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Racial Issues in 21st-Century US Literature

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1. Introduction

During the years I have spent studying my Bachelor's Degree in English Studies at the University of Oviedo I have come to learn about the voiceless and the Others. Those who, through history, have been mistreated, forgotten, or overlooked. In my second year of university I had the opportunity of taking the Cultures of the United States module, which showed me the dark sides of a country that most people seem to have romanticised at some point in their lives and made me learn about the underlying issues that exist within it. Despite being portrayed as a melting pot of cultures and peoples, the United States have had a convoluted story of racial discrimination and injustice. Looking into the past and at the current reality of the US, it is clear that the nation remains tainted with racism. At the top of the list of the minorities that have suffered from racial inequality and prejudice in the US we encounter the African American population. Through American history, people of African and Caribbean descent have been the target of violence and hatred for no reason other than their skin colour. Of course, the situation of African Americans has improved since the times of slavery. This, however, does not mean that racial discrimination has disappeared. It has just changed and evolved the same way society has.

Both the overt, violent displays of racism and the more accepted covert forms of discrimination are still an ordinary part of everyday life in the US. The deaths of many innocent African Americans, going from those of children like Tamir Rice, who was fatally shot by the police in 2014, to the death of George Floyd in 2020, whose killer was finally charged with manslaughter, third-degree and second-degree murder in April this year –something that does not seem to happen as much as it should– are a representation of these deep-rooted issues. So are the smaller acts of hate Black Americans suffer on a daily basis. Black voices keep being silenced and Black existence keeps being disrespected. Society needs to change and representing and bringing light to these problems might be a good step forward. This has inspired me to explore how racial issues are portrayed in 21st-century American literature that was written by authors of colour and the effects these literary works have on the population.

In this thesis I will be analysing a young adult literature duology –*Dear Martin* (2017) and *Dear Justyce* (2020)– written by Nic Stone, an African American *New York Times* best-selling author who is trying to make a change in society by putting Black stories at the forefront. The duology deals with how racial discrimination and

institutionalised racism in America affect Black people, especially Black youths. By comparing the lives of Justyce McAllister, his best friend Emmanuel “Manny” Rivers and Manny’s cousin, Vernell LaQuan “Quan” Banks Jr, and their different experiences of being African American young men in the United States I will try to demonstrate that fictional stories can act as “counterstories” (Delgado and Stefancic 2017) that help challenge the hegemonic white narrative the world is used to seeing, subsequently helping educate the population on race issues and providing representation for Black youths. For these purposes, I will, firstly, look at the part race and racism have played in the history of the United States of America to understand why it is important for literary works like Nic Stone’s to exist in today’s society. I will also be looking at the different movements against racism that have arisen through the years and how these have translated into contemporary times and have come to be represented in areas such as multicultural literature. In my analysis, I will be treating the two literary works as a continuum and I will use Critical Race Theory –a movement that studies the relationship between race, racism and power and looks at racism as a normalised part of life in the US– as a framework to inspect how the concepts of race, institutionalised racism, prejudice, privilege and microaggression are developed in *Dear Martin* and *Dear Justyce* and how these have impacted the lives of Justyce, Manny and Quan.

I have chosen these literary works because I believe young adult literature has the potential to help bring the change the world needs since it impacts younger readers, who are in charge of leading the future. Literary works like Nic Stone’s aid in the fight against racism. This fight has been in process since the abolitionist movement started in the 19th century and it is not over yet. From the Civil Rights Movement to the Black Lives Matter movement, the world has seen African Americans strive to finally achieve an equal position in society through both theoretical and hands-on approaches. Literature can be a part of these movements by portraying these issues and illustrating people. Furthermore, the message multicultural literature carries has the potential of being translated into other forms of media that will reach a larger amount of people and of being taught in schools, making students ask themselves important questions. The fight, the public upheavals, the efforts put into educating others and everything that has been done in the fight for Black lives and Black voices should not be in vain. With my thesis I want to help bring light to these issues and partake in the efforts to represent Black voices that have been made up until this point.

2. Theoretical Framework: Race and Racism in the United States

*We hold these truths to be self-evident
that all men are created equal.*

(The United States Declaration of Independence, 1776)

The United States of America were built under the promise of equality for all men; a promise that to this day, 245 years after the Declaration of Independence was signed, many believe remains unfulfilled. To understand contemporary racial discrimination in the US and the reasons for African American stories to need representation in literature we must look back in time hundreds of years into the past. Firstly, at the history of Western civilisation, to discern how the concepts of race and racism came to exist and how they became a fundamental part of American society. Secondly, at how these issues have developed alongside the American nation. From the fight for emancipation, through the Civil Rights Movement, and up until the present day, the American system has failed and seems to keep failing African Americans, who are still fighting for equality.

2.1. Race and Racism: A Panorama

The term 'racism' did not appear in a dictionary until the early 1930s, when it was coined to refer to fascist European ideologies. It would still take years for it to be used in the context of the United States. By that point in history, the practice of racial discrimination had been around for a long time; emancipation and citizenship had been granted and the Jim Crow laws and racial segregation were in full swing. It was not until 1938 that the word 'racism' was first publicly employed to speak out against the situation in the US in front of the American public (Zimmer 2020). That was the point when 'racism' started being associated with the hundreds of years of discrimination that Black Americans had suffered.

The 'discovery' of America in 1492 was one of the main events that led to an era of racial aggression (Rattansi 2007: 20). It was Europe's first step into the world of what they considered the uncivilised and the barbaric. The hegemony of European empires had been evident up until that point, but it was then that for the West the world started being divided between 'us', the civilised, and 'them', those waiting to be exploited and controlled (Addison 2009: 6). It was because of the dawn of colonialism

that the concept of race first appeared –or rather, was manufactured– in the 16th century, to create a distinction between the colonisers and the colonised.

Through history there have been attempts to explain racial discrimination against dark-skinned people as a consequence of the connections that Christianity makes between whiteness and purity and darkness and evil. The historical confrontation between Christians and Muslims has also played a part in these hypotheses. Research, however, has proved that these ideas and conflicts were not connected with physiological differences (Rattansi 2007: 18). It was not until resources to exploit were discovered in Africa in the late 15th century that blackness as a physiological trait started being considered something inherently bad. Slavery was nothing new or revolutionary at that point in history, and soon after the European powers got involved in the exploitation of Africa's West Coast, Africans started being captured and enslaved. In no time, the scale of these captures doubled as the implantation of colonies through the American continent led to the start of what is known as the Transatlantic slave trade: the transportation of captive Africans from Africa to America to use them as workforce in plantations. This became a profitable practice that allowed goods to be transported to Europe, bringing noticeable benefits. It is estimated that between 10 million and 12 million Africans were forcefully transported across the Atlantic Ocean to the American continent between the 16th and the 19th century (Lewis 2020). These were the origins of a great part of today's African American population.

Once the first of the thirteen British colonies was established in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, it only took twelve years for the first slave ship to be sent their way. In 1619, twenty slaves disembarked that ship in Virginia, marking the beginning of the United States' history of injustice and racial discrimination. Slave owners and Western powers had a "crucial interest in representing the black as fit for no other fate" (Rattansi 2007: 31) as slavery sustained a great part of their economy. Soon enough and without much difficulty, white Europeans, both those at home and those in the colonies, accepted racial discrimination as something natural. According to Addison (2009: 27) and Williams (2014: 3), the perceivable differences between black and white people made Africans prime candidates for enslavement. They were seen as alien and did not awaken feelings of empathy in the general public. Thus, the concept of race became fully incorporated into the Western imaginary in the late 18th century. The age of the Enlightenment brought with it the taxonomy of race and the concept 'scientific racism'. In America, these were conceived by the most prominent scientist of the time, Samuel

Morton, who categorised humans into five races. Whites or ‘Caucasians’ were at the top of the hierarchy and blacks or ‘Ethiopian’ at the bottom (Kolbert 2018). It became clear that to uphold colonialism and slavery there needed to exist a distinction between progress and savagery; those races other than the white needed to be tamed. Racial discrimination became a part of ‘nature’ and their adverse situation a part of Darwin’s process of natural selection (Rattansi 2007: 54). Even important intellectuals of the time such as Kant and Hume alluded to the inherent lack of intellect of Black individuals and helped their image be associated with the concept of brutishness (Rattansi 2007: 28). These ideas would become so ingrained in the public’s consciousness that they can still be found today under the guise of being cultural stereotypes. As the thirteen British colonies evolved into the United States, the concept of racial superiority became a crucial part of the nation and, as it was an efficient practice, slavery remained established until it could no longer be upheld. The moment the first African slaves set foot on Anglo-America the fight for Black rights and equality –a fight that is still alive and being fought today– started.

2.2. The Fight for Equality: Institutionalised Racism in the United States

The practice of slavery benefitted the US in ways that ensured the economic progress of the nation. The mass unpaid labour brought substantial profits and sustained the style of life the United States pursued. This was especially evident in the gap between the rhetoric of the 1776 Declaration of Independence and the reality of the United States (Addison 2009: 300) where men were evidently not equal and, therefore, could not aspire to achieve the same things. Slavery was a life-long experience out of which very few could get out and it was characterised by abuse, torture, and dehumanisation. Yet, African Americans were not passive in the face of such injustice. From 1619 up until the abolition of slavery in 1865 there were countless displays of resistance. It was a push and pull where the power dynamics were unbalanced from the start but “even the most oppressed were not completely powerless” (Williams 2014: 51). Withholding labour and organising acts of rebellion were some of the things slaves could do. The question was how to defend themselves and try to reach freedom without endangering their lives in the process, a struggle that remains relevant to this day as people go out into the streets to protest against the inequality that still exists in the US.

The American abolitionist movement arose in the 19th century, but voices opposing slavery had already existed for some time: apart from slave revolts, some white groups, mostly made up of Quakers, spoke out against the establishment. After the American Revolutionary War, the northern states began passing emancipation laws since they were building cities and industries and did not rely on slavery as much (Addison 2009: 319). This situation provided the opportunity for the birth of the abolitionist movement, which was conformed both by whites and by African Americans who had either been freed or had escaped slavery. Their main strategy consisted in sharing information that illustrated the reality of slavery. One of the most difficult things was making the general public move past the widespread view Americans had of Black people as people who lacked intellect and were suited only for hard labour. At this point in history, freed individuals started writing their slave narratives, which would play a fundamental role in the abolitionist movement as they impacted the white American public. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) or Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) are two examples of these autobiographies, which were published as pamphlets or books. Meanwhile, the southern states, since they relied on plantations and slavery as their main source of income, kept showing strong resistance against Abolitionism. Many restrictive laws were passed to avoid the spread of abolitionist ideas and the desire to revolt. Support for the abolitionist movement grew in the North and, as other countries began abolishing slavery, the tension between the North and South grew. This tension would be one of the reasons that would lead to the American Civil War.

Slavery in the United States officially ended with the ratification of the 13th amendment in 1865, after the end of the Civil War. While this legislation meant the official abolition of slavery and granted them basic civil rights, African Americans were still in a disadvantaged position. Most times they even remained in the same conditions doing the same unpaid labour, especially in the southern states. The title of 'slave' had been removed, but it was now referred to with a different name. Soon enough southern states began passing legislations that made sure African Americans' rights were controlled and kept minimal. These legislations were the Black Codes, which later on came to be known as 'Jim Crow' laws because of a popular caricature that mocked Black Americans. These policies were no longer questioned by the North, where segregation was *de facto* instead of legalised, because, in the face of mass immigration from Black southerners and southern and eastern Europeans, they had started fearing for

their “Anglo-Saxon racial stock” (Klarman 2007: 4). Black activists and politicians fought against these measures throughout the Reconstruction period, using their voices and intellect and pushing for legal action. However, the previously mentioned question of defending themselves without endangering their lives remained central. In 1866, the Ku Klux Klan, a terrorist white supremacist organisation, was established with the purpose of stopping the advancement of African Americans. They especially targeted and attacked Black activists, whose words and militancy were met with violence and, in many cases, murder (Williams 2014: 114). The end of Reconstruction was characterised by the return of a convoluted racial climate. This culminated with the verdict of the *Plessy vs Ferguson* case in 1896. Homer A. Plessy took to court a Louisiana law that required separate train carts for Black and white citizens. The Supreme Court ruled that ‘separate but equal’ facilities were legal under the current legislations. There started the era of constitutional racial segregation throughout the United States which would eventually lead to the start of the Civil Rights Movement.

As the 19th century moved into the 20th, racial discrimination in the US was as evident as ever, both in the social and the legal realms. In this context the need for an organised platform became evident. In 1909 the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) emerged as one of the first groups to fight for the civil rights of African Americans. Among their main strategies was trying to push lawsuits against legalised segregation. Two events that took place in the 1950s were the catalysts for the boom of the Civil Rights Movement: in 1954 the NAACP pushed for a lawsuit against unequal and unfair conditions in a Virginia school. It came to be known as *Brown vs Board of Education*. The verdict of the case was unexpected as the white jury unanimously invalidated racial segregation in education (Klarman 2007: 55-57), marking the start of desegregation. The second event was not a positive milestone: in 1955 the kidnapping, beating and murder of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Black boy, for allegedly flirting with a white woman, caused a public uproar. The Till family decided to hold an open casket funeral in hopes that seeing a child in his state would stop racist attacks from happening (Addison 2009: 377). Up until that moment civil rights activists had been organising non-violent protests and acts of civil disobedience, and these events encouraged African Americans to keep fighting. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, which was started by Rosa Parks in 1955 to end segregation in public transport, would be another landmark of the movement, which progressively grew in the South. The boycott had been organised by minister Martin Luther King Jr,

who would go on to become the most visible spokesperson of the movement for his peaceful but strong stance on the fight for equality.

Finally, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, dismantling the Jim Crow laws and establishing measures to combat racial segregation. In 1965 an additional Voting Rights Act was passed to eliminate the barriers the South had been establishing to avoid African American votes (Addison 2009: 202). These are two milestones in the history of the United States of America, but racial inequality and discrimination did not end there. According to Bonilla-Silva (2006), the end of Jim Crow did not entail the end of racism, it just brought a new form of racism that today is commonly referred to as 'colour-blind racism'. This has become normalised and resides in the idea of there being equal opportunities for everyone in America's capitalist, liberal society as long as they work hard. It ignores obvious examples of systemic and institutional racism that hamper the equality of opportunities. Biological views about race, born with scientific racism, have been replaced by cultural ones that mimic them after genetic research during the 20th and 21st centuries proved that race is a made-up concept (Kolbert 2018). Furthermore, this new type of racism looks at segregation as an individual choice based on our natural desire to gravitate towards those like us. Overall, it is covert and normalised, which has made it acceptable in today's society (Bonilla-Silva 2006: 73-78). Racism has become part of the American system; it is institutionalised. Studies show that most positions of power in the US are held by white people, the majority of prison inmates are black and brown, and residential segregation remains central in the organisation of American cities, even if African Americans could also afford to live in the suburbs (Delgado and Stefancic 2017: 12). While undoubtedly there have been improvements since the 1960s, like the election of the first Black president in 2008 and of the first Black female vice-president in 2020, racism seems to remain a standard part of everyday life for most African Americans.

The 21st century has seen many examples of institutionalised, covert, and colour-blind racism, but it has also seen the gradual return to overt ones as violence against the African American population has increased notably. New social movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement have appeared, and the already established organisations have kept fighting against discrimination and racial inequality. In the past few years, the public has witnessed the deaths of many Black Americans, often at the hands of the police forces. Twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was shot by the police for playing with a toy gun in 2014; other teenagers and adults have also suffered the same fate. George

Floyd's murder in May of 2020 led to what has possibly been the biggest public response against racism since the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. It has been 245 years since the statement "all men are created equal" was written, yet as of today it is evident that there still is a long way to go. The fight for equality and against racism remains alive and the need for the voices of Black Americans to be heard seems as evident as ever.

2.3. Critical Race Theory and Counterstorytelling: The Importance of Stories of Race and Multicultural Literature

A number of different approaches to race and racism derived from the Civil Rights Movement in the United States after the 1960s. The Critical Race Theory (CRT) was devised in the 1970s after the movement started losing force and covert forms of racism became normalised. The father figure, Derrick Bell, was a professor of Law at Harvard Law School and New York University. He and a number of other thinkers and activists wrote the foundational texts for the field, which started in law but rapidly spread beyond that discipline. CRT draws from other theories and movements, among which are the ideas of the African American radical tradition, exemplified by figures like Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr, and the Black Power groups. It also looked at post-structuralism and its ideas of deconstruction.

Essentially, CRT is a theoretical and interpretative approach that studies and tries to transform the relationship among race, racism and power (Delgado and Stefancic 2017: 2) in different cultural forms of expression. Not only does it look at individuals but also at groups, settings, relevant history, economy, emotions and the unconscious. The theory is based on five propositions that all CRT writers and activists agree on. The first is the idea that racism is an ordinary part of life in the United States, and it is not challenged because it is a colour-blind and covert type of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2006). The second is that racism benefits the majority group –the white American population– both materially and psychologically, which is an incentive to maintain it. The third is that race is a social construction, as proved by scientific and genetic research from the late 20th and 21st centuries (Kolbert 2018), and society chooses to ignore this for its own benefit. The fourth is that racialisation, or how the majority group decides to picture and portray people of colour at different times, has general consequences on racialised groups but each individual of colour still has their own

plural identity. The final idea is that there exists a unique voice of colour. Writers of colour, thanks to their different experiences with oppression, can understand each other and illustrate white people about race and racism (Delgado and Stefancic 2017: 7-11). These ideas set the framework for any cultural artifact or situation CRT studies. The concepts of white privilege, microaggressions, institutionalised racism and intersectionality are part of these tenets and are central to everything analysed under the lens of this theory.

The Critical Race movement is not only a theoretical one, it also has an activist side. Its main activity is storytelling, or counterstorytelling as it recounts stories of individuals whose identity and race are the opposite of what is considered to be the norm. Just like the movement itself, this practice started only as legal storytelling, but it quickly moved beyond the legal realm. CRT is concerned with “the exploring of the stories, the telling of new stories, and the unpacking of race in the stories” (Bowman et al. 2009: 37). In Critical Race Theory, stories of race are narratives, real or fictional, which deal with the experiences of racialised individuals. Once a story of race is told, CRT analyses its key elements in connection to the tenets, propositions, and legal arguments developed by CRT writers. The importance of articulating stories of race, however, goes beyond CRT. In the literary field these stories may be referred to as multicultural literature and, according to Cai, “the goal of the multicultural literature movement is to give voice to those who have been historically silenced, to represent those who have been underrepresented, to give true faces back to those whose images have been distorted” (2002: 49), which agrees with CRT’s concept of counterstorytelling.

Within multicultural literature we encounter African American literature, which originated in 18th century. It was preceded by the early forms of expression of slaves and eventually of free Black Americans, who shared their experiences with their voices. The first instance of this would be the creation of slave songs, which they would sing as they worked. According to Frederick Douglass, slave songs had a great impact as they were full of meaning and would impress anyone that heard them since they talked of the horrible character of slavery (2009: 24). After these songs came the 18th-century slave narratives, which deeply impacted the white public and kept being written even after emancipation, sometimes from a fictional perspective, to keep alive the memory of the struggles that Black Americans had to go through. Despite these early examples, the biggest spurt of multicultural literature worldwide would not come until the 20th

century, when colonialism came to an end and silenced voices found a space for themselves. In the United States the boom of multicultural and African American literature happened later on, after the Civil Rights Movement. Even though it brought progress to the American cultural stock, these stories, even today, are not as present as hegemonic ones (Thomas 2016: 1). Despite this, stories of race –both real and fictional– are powerful tools for minorities as they give the silenced voices and names and explain things that other groups may not be aware of.

Critical Race Theory scholars believe that, once named, discrimination can be fought, and these stories can help ease prejudice and unlearn stereotypes that have been embedded in the Western collective imagination for centuries (Delgado and Stefancic 2017: 44-52). It is important, however, that stories of race are written and told by subjects of colour who can relate to the experiences in the narrative, since white writers may perpetuate cultural imposition and create stories unintentionally filled with stereotypes (Cai 2002: 38). The goal is for these scripts to challenge the dominant group and its ideology and foster appreciation and respect for the cultures that have been silenced, but also to empower the members of these groups and make them feel represented and understood. For these purposes it is especially important to produce counterstories that show representation in children's and young adult literature, as younger generations tend to grow up without them. Not only does this affect younger people of colour, who cannot see themselves reflected on anything, but also their white counterparts, who might think their stories are the only ones that matter (Thomas 2016).

3. Analysis of *Dear Martin* and *Dear Justyce*

The experiences of African American have become central to the reality of the US today. It is because of the historical journey Black Americans have gone through and the injustices they have faced and still face today that the representation of their identities and their struggles in literature matters so much. The spread of multicultural literature –and African American literature in particular– onto the mainstream media is a step in the right direction, especially for younger generations, since they are the ones who can change the way society works. Writers like Nic Stone, author of *Dear Martin* (2017) and *Dear Justyce* (2020), give representation to young Black voices and provide African American children and adolescents with role models to look up to. They also

use their platform to portray the struggles connected to being Black in the US and help in making racism be seen and understood for what it is.

3.1. Young Adult Literature

Literature made to cater to adolescents –commonly known as Young Adult Literature (YAL)– has been around for a relatively short amount of time. Scholars consider that young adult literature started being published in the US after the end of the Second World War, in a period when the concept of being a teenager was slowly becoming an important part of culture. However, it was not until S. E. Hinton’s novel *The Outsiders* (1967) was published that this new genre took off and became popular. It set the standards for the genre, providing an insightful perspective into the minds of teenage characters, teenage rebellion, and other issues. These concepts would then become fundamental in most YAL works. Because of the relative novelty of the genre, its scope and limits are still not totally clear. Some say YAL deals with growth, the journey from childhood to adulthood and how changes take place in it (Campbell 2010: 70). Others argue that it navigates institutional power hierarchies (Trites 2000), be them within families, religions, high schools, or society in general. The genre is a mixture of these themes and is characterised by young adults and their experiences being the main focus. In the 21st century YAL has gone on to become a staple in popular culture. The genre offers creative stories that tend to be easy to read and touch on issues that more mature fiction generally does not explore, like the search for one’s identity or the struggle to fit into society. The topic of adolescence, a life stage that by now is considered a fundamental part of a human’s development, pulls teenagers in and makes them feel seen in a period where they tend to feel alone and different. The popularity of YAL has transcended literature and the world has seen some works, especially in the 2010s, turn into hits among children and teenagers and even be adapted into films and TV series. Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010) trilogy and the *Twilight* (2005-2020) series, written by Stephenie Meyer, are two examples of popular YAL texts that were successfully adapted into the big screen. This made them more accessible to a broader audience. Furthermore, these stories seem not only appeal to younger readers, but also to older ones.

Young adult literature has proved to be statistically much more diverse than other genres and it often portrays characters of different origins, religions, races, and sexualities. Nevertheless, readers denounce that it is still lacking a lot of representation

as the diverse characters rarely are the main focus of these literary works. Stories with white protagonists, like the previously mentioned *The Hunger Games* trilogy and *Twilight* series, remain the preferred ones and are the most popular in the media. Still, authors such as Nic Stone, Angie Thomas and Ibi Zoboi are producing works that play an important role within multicultural literature. Slowly, stories of race targeted to adolescent readers are making their way into the spotlight. While YAL is still not as inclusive as it could be, it is a work in progress that advances every day. According to research done by the Cooperative Children's Book Centre at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, out of the 3,717 books the centre received from US publishers in 2019 only 451 had significant Black or African American content (CCBC 2021). The number is striking, considering that in 2019 there were around 46 million Black Americans living in the US. As time passes, the numbers seem to be improving progressively and, although authors of colour encounter more problems than others when publishing their novels, their stories are seeing the light and being recognised by their importance. Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* (2017) could be considered an example of these improvements and a significant milestone in multicultural YAL for its huge media success.

Multicultural YAL, just as traditional multicultural literature, shows realities different from the ones experienced by the majority group. For racialised children and teenagers it works as a mirror (Hughes-Hassel 2013: 221), helping them see themselves reflected, whether the stories are real or fictional, and consequently, positively impacting their self-love. According to Collins, "young adult literature written from an authentic black cultural perspective can prove to be a valuable tool in helping black young adults achieve the skills and knowledge they require to succeed in this society" (1993: 378). Apart from working as a mirror, multicultural YAL can also act as a sort of window (Hughes-Hassel 2013: 221), allowing white adolescents to see realities different from their own and exposing the impact of racism. Reading about these experiences and making discussions approachable to younger readers who have probably never experienced them can help them see things beyond their perspective. This can help challenge the myth of the single story by making readers learn about prejudice, since "the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (Adichie 2009).

Young readers are more likely to change their mind about things they have been raised thinking. Reading about realities different from their own can help broaden their

horizons and create more awareness about a number of different topics. It is because of this that many American schools are adding diverse children's and YA books to their curriculum (Thomas 2016: 120-121). Defensiveness, anger, and shame are to be expected if the readers belong to the group whose attitudes are being challenged in the narrative. However, counterstories are inherently non-confrontational; they allow the readers to make their own judgements (Hughes-Hassel 2013: 221) and prove to be a tool for reflection and open dialogue among teenagers. Authors like Crowe consider that presenting the struggles and victories of African Americans to young people in "moving, personal ways" (2003: 132) will have an effect on how they see and understand the world around them. Reading about the impact of colour-blind and institutionalised racism and feeling it first-hand through the lens of literature may even get them to act against injustice.

As explained in the introduction, Nic Stone is an African American *New York Times* best-selling author of young adult fiction. In her novels, she offers diverse stories with African American protagonists who are exploring life and learning from it. Her debut novel *Dear Martin* and its sequel *Dear Justyce* tackle race relations in the US and how African American young men tend to be the ones to carry the consequences of America's history of racism. In both literary works Stone adopts a fictional approach to show how institutionalised racism is still present in America's legal and judicial systems and how blatant displays of racism in society have become normalised. The protagonists –Justyce McAllister in *Dear Martin* and Vernell LaQuan Banks Jr in *Dear Justyce*– are two African American teenagers from the same Atlanta neighbourhood who wind up living very different lives. They reflect on race issues by writing letters to Dr Martin Luther King Jr in Justyce's case and to Justyce in Quan's case and help each other, and the readers, understand the role racism plays in the US. Stone's literary works are a prime example of YA multicultural literature that promotes reflection and open dialogue by offering counterstories that are approachable and easy to read. Because of this, these literary works have been chosen as the corpus of this thesis. In the following section they will be discussed in detail using the approach of CRT and looking at the issues of racism and counterstorytelling in depth.

3.2 Race, Racism and Social Standing: Analysing Justyce, Manny and Quan's experiences as African American Young Men using Critical Race Theory

Dear Martin and *Dear Justyce* represent the pervasive nature of racism in American society and the American system through the voices and stories of Justyce McAllister, Vernell LaQuan Banks, and Emmanuel Rivers. Justyce and Quan, as protagonists, actively share their fictional counterstories. There is a 3rd-person omniscient narrator that recounts the significant events in the life of each boy, but Justyce and Quan also use their own voices to share how they feel about the world around them. They write letters where they reflect on their experiences as African American young men and on how their lives are or have been conditioned by the unfair treatment that Black individuals receive in the US. They challenge the hegemonic white narrative and bring light to issues that readers might not know about. Justyce and Quan provide details not only about the overt forms of racism they and others like them experience every day, but also the covert and less talked about ones. Their counterstories offer insight into the effects of prejudice on and within the African American community, the impact of microaggressions and how the American system conditions Black people –especially Black youths– to have fewer opportunities.

Manny's situation and story are different from Justyce and Quan's. Despite being a character of significant importance in *Dear Martin*, he never gets the agency to express his own voice and thoughts in the narrative. His is not a counterstory, he does not get to actively share his own experiences. Readers can only perceive him from the narrator's point of view and through Justyce's and Quan's eyes. From what the reader gets to know about him, he is not ready to challenge the group in power and the hegemonic narrative. There comes a point in *Dear Martin* when he finally wakes up and finds himself ready to accept that racism is an intrinsic part of the society he lives in. He is able to acknowledge the fact that he had ignore the unfairness of racial inequality until he could no longer stand it. He mentions "I didn't like what I saw" when he opened his eyes to see the reality of the society he lived in so "I wanted to shut 'em again" (Stone 2017: 109). His life, however, is cut short soon after his realisation. He is "shot at a traffic light" by an "officer with the Atlanta PD" who was "not on duty at the time of the shooting" (Stone 2017: 123). His death is a significant part of Justyce and Quan's counterstories and a representation of a very common American tragedy: the

murder of innocent African American young men at the hands of racist individuals. Despite the gap that exists between reality and fiction, there are clear links among Manny, Justyce and Quan's stories and those of real African American teenagers that make *Dear Martin* and *Dear Justyce* plausible fictional representations created to fight against racial inequality.

The novels openly portray racism as an institutionalised and normalised issue, which, as mentioned in section 2.3, is the basis of CRT and one of the key elements that allows these texts to be looked at under its lens. This is not stated matter-of-factly, but developed through the debates and discussions the different characters engage in. These conversations do not only help readers understand what Black individuals go through every day, but also the novels' own characters. Justyce, Manny and Quan show different levels of awareness to the presence of racism in the US. Justyce and Quan reflect on how the system has treated them and others who look like them. *Dear Martin* starts with an unfair encounter that Justyce has with the police when he is targeted and considered a criminal because of his skin colour. Up until that point in his life, he seemed to have ignored the presence of racism in the American system, but suddenly he is faced with it and feels pushed to try to make a change.

I know I can't continue to pretend nothing's wrong. Yeah, there are no more 'colored' water fountains, and it's supposed to be illegal to discriminate, but if I can be forced to sit in the concrete in too-tight cuffs when I've done nothing wrong, it's clear there's an issue. That things aren't as equal as folks say they are. (Stone 2017: 13)

From that point onwards, Justyce starts a journey of self-reflection and his own small fight against racial inequality. His awareness grows as the plot develops and he uses his voice to bring light to the topic of institutionalised racism, which can be seen in his contribution in the state debate tournament: "We are here to argue that racial disparities in the US criminal justice system are largely due to racial profiling" (Stone 2017: 80). Writing letters addressed to Dr Martin Luther King Jr where he reflects on these issues is also part of his journey. His epistles become his counterstory, and when he passes them on to Quan, they help him start his own journey. Quan confesses that reading Justyce's letters "made me want to write this" (Stone 2020: 24). This is because counterstories help minorities and "give them a voice and reveal that other people have similar experiences" (Delgado and Stefancic 2017: 50). Despite feeling identified with

Justyce, Quan's own experience with institutionalised racism contrasts with Justyce's. He has grown up in a majorly Black area and from a young age he has associated himself with a gang known as "the Black Jihad" (Stone 2017: 43), whose work is inspired by the Black Panther Party and the concept of Black Power (Stone 2020: 89). Despite knowing that they engage in criminal activities, Quan finds "support without judgment" in them. He has been taught to think that the American system is constituted of "institutions of oppression" (Stone 2020: 41) that work against Black people. Quan can relate to these ideas because he has experienced this oppression first-hand. The system gave up on him, labelling him a career criminal at 15 years old. He is one of the many people that have been failed by the system because of their race.

Justyce and Quan's counterstories portray the effects of racialisation –another one of CRT's primary elements in the analysis of stories of race– on the African American community, but also within it. Society has created an image and a series of stereotypes that are supposed to fit African Americans, and this affects them in ways they sometimes do not even notice. First, because the group in power takes the truth of these prejudices for granted and sees Black Americans as representations of these stereotypes. Secondly, because African Americans themselves can –both knowingly and unknowingly– absorb these prejudices in order to live according to society's expectations. Justyce and Manny are characters that are especially susceptible to the effects of racialisation within the African American community. It is not that they are defined by their race, but they are affected by how society perceives it and want to stay away from the negative stereotypes that have arisen from the racialisation of African Americans. Despite belonging to the same ethnic group, they are individuals with "potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances" (Delgado and Stefancic 2017: 7). Manny, who has always lived in a white area and been surrounded by white people of a certain status, feels disconnected from the perception society has of African Americans. He does not deny the truth within stereotypes and prejudices because he has only seen them as a spectator. He considers Justyce to be his "*only* black friend" (Stone 2017: 73; emphasis in the original) and states he does not like Black girls because they are really "attitude-y" (Stone 2017: 72). While he mentions he knows "that's a stereotype or whatever" he also comments that he has "literally never experienced anything else" (Stone 2017: 73). Justyce, on the other hand, believes he needs to stay away from these stereotypes in order to prosper in life. He is a scholarship student living in the halls of residence of an elite preparatory academy and takes pride

in not having a “thuggish” appearance and not being like “THOSE black guys” from his mother’s neighbourhood (Stone 2017: 12). He considers that “despite growing up in a bad area [...] I have a future ahead of me” (Stone 2017: 10), exhibiting how the still existent segregation of neighbourhoods plays a very relevant part in the American system, and how living in one area or the other affects Black people’s self-perception, but also how society sees them.

As Justyce goes through his self-reflection journey and starts looking into the stories of other people like him and learning about Martin Luther King’s teachings, he gradually deconstructs and overcomes these prejudices. This is clear in how he changes his use of “THOSE black guys” (Stone 2017: 12) in *Dear Martin* to “dudes like us” (Stone 2020: 152) in *Dear Justyce* since he has learned more about racism and the fight against it. Living according to society’s standards loses importance and he starts feeling more comfortable in his own skin. He asks himself “why should I give a damn about being agreeable?” (Stone 2017: 96), demonstrating that he is no longer trying to act according to what is expected of him. Manny, inspired by Justyce, also undergoes a process of gaining awareness about racism. Not only does he have to unlearn the prejudices but also learn that he, despite being in a privileged position because of his economic status, can also experience discrimination. The stereotypes and prejudices created by racialisation of African Americans affect Quan differently. He belongs to the group of people these stereotypes are about, and he is aware of the way he is seen by the rest of society. This makes him feel defeated and he even wonders “what do I even have to offer the world, Justyce?” (Stone 2020: 187). He does not know who he can be outside the mould he has been put into all his life and is afraid he will not be able to “reintegrate” or “contribute” (Stone 2020: 186) to society. The way society has presented African American boys affects Justyce, Quan and Manny in different ways, but affects them nonetheless. These prejudices and stereotypes reside at the core of the American society and are one of the main reasons why racism is normalised in the United States. They distort the image of the voiceless (Cai 2002: 49), turning it into something negative and pushing them to the back. Racialisation helps maintain the myth of the single story by socially subduing African Americans.

Social standing and wealth are two elements that play a central role in the lives of African Americans like Justyce, Quan and Manny. Manny, coming from a wealthy family and having always lived in a majorly white suburban neighbourhood, seems to be respected by those around him. Up to a certain extent, he shares the privileges of the

majority since he benefits from his social standing. He is not worried about the presence of racism in the system because he has never fully experienced it, not overtly at least thanks to his class privilege. He is more worried about the fact that he is “supposed to go from this all-white world to an all-black one overnight” (Stone 2017: 73) when he leaves for college. That, however, is something he never ends up having to do since he is killed before finishing high school. Ultimately, his higher social status does not help him avoid racial inequality. On the contrary, after he is killed, he is portrayed as violent and “a genuine threat” (Stone 2017: 193) in the media. He is unable to escape the prejudice he avoided while being alive. Even after trying to blend in and to act according to the societal expectations Manny is unable to escape racism. He is one of many who do not get to share their stories.

Justyce and Quan, unlike Manny, cannot benefit from their social standing. Both characters come from a “bad” (Stone 2017: 10) area and low-income families. Justyce, however, is in a slightly more privileged position than Quan. His mother’s support in combination with his intelligence and resolve helped him achieve a scholarship, and because of his academic results he is bound to attend an Ivy League school once he graduates high school. Still, he is “one of three black students in a class of 82” (Stone 2017: 201), new to the area and significantly less affluent than those around him. Quan, on the other hand, is a victim of his own circumstances. Despite his intelligence, he is unable to achieve what Justyce has, and not for a lack of trying. With his father in jail and his mother in an abusive relationship, him and his siblings go hungry, which eventually takes him to stealing. This becomes a vicious cycle that Quan has very little control of. Since he ends up associating himself with those who accept him for who he is despite their criminal background he keeps getting caught up in illegal activities. He is taken to juvenile prison several times through his adolescence and in the last occasion, he is accused of a murder he did not commit and is bound to go to jail if he is charged with the crime:

So many of us who wind up here really did WANT to do shit the right way and be ‘successful’. But there’s so many other things dudes like us be contending with. Again, not saying that’s an excuse but I also can’t sit here and pretend the shit doesn’t matter. (Stone 2020: 187)

Quan is fully aware of the fact that race and social standing play a central role in the outcome of underprivileged Black youths like himself. He is conscious of how his position in society in combination with his own mistakes has taken him where he is. Even though Quan and Manny are cousins “they don’t see each other. And they certainly don’t speak” (Stone 2020: 56). Despite being connected by their family ties and belonging to the same group there are more things that come between them than things that unite them. They are unable to understand each other. While Quan sees race as a central part to who he is and how he is treated, Manny, because of his personal circumstances, prefers to ignore how his skin colour affects his daily life. Justyce, Quan and Manny’s different perceptions of the presence racism in society affect how they interact with the world and how they comprehend the way they are treated. Their perception, however, does not change the treatment that they receive. Early on in *Dear Martin*, Manny and Justyce are told: “These white boys might be standing here next to y’all, but y’all are still nothing but niggas to them [...] Ain’t no amount of money nor intelligence can change that shit” (Stone 2017: 44). It is only a warning, but later events in Justyce and Manny’s lives prove this statement right. This summarises how the power dynamics between Black and white people seem to work in a society where racism is so deeply engrained. Despite feeling like they have the ability to share the power white people hold if they conform to their standards, Justyce and Manny, as African American young men, are in a disadvantaged position.

Justyce and Quan’s counterstories show that African Americans do not only suffer overt and violent racist attacks. The subtle forms of racism that happen every day and might go unnoticed to the majority race are also part of racial inequality. These tend to be known as “microaggressions” (Delgado and Stefancic 2017: 179) and are usually performed to undermine people of colour deliberately but discreetly. Justyce, who is a student of excellent academic achievements, has his intelligence doubted on several occasions. After getting into Yale, his white classmate Jared says that he took his spot because Yale has to fill a quota. Instead of recognising his efforts, Jared undermines them making Justyce’s acceptance about his race. The same topic is brought up again in a fight, where he is told “I think you’d know that as someone ‘smart enough’ to get into Yale” (Stone 2017: 91). This ties in with the archaic idea that, biologically, Black people are less intelligent than white people. After scientific development proved this wrong, ideas like these were turned into the stereotypes that are now used to subvert African Americans. Microaggressions can also be performed as jokes because, since

they are not supposed to be serious, those who perform them can deflect their effects. Manny is told he cannot quit playing baseball until his “*Massah*” sets him free, as a joke (Stone 2017: 109). On another occasion, Manny and Justyce attend a Halloween party and one of their white friends, Blake, is “dressed as a Klansman” (Stone 2017: 40). These comments and actions are made and performed without caring about the impact they might have on those on the receiving end. Justyce wonders “what do I do when my identity is being mocked by people who refuse to admit there’s a problem?” (Stone 2017: 95) in relation to his white friends’ behaviours. People belonging to the majority group are able to ignore these microaggressions, but they are a significant part in the lives of Black Americans that continuously belittles and hurts them so they “CAN’T not notice” (Stone 2017: 201) them.

When the characters choose to stand up for themselves, microaggressions tend to escalate. White privilege comes into play here. Since “whites do not see themselves as having a race but as being, simply, people” (Delgado and Stefancic 2017: 91) they refuse to acknowledge how race impacts those who are not white. This works for their own benefit since it maintains their position of power, which subsequently blinds their perception of reality. Jared tells Manny and Justyce that “black people have the same opportunities as white people in this country if they’re willing to work hard enough. Manny’s parents are a perfect example” (Stone 2017: 24) ignoring the reality of many others like Quan, whose opportunities are limited from the start. This is one of the main ideas that sustain colour-blind racism. When confronted, Manny and Justyce’s friends use their privilege to silence them claiming they are being “sensitive” (Stone 2017: 95). Blake, after inviting Manny and Justyce to a house decorated with “racist lawn gnomes and white people in blackface hanging on the walls” (Stone 2017: 91) asks Justyce “what is it with you people and the goddam race card?” (Stone 2017: 91). When he is called out on his offensive behaviour, he does not feel remorse for his actions and is unable to admit to his wrongdoings. *Dear Martin* and *Dear Justyce*’s white characters represent how white people believe that their stories are the only ones that matter (Thomas 2016). They are not interested on educating themselves on these matters or looking at the broader picture because, as explained in section 2.3, racism benefits them psychologically, by making them feel like they are in power, and socially, since there is someone below them on the social scale.

Because of the privilege they hold, white people are able to get away with these actions; they have the upper hand. They claim “this is a color-blind society” (Stone

2017: 32) and by saying they do not see colour and performing covert forms of racism they avoid the ‘racist’ label. Seeing white privilege leads Justyce and Quan to feel “defeated” (Stone 2020: 25). Their disappointment with the system is accentuated seeing the unmistakable difference in treatment Black and white people get. Quan tells Justyce: “if I had a dollar for every white boy I’ve seen come into detention and leave within a couple of days –both when I was fourteen and now– I could probably buy my way out” (Stone 2020: 92). This connects with the idea that racism is institutionalised: a white and a Black person doing the same crime would not lead to the same result. Justyce’s white girlfriend, SJ, tries to explain this to the rest of the people in their class to no avail, telling them: “we’ll never be seen as criminals before we’re seen as people” (Stone 2017: 29). Justyce, Manny and Quan’s lack of power leads them to doubt their own perception at times. Since racism is normalised, microaggressions and systemic racism can blend in with hostile behaviours caused by other things. Justyce, after being treated badly by his new roommate at college thinks “maybe I’m making this a race thing when it’s not” (Stone 2017: 201). They have been conditioned to think they are wrong about their perception. After Manny’s death only one of Manny and Justyce’s white school friends, Jared, reappraises his actions and reconsiders the importance of race in society. Justyce, once they are off to Yale, is happy to think “he is doing better” (Stone 2020: 148) and he even admits to Justyce he has decided to major in “civil rights law instead of business” (Stone 2017: 207).

Although they exhibit the harsh reality of racism in the US, Justyce and Quan’s counterstories also offer hope for a better future. Illustrating and educating others seems to be Stone’s preferred way of achieving this future and of making American society better. In *Dear Martin* and *Dear Justyce*, readers can see the characters actively engaging in difficult debates in hopes that those who are uneducated on the issue of racism will be able to learn about it. Jared is a good example of how these debates can help people see the wider picture and step outside their comfort zone to reconsider what they know about racism and notice one’s own racist attitudes. The impact of these discussions goes beyond the pages of the books and into the minds of the readers who might also be pushed to learn and educate themselves. This goes hand in hand with CRT’s idea that naming discrimination is the first step in the fight against it; making these struggles public helps make a change. Readers can see how Justyce, after battling with racism and inequality, gets accepted into one of the most prestigious universities in the US, Yale, where he is studying to be a lawyer. Thanks to this he is able to help

Quan, who is serving time for a crime he did not commit and was coerced into confessing. The reader is able to experience the same joy Quan experiences when he is told that the “State’s dropping all charges” (Stone 2020: 247). Quan gets a chance for a second life; for the first time the system has not failed him. It is impossible to know what happens in Justyce and Quan’s lives after the events of *Dear Justyce*. Their counterstories cover the struggles they have faced from childhood until adulthood, and they stop there, leaving their future to the readers’ imaginations. The only certain thing is that Manny’s death is irreversible; a consequence of the deeply engrained and normalised racism that still exists in the US. Justyce and Quan, on the other hand, have a life ahead of them and it is mostly in their hands. They have grown, learned how the system works and how to fight against racial inequality. Thus, reluctant as it might be, their endings convey a feeling of hope.

The relationship between race, racism, and power that Critical Race Theory studies is clearly present in *Dear Martin* and *Dear Justyce*, as shown in the analysis of these two texts, and it marks Justyce, Manny and Quan’s lives in ways that they are not able to control. Race is part of their identity, and because of the inextricable relationship between racism and the American society, they find themselves conditioned by it. These characters prove that race, racism, and social standing are central to one’s life in the US and determine the outcome of many African Americans. Justyce and Quan’s counterstories, despite being fictional and containing dramatic elements typical of YAL, exemplify the different realities that African American young men live in the US and challenge the single story the public is accustomed to hearing.

3.3 The Social Impact of Nic Stone’s Corpus: Black Stories Matter

Dear Martin and *Dear Justyce* might never be part of the list of the best works of literature to ever written, but they do not have to be. They are targeted to a young audience and written in a simple, entertaining, and easy to understand way for a reason. Their purpose is providing Black youths with representation and educating others about the reality and struggles that African Americans face because of their race. They matter because they may help make a societal change and bring attention to the existence and the impact of institutionalised and normalised racism in the US. Their relevance has surpassed the limits of America and these stories are now reaching a broader public worldwide. *Dear Martin* has already been translated into German, Spanish and a

number of other languages, and both *Dear Martin* and *Dear Justyce* have been brought to the United Kingdom by the publishing group Simon & Schuster. This proves that the importance of representing Black voices and educating people on their struggles is being recognised globally.

Dear Martin, Nic Stone's debut novel, paved the way for the rest of her corpus. She said she "had written the book after a string of high-profile shootings of unarmed African-American teenagers left her feeling gutted" (Alter 2017). The situation that Black individuals –especially children and teenagers– are living in the US has been the inspiration for most of her works. As of today, she has had seven books published. All of them are targeted to young readers and they range from middle grade to young adult fiction. They all have one thing in common: they put Black voices and struggles at the forefront. Stone recognises the importance of giving the Black youth role models and characters they can see themselves reflected on being in central positions. In *Dear Justyce*, Stone expresses this through Quan when he tells Justyce: "Thanks for them graphic novel joints you sent. Them things have made me the coolest dude on the (cell)block. Everybody is specially into the black girl Iron Man ones. And the black Batman and black Robin one is also a hit" (Stone 2020: 40).

Much of our identity formation happens in our teen years and being able to relate to characters and seeing oneself represented in important roles is a positive reinforcement for young people. However, that is not all: according to Stone, "seeing people go through their own experiences but also people with experiences different from them is how teenagers learn about the world" (etalk 2020). Without literary works like *Dear Martin*, *Dear Justyce* and the rest of Stone's corpus bringing light to these problems, this learning process would be much slower. Books give you the opportunity to process these issues and grapple with them without feeling pressured or vulnerable. They provide a safe learning environment and an opportunity to listen and grow without being overwhelmed by the new information one's receiving. The existence of literary works like these provides hope for a better, more educated, and equal future, which is precisely Stone's goal. Because of this, *Dear Martin* and *Dear Justyce* are now being used as class readings in high schools throughout the US and helping students learn about injustice and how to react to it (Seglem, Bonner & Hays 2018: 9). Nicole A. Moskal, a teacher at the High School for Medical Professions in Brooklyn, New York, has written about the fact that contemporary YAL makes students readily engage in critical analysis and *Dear Martin* was one of the books her students rated highly. YAL

explores issues that matter to youths so using these texts in class pushes students to ask themselves powerful questions (Seglem, Bonner & Hays 2018: 9). Reading Stone's text led Moskal's students into hard discussions about whether movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement are necessary and how the feelings conveyed in the book should be processed by those who have never experience the same injustice Justyce, Quan and Manny have (Moskal 2019: 58).

The essence and message of these stories is now being translated into other forms of media. According to *The Post and Courier*, *Dear Martin* is now in series development at Netflix (Perryman 2021). Adapting it will allow a larger amount of people to consume it, helping spread its message further and raising more awareness about the struggles Black Americans face. In the 21st century the world has seen several stories of race be adapted into the small and the big screen, showing that change is possible, and that it is happening. The success and popularity of these adaptations have proved that the importance of Black stories can be recognised by a larger audience who may or may not feel represented by them, but that can enjoy the stories and learn from them anyway. The adaptation of Marvel Comics' superhero Black Panther's life into the film *Black Panther* (Dir. Ryan Coogler 2018) and the film adaptation of Angie Thomas's acclaimed novel *The Hate U Give* (Dir. George Tillman Jr 2018), are two examples of successful adaptations of Black stories. The goal is for Black stories to be seen everywhere and for them to be part of all forms of media as not to be forgotten or overlooked. For this reason, the company TMI Project has envisioned the Black Stories Matter project. It is a way for organisations to participate in the fight against racism in America "using true storytelling to speak truth to power and to dismantle the white supremacist systems that hold racism in place" (TMI Project n.d.). Companies of all types have supported this project or been inspired by it and by the rise of anti-racist movements in the 21st century to create their own initiatives. Now the world can access content dedicated to the importance of Black voices from streaming platforms such as Disney+ to the webpages of several publishing houses. While some may agree that companies support these projects as a form of meaningless surface-level activism performed to increase their profits and popularity and not because there is a real interest for the cause, their endorsement still has a positive impact. Thanks to it, more people are seeing Black voices and Black stories be celebrated and recognised in popular platforms. Penguin Random House, the parent company of *Dear Martin* and *Dear Justyce*'s original publisher, Crown Publishing Group, has been a part of this project

since its origins and creates content that highlights the importance of Black stories in order to “teach, enlighten and inspire young readers” (RHC books n.d.). Naturally, Stone’s work is part of the corpus that will help enlighten the younger generations.

Black stories matter; *Dear Martin* and *Dear Justyce* matter. But it is not only because they are underrepresented and help fight against social inequality. They matter because they are relevant well-written stories that deserve the same recognition hegemonic white stories have. This recognition has not been fully granted in the 402 years that Black people have been part of what today is known as the United States of America, but there still is hope for change. Until that happens, and that recognition is fully granted, it is important for authors to keep writing stories of race and counterstories to foster awareness and understating. Nic Stone’s production is a powerful example of narratives that are trying to help America move forward and away from racial inequality.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to show how racial issues are represented in 21st-century American literature by looking at Nic Stone’s YAL duology –*Dear Martin* and *Dear Justyce*– and its impact in depth. Through the analysis of these literary works, I have concluded that fictional stories of race like those of Justyce, Quan and Manny are powerful tools that help challenge the hegemonic white narratives the world is familiarised with. Furthermore, these stories, by providing representation and putting Black characters at the forefront, are a positive reinforcement in the lives of Black youths, and also an educational resource for those who have never experienced the types of discrimination that are mentioned in Stone’s literary works. They represent how race, racism and power are central to the existence of African Americans in the US, who still suffer from microaggressions, prejudice and injustice, something that is usually overlooked by the majority group: white people.

Using the lens of Critical Race Theory, which looks at racism as a real and ordinary part of society, to analyse *Dear Martin* and *Dear Justyce* has helped highlight the impact of these elements on the lives of young Black Americans. Justyce, Quan and Manny, in spite of their different socioeconomic situations, are all in a disadvantaged position in a society where being white is key to being in power. They, as individuals, react differently to society’s expectations. Justyce tries to conform to them, Manny ignores them, and Quan challenges them. Their different responses affect the way they

interact with the world, but not the way they are treated since that is something they are unable to control. These characters represent how African Americans, despite the different realities they might be living, are all subjected to different forms of racism through their lives. CRT, as a framework, helps see *Dear Martin* and *Dear Justyce* for what they are: books that, despite being fictional, show a very real side of the land where all men are supposed to be equal.

More than 400 years have passed since slavery was first brought to America. The historical events that followed, going from the abolition of slavery to the gradual transformation of racism into something covert and accepted as normal, have proved that racism is, still today, at the very core of American society. The history of the US explains why literary works like *Dear Martin* and *Dear Justyce* are necessary. The fight against racism, which started with Abolitionism and has persisted through the times in the shape of movements such as the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and the Black Lives Matter movement today, is what helps the United States of America progress and what will, hopefully one day, get all Africans Americans, regardless of their socioeconomic situation, to have an equal position in society. Multicultural YAL, as demonstrated in this thesis, can be part of this fight. By sharing stories of race and counterstories like Justyce's and Quan's, authors are taking a step in the right direction. They are helping educate the public and giving others the strength to speak up and share their experiences the way Quan did when he got to read Justyce's letters. YAL is destined for younger readers, who will one day be in charge of leading the world. Therefore, making texts that showcase the existence of issues such as racism and that help the younger generations reflect on them will build the foundations for a better world. Nic Stone's corpus is important because it brings light to Black stories and Black struggles in a way that easy to understand and to digest. *Dear Martin* and *Dear Justyce* are now being taught in schools and are being translated into other languages and other forms of media. This proves that representing racial issues in 21st-century American literature is a practice that is bringing positive results.

In spite of the positive, there still is a lot to be done about racial discrimination in the US. Justyce and Quan got hopeful endings; they were able to grow and learn and they started their own fight against racism, inspiring others to do the same thing. Others like Manny, on the other hand, keep being killed and silenced; they never get a hopeful ending. Researching the role literature destined for younger readers plays in the development of social change seems like good way of displaying issues like racism in

front of a larger public and of giving them the importance they deserve. It also helps remove the stigma around texts like Stone's, which are usually disparaged because of their simplicity and use of dramatic elements typical of YAL, ignoring their contents and message. This thesis has marked the start of my journey in the academic world, and I would like to keep exploring the importance YAL has in today's society because I wholeheartedly believe it has the power to help it change for the better. The first chapter of this text opened with a quote from the United States Declaration of Independence that claims that all men were created equal. Through my analysis and historical revision, I concluded that the contents of this quotation remain, to this day, false but pushing for change and uncovering the underlying problems that exist within the American system could one day make it true. There is still hope for a better future, it is not too late for society to change. In the meantime, the fight against racism will not stop until Black lives are respected, Black voices are heard and Black stories are appreciated.

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