportunity to see

themselves within a book (Bishop, 1990; Ginsberg, 2022). As participants shared, their identities were not only influenced by the affirmation found in seeing themselves, but the development of their empathic and social engagement skills deepened through their reading of a variety of YA texts across multiple cultures, abilities, gender expressions, etc. Additionally, current educational evaluative measures support the design, implementation, and assessment of instruction to be inclusive of student choice, relevancy to student lives, and guided by the promotion of student inquiry, curiosity, and exploration (TN Dept. of Education, 2024). Therefore, educational policy functioning in alignment with valuing students' knowledge and capabilities to select their own reading material and work in partnership with educators to design curriculum should be encouraged, supported, and addressed in educational institutional contexts.

Lastly, the findings of this study suggest the importance of providing classroom space and opportunity for reflection, discussion, and applicability of learning from the reading transaction with YA texts. As cited by Alsup (2010), "The goal is more than just to get students to respond to the text about teens as teen readers; the goal is first to get the response, then to encourage students to grapple with it, wonder about it, and ask questions about it" (p.211). This proved to be vital to participants in this study. Their awareness and critical thinking about their reading transactional processes mattered in their understanding of how the transactional process incorporated into their sense of self. Many participants noted the value of being asked to reflect due to the ways it made them conscious of their unconscious connections and identity work done while transacting with YA texts. Skye shared, "I think I didn't realize how much the YA that I read when I was younger is really what centered probably my love aspects of me." Similarly, Alexis reflected, "I think without realizing it. We're…I'm just doing so much without even knowing it. Without realizing it." Therefore, when implementing instruction and discussion of

YAL educators need to encourage and prompt reflection on the readers' responses and additionally, the connections made to the readers' identity through responses. An additional layering to this implication remains Beach, Johnston, and Thein's (2015) assertion that teachers must "view students as complex and complete people negotiating a range of identities" (p. 14) and "equal participants" (p.14) in the process of identity work. Therefore, teachers must shift away from the positioning of themselves as separate adults from adolescent students and find a way to "come to class with deeply felt questions that [they] genuinely hope to explore with students–questions about which [they] do not already have answers!" (Beach, Johnston, and Thein, 2015, p. 15). Thus, robust pedagogical practice and policy will support and combine all three implications into practice that takes YAL as a textual foundation for readers to select, read and respond, discuss, and reflect upon their own position to the text, their questions about the text, themselves, and the world, and the next steps to further develop the holistic identity they wish to become.

Conclusion

The process of conducting this study has been one of the greatest privileges of my life and a defining experience as a researcher, teacher, and reader. In reading years of critical scholarship across the fields of literary theory, reading psychology, English education, and YAL, I have deepened my understanding of the reading process, and the ways YA texts have criticality not just for myself, but for others. The magic and companionship YAL worlds and characters have given me, and my participants remains pivotal in the continued growth of who we are and will be. Through this process, I've witnessed and experienced the complexity of identity work and the ways stories instigate, partner, interrupt, and expand readers' lives. My deep hope is that this study shares the beauty and resilience in each of my participants' own stories and provides

more language to the academic world to describe the intricacies involved in the reading experience when a reader chooses to open a book, enter a world wholly themselves, and emerge from the tale, consciously or unconsciously mended, encouraged, enlivened, and changed.

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Appendix A

Table 1.1: *Key Texts*

Text Title & Number of occurrences across participants	Author
We Deserve Monuments (2)	Jas Hammonds
In the Wild Light (2)	Jeff Zentner
We Are All So Good at Smiling (4)	Amber McBride
Last Night at the Telegraph Club	Malinda Lo
Harry Potter series (4)	J.K. Rowling
Hunger Games series (4)	Suzanne Collins
Percy Jackson series (2)	Rick Riordan
Divergent series (3)	Veronica Roth
Paint the Wind	Pam Munoz Ryan
The Giver (2)	Lois Lowry
A Wrinkle in Time	Madeline L'Engle
Quiver	Julia Watts
A Gentleman's Guide to Virtue and Vice	Mackenzi Lee
Red, White, and Royal Blue	Casey McQuinston
Magic Tree House (3)	Mary Pope Osbourne
Eragon	Christopher Paolini
Monster (2)	Walter Dean Myers
The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian	Sherman Alexie
We Were Liars	E. Lockhart
The Book Thief (2)	Markus Zusak
Alice in Wonderland	Lewis Carroll
Cinderella is Dead	Kalynn Bayron
Excuse Me While I Ugly Cry	Joya Goffney
The Skin That I Am in	Sharon G. Flake
Bluford High series	Ben Alirez; D.M. Blackwell, Karyn Folan, Peggy Kern, John and Paul Langan, and Anne Schraff
Felix Ever After	Kacen Callender
All Boys Aren't Blue	George M. Johnson
Legendborn	Tracy Deonn
Twilight (2)	Stephanie Meyer
Vampire Academy	Richelle Mead
Maximum Ride (2)	James Patterson
Vampire Diaries	L.J. Smith
Challenger Deep	Neal Schusterman
Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes	Christ Crutcher
American Born Chinese	Gene Luen Yang
The Waking Forest	Alyssa Wees
The Series of Unfortunate Events	Lemony Snicket

Table 1.1: Continued

Greenglass House	Kate Milford
The Warrior Cat series	Erin Hunter
Nancy Drew series	Carolynn Keene
The Summer of Bitter and Sweet	Jen Ferguson
The Lovely Bones	Alice Sebold
Shatter Me	Tahereh Mafi
Love is a Revolution	Renee Watson
House on Mango Street	Sandra Ciscernos
I Must Betray You	Ruta Sepetys
A Good Girl's Guide to Murder	Holly Jackson
Throne of Glass	Sarah J. Maas
The Selection series	Kiera Cass

Table 1.2: *Data Source and Research Questions*

Research Question	Data Source
1. What types of transactions with YA texts have occurred with self-identified YA readers? Why have these transactions proved meaningful for the reader?	Reader Response Discussion Board End of Course Reflections Semi-structured Interviews
2. In what ways does reading YAL texts contribute to the identities of self-identified YA readers?	Reader Response Discussion Board End of Course Reflections Semi-structured Interviews
3. What role(s) do reading YA texts play in the identity development of self-identified YA readers over time?	Semi-structured Interviews

Table 1.3: *Sample Coding & Analysis Table*

Data Excerpt	In Vivo Coding	Open Coding	Memo
But I feel like there's, like a lot of things that go into like making like your own personal identity, kind of like how you grew up, what your interests are, what your morals are, and just kind of like who you are as a person. I also think a little bit goes into like how like maybe other people view you and see you, but I think that's kind of more it goes into like what other people's perceptions, perceptions of your identity are like, like my personal identity…I feel like that's really hard to describe, but I think I view myself as like a very, like, kind and like understanding person. I try to be like very open to like understanding other people or like other things. And I think like a lot of that has to do is like I grew up with or I grew up like surrounded by like people and family who are always like very open and like very understanding to like learning those new things. And I feel like I also… I do feel like reading kind of had to play into that. So, I like, read a lot and I read like a lot of different, like types of books, my different genres and saw like a lot of different perspectives. And I feel like that like not only like broadened my view, but like I was able to, like, make me understand, like maybe I don't always like, agree with people, but I can at least like, formulate like an understanding of, like where they're coming from with, like, why they do things or like, their opinions on things.	"a lot of things that go into…making…your own personal identity" "how you grew up" "what your interests are" "what your morals are" "other people view you" "perceptions of your identity" "hard to describe" "view myself" "kind" "understanding" "try to be very open" "understanding other people" "has to do" "grew up surrounded" "people and family" "very open" "very understanding" "learning" "new things" "reading had to play into that" "read a lot" "different types of books" "different genres" "different perspectives" "broadened my view" "make me understand" "formulate an understanding" "where they're coming from" "why they do things" "their opinions"	Self-identity Effect-Perspective	• Sees identity as a combination of context, socialization, instinct, interests, morals—very broad in scope. • Factors in outside perception—who others think you are. • Views herself as kind, understanding, open minded—thinks this is because she was surrounded by people with the same disposition. • Sees reading as playing into this as well—exposure to a lot of books from different genres, different perspectives—signals this broadened her views and enabled her to perspective take and understand another's context (where) and reasoning (why) Theory Connection: Holland (2001) & Rosenblatt (1994)

Table 1.4: *Sample Open Coding & Examples Table*

Code Name & Theme Alignment	Code description	Examples
Code: Transaction: Situation simulation Theme: *Transporting into new world and experiencing new stories*	Participant describes their experience of reading as a way to explore different situations or simulate possible choices in different situations present in narrative	Beth: "But it was fun seeing like things happen, and like the consequences, not be so detrimental as if, like you were an adult. So, it's kind of just like the best parts of childhood, even though some of the things were really dark like in young adult literature. It can really go there. But there's also, like, at least in some young adult literature, there is like a little bit of a protection. And then, obviously, and other sides, there's not" Maeve: "Well, I guess questioning, the world is sort of like. there are so many different systems within systems in those books. So, it's really interesting to see how other systems would work. I'm like well, why do we do things this way? This makes a lot more sense. And then, so that was definitely something for me. There was a lot of curiosity with reading." Elena: "… I think just like in general, like reading fantasy or just like kind of anything that I'm reading, like in general, I really, I prefer like fiction versus like maybe like nonfiction or like realistic fiction because I feel like it kind of allows you to like experience things or situations that like you might not always experience in real life, but it still kind of gives you that experience and that like kind of knowledge, like, like: Oh, I'm never going to be in the situation. But if I'm in like kind of a situation that's like maybe similar or like I made a similar thought process, I've already kind of gone through it while reading a book, and now I kind of have like a background for like how I could react or how I could approach like the situation, you know?"

Table 1.4: Continued

Code: Transaction: Emotions Theme: *Navigating Emotions*	Participant describes the reading experience as a way to explore emotions	Malaya: "I can really relate to this book because, like, the main character is talking about things that are so personal, and I think anybody who is struggling with anxiety or any kind of depression. Being those words being expressed, I think, would be helpful in their journey of being like: Oh! Like this character, though fictional, is able to express these feelings in this setting. Perhaps I can also do that for myself in my own life. And what could that possibly look like? Could it possibly look like reading more books similar to this? Is, is there a practical thing that I can apply my energy to so that I can, you know, help myself with my own anxiety, with my own demons?" Malaya: "And it's like that book helped me process like those emotions of like that was a scary thing… and it happened to me. But it's going to be okay, like, I, like just like her, I will… I will fight my own demons. I mean, I'm sure in the moment as like a teen girl, I did not think that…but now, you know, I can like look back… That was like, you know, years and years ago, I can look back and think like: okay like that…That book gave me courage to like push through." Beth: "So yeah, things like that that it was one of those things where I really like… I kind of knew that who I wanted to be. But then, especially with like the emotional instability I was stuck between: Okay, should I like, let my emotions be out there? Or should I just kind of like, ball them up and be like an aggressive or just like shut off person? And so, like being able to read that and see just like how compassionate people seem like more valuable and a lot more like they enjoy their lives at least in fiction. Kind of like pushed me in and be like no, it's okay to like, be emotional and be a person like that. So…"

Table 1.4: Continued

Code: Transaction: Character connections Theme: *Connecting to Characters*	Participant describes the reading experience as a way to connect with characters directly	Malaya: "You're literally inside their brains like they will tell you like, you know. It's mostly in Juliet's point of view. So, it's like you're inside her brain. She's like saying things that she would only say to herself, so to me, that's really like, so fun. It's like, I don't… I don't have to… I… I mean, I have questions. For sure. But you have like direct insight, and I guess, in like the novellas, you get like different points of view as well." Beth: "… I could feel like myself growing up with the characters, even if our situations weren't the same at all, I could just like connect with them, because even if how they were growing up was different. They were still learning like how to grow up, and I could… I could still connect to that, regardless of like how either of us was going through that. It was just kind of like, we're both on the same journey, I guess." Beth: "but I just remember, like the mental health things that she dealt with even before the accident. I just really related to them that really kind of paralleled with what was going on in my life at the time, and then, like also because of my struggles with mental health, I would go through these periods where I'm just like, am I crazy? Like what's going on? Like what's wrong with me? And then, obviously, the character dealt with that as well."

Appendix B

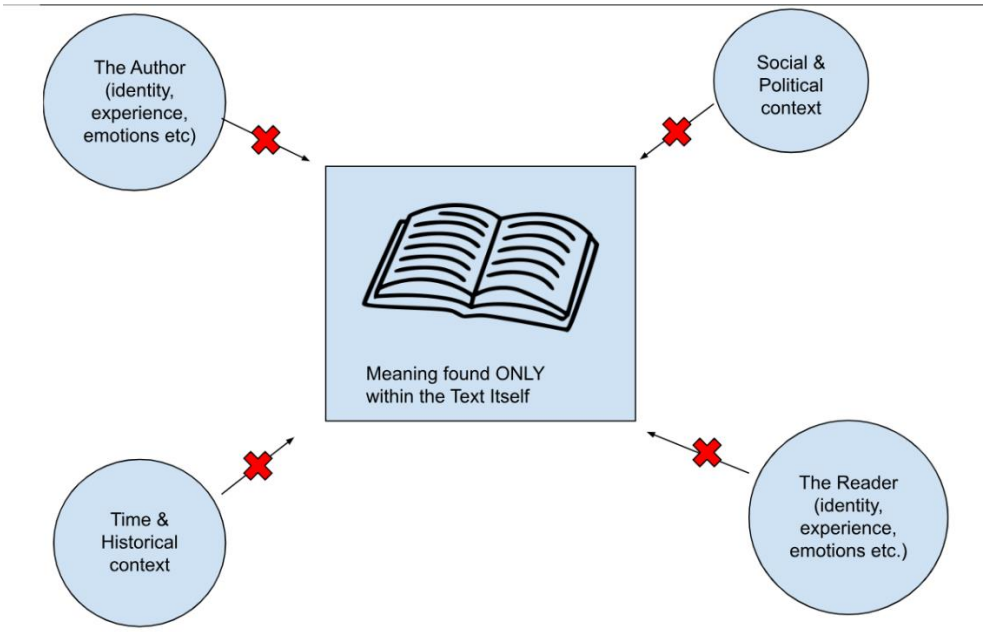


Figure 1: New Criticism's Text Itself Reading Process

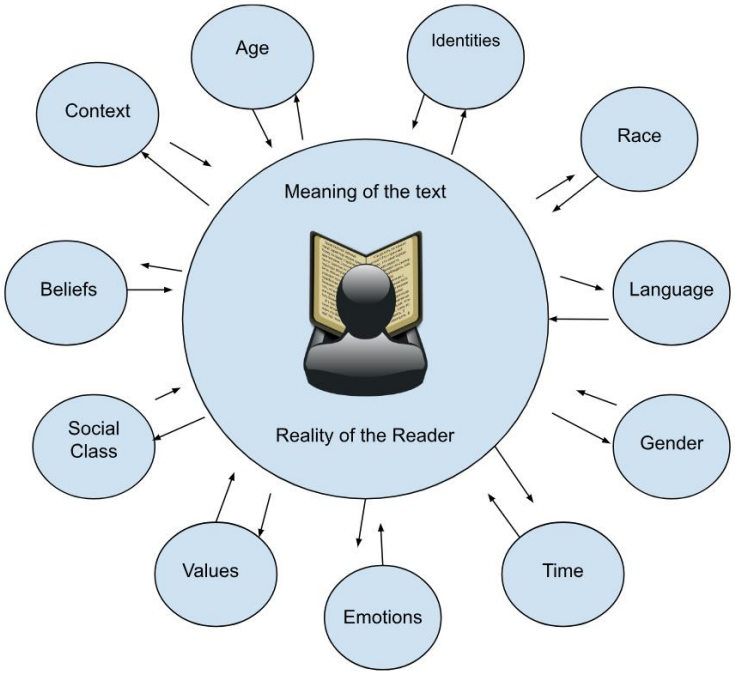


Figure 2: Reader Response Theory as Challenge to Objective Interpretation

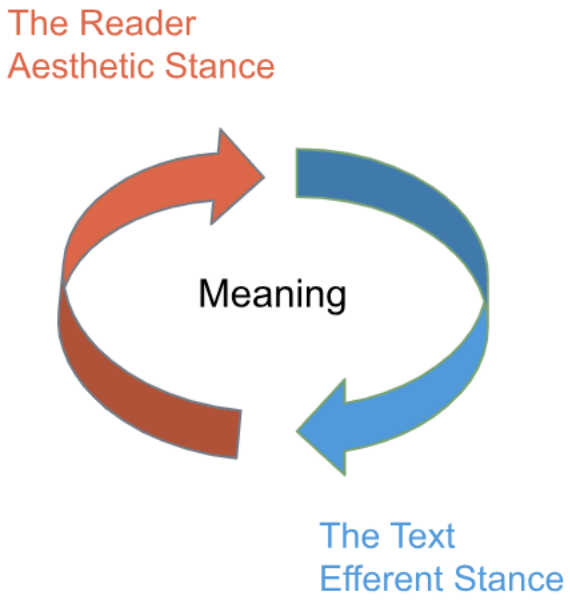
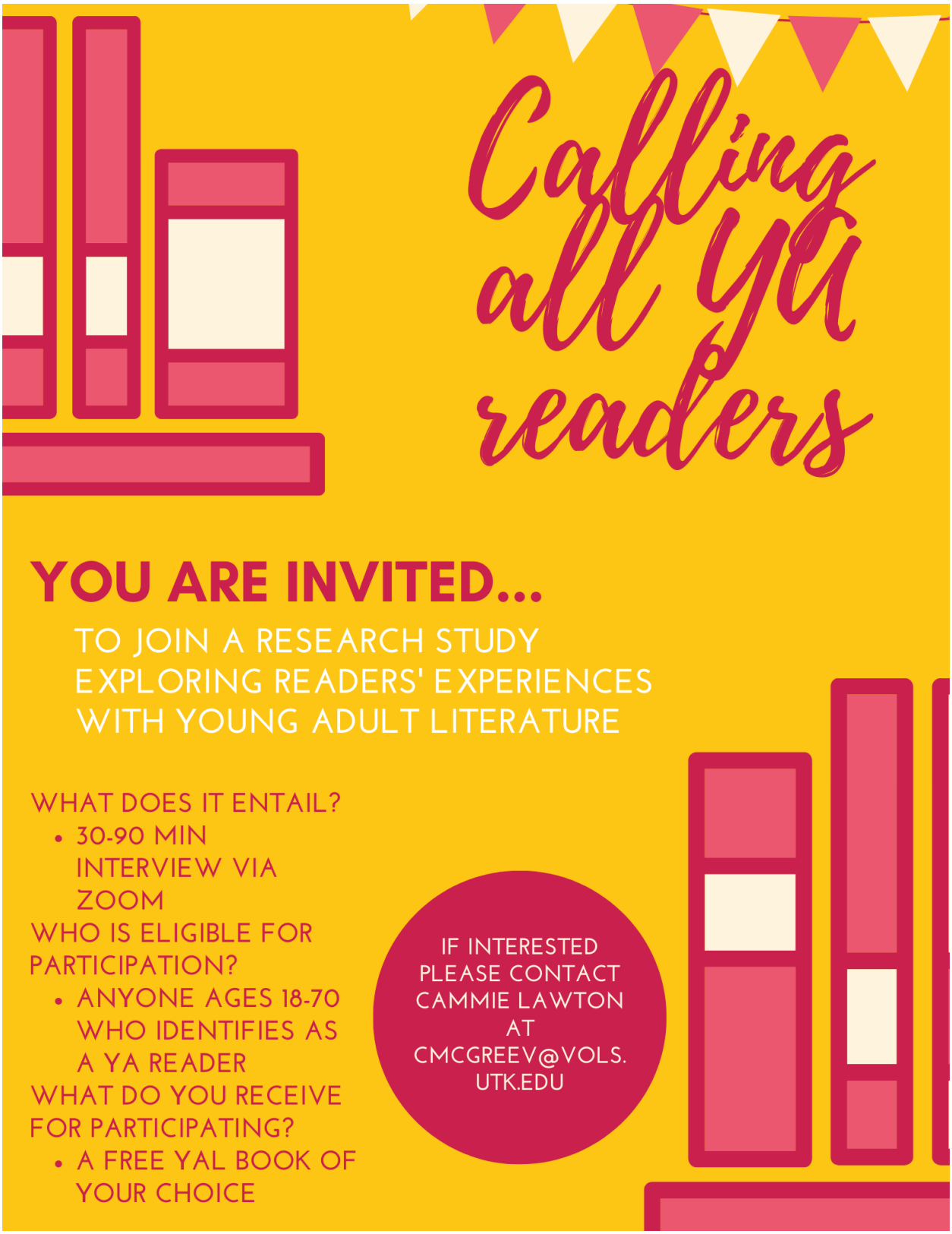


Figure 3: Rosenblatt's Transactional Model of Reading

Appendix C


Calling all YA readers
YOU ARE INVITED...
TO JOIN A RESEARCH STUDY
EXPLORING READERS' EXPERIENCES
WITH YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE
WHAT DOES IT ENTAIL?
• 30-90 MIN INTERVIEW VIA ZOOM
WHO IS ELIGIBLE FOR PARTICIPATION?
• ANYONE AGES 18-70 WHO IDENTIFIES AS A YA READER
WHAT DO YOU RECEIVE FOR PARTICIPATING?
• A FREE YAL BOOK OF YOUR CHOICE
IF INTERESTED PLEASE CONTACT CAMMIE LAWTON AT CMCGREEV@VOLS.UTK.EDU

Interview Protocol

Purpose & Research Questions:
The purpose of this case study is to determine how readers' responses to YAL are experienced and how readers associate the reading of YAL with their own identity formation or change over time. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. What types of transactions with YA texts have occurred with self-identified YA readers? Why have these transactions proved meaningful for the reader?
2. In what ways does reading YAL texts contribute to the identities of self-identified YA readers?
3. What role(s) do reading YA texts play in the identity development of self-identified YA readers over time?

Context & Consent:

To contextualize our time together today, we are going to be talking about our experiences and time together in [YA Course]. I'm Cammie Lawton and I'm researching the experiences of readers' responses to YAL and their beliefs, ideas, feelings about YAL's role in identity formation and change over time. This conversation will be about 30-90 minutes long and is completely voluntary. If at any point you feel uncomfortable or wish to stop the conversation, please feel free to let me know and I will end the conversation immediately. Since we know each other, this will be a semi-structured talk, so if I ask something that you would like to clarify, just ask. With your permission, I plan to record this conversation for transcription purposes, but you and I will work together to determine what level of identity and data disclosure you are comfortable sharing in the final report of this study. Do you have any questions or immediate concerns? With your permission, can we begin?

Interview Questions:

Purpose:	**Interview Questions:**
Build Rapport	1. How are you today? 2. Why did you choose to participate in this interview? 3. Because this interview is about reading and identity development, would you share with me how you would describe your identity/facets of who you are? 1. What characteristics, beliefs, values,

	personality traits, actions, ethics, connections/relationships, etc. are important to you and how you think about yourself or orient you to the world? 4. Again, just to situate ourselves to the present moment–What are your current reading habits? 1. What genres do you prefer? Why? 2. How would you describe yourself as a reader/ what defines your reading identity? 3. What connections to your personal life/larger personal identity formation do you associate with your reading habits right now?
RQ3: What types of transactions with YA texts have occurred with self-identified YA readers? Why have these transactions proved meaningful for the reader?	1. Tell me about your reading history over time–what made you a reader? How did you develop your reading likes, dislikes, etc.? 2. Tell me about your experience with reading specifically the genre of young adult literature–what stories were you drawn to, how did they make you feel, what did they make you think about/question/imagine? 3. When thinking about these experiences, which specific texts/readings/timings were meaningful for you? Why?
RQ1: In what ways does reading YAL texts define/impact/influence the identities of self-identified YA readers?	1. Based on these reading experiences with YAL stories, how do you connect your reading of YAL with your identity/personal development? 2. In what ways has your reading impacted your personal growth/self-knowledge/identity formation? 3. Tell me about a time that you experienced a challenge or confirmation of your identity/identities through reading a young adult text. 4. What questions does your reading provoke for you about your view of yourself or how you see the world? 5. How do you seek to answer those questions? 6. In what ways does this create growth or change for your holistic (spiritual, emotional, etc.) personal life?

RQ2: What role(s) do reading YA texts play in the identity development of self-identified YA readers over time?	1. Based on your experiences with YAL, how would you define the role YAL has had in developing your identity/sense of self over time? 2. In thinking back over your reader history and specific experiences you've shared; how would you describe yourself/sense of identity at the beginning of your reading life vs. now? Has there been shifts or changes or not really? Why? 3. Reflecting on your stories you've shared today, what have you realized or connected between your reading and your development of personal ideas, beliefs, and values? 4. How might you use this information to change/expand/adapt your reading life? 5. How do you envision your reading of YAL to inform your ideas about who you are/are becoming? 6. In what ways might these understandings shape your future actions?
Wrap Up Question	Is there anything that we talked about that you would like to expand on or anything else you'd like to add that we haven't already discussed?

Expression of Gratitude & Follow-Up Information:
Thank you again for spending this time talking with me about your personal experiences. I've really enjoyed hearing your story and perspective on reading, identity, and YAL. I deeply value your trust and vulnerability. I will email you a copy of the transcript for your review. If upon reflection and review you have any additional feedback, questions, or additions you'd like to make, I'd be happy to discuss them with you. I will also reach out to you after all analyses are done for your review of the findings and your specific data included in the final report. Anything that needs to be removed or clarified we can work together to finalize so that you feel your voice is accurately represented. I look forward to connecting with you again!

Vita

Cammie Jo Lawton was born and raised in Indiana and had the privilege of attending schools in both the towns of Pendleton and Westfield. After graduating from Westfield High School, Cammie traveled to Knoxville, TN to attend Johnson University where she studied in the Honors Program focused on English Literature and Biblical Studies. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 2012 and then a Master of Arts degree in Teacher Education in 2013. After completing her studies and teacher licensure at Johnson University, Cammie taught high school English and Language Arts for Knox County Schools. During her tenure with Knox County, Cammie had the honor of teaching freshman English (CP, Honors, Co-taught), Journalism, Advanced journalism, speech, sophomore IB English (MYP, Honors), and Film studies. In those years of teaching, Cammie trained in Secondary Reading, Positive Behavior Intervention Supports, Restorative Justice, and IB Personal Project facilitation. Through her work with students, Cammie fell in love with diverse children's and young adult literature and saw the ways incorporating YA affected students' engagement, emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual growth. This interest led her to enroll in a doctoral program. In 2020, Cammie started coursework towards a Doctor of Philosophy in Education, with a concentration in Literacy Studies, and a specialization in Children's and Young Adult Literature from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK). During her time at UTK, Cammie served in a variety of roles including a research assistant and teaching associate for The Center for Children's and Young Adult literature. She taught courses in Children's Literature, Young Adult Literature, and English Education. Additionally, she worked across specializations of Qualitative Research, Teacher Education, Elementary Education, and Social Studies education to complete research and grant projects for UTK. Cammie's research interests were inspired by her own lived experiences as a reader and her role as a high school English and literacy teacher. She has a particular passion for centering readers' experience of reading diverse representations of YAL and learning about how their responses affect their understandings of identity. Also, during her time at UTK, Cammie developed additional research interests in disability representation in YAL and its potential for shaping anti-ableist views in readers. Her goal remains to continue developing a pedagogy of criticality and love and utilizing diverse children's and young adult literature to explore potential transformative reading experiences that can shift understandings and promote social, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual growth for all people.