

Anthony Pratt

Professor Warner

ENGL-112B

21 September 2018

Capturing Black Identities As America Outpaces
Its Own Understanding Of Systemic Racism

“Slavery ended 200 years ago.” “I’m not responsible for my ancestors.” “What does race have to do with it?” “Why should everything always have to be made into a race issue?” “It’s just a joke.” “You’re too sensitive.” These are just a few of the commonly repeated phrases I’ve heard repeated by my fellow (non-Black) Americans over the past several years, and they point to a fundamental—and dangerously widespread—misunderstanding of the concept, history, and current progression of Black inequality in America. I doubt it should come as a surprise to anyone that our K-12 education system is insufficient for a multitude of reasons; But this is especially true of our shared lack of education regarding issues that have plagued, and continue to plague, African-Americans. Perhaps to a lesser degree, this is true even for African-Americans ourselves. Common phrases I’ve heard repeated by fellow Blacks include: “Success isn’t just handed to you.”; “You have to work hard to play hard.”; and “Money doesn’t grow on trees.” What need have we to cling to such empty platitudes if not for being tired, drained, and exhausted?

Systemic racism is ubiquitous by mere virtue of having to declare during

conversations regarding race that I'm a fairly-well-off exception, thereby avoiding comments such as "You don't look poor"—as if that were sufficient grounds to claim its nonexistence. That we must continually demonstrate the existence of inequality, in a country where it is so readily apparent, is evidence of a problem in and of itself. We have achieved a great amount of progress in the years following the Civil Rights Movement, but our collective understanding of racism hasn't evolved along with us. It's stuck in the 1960s—an issue further compounded by the advent of the internet.

One of the ways in which we address this is through the representation and inclusion of Blackness in media. We've seen a hostile response to this in decades past, and we've seen it again this summer in the far-right protests outside *WorldCon 76*, whose leadership had restructured its entire panel lineup after facing backlash about the lack of diversity within the original panels. This far-right protest and others like it are fueled, in part, by our society's reluctance to include a diverse range of voices in the first place. This issue has improved dramatically in recent memory, as evidenced by the critical and box office successes of films like *Black Panther*, *BlackKkKlansman*, *Sorry To Bother You*, and *Get Out*. But if more films involving such nuanced depictions of Black lives had been given a green light a decade or two sooner—say, 2008 or 1998—I reserve a great amount of doubt that such protests would be nearly as prevalent as they are today. Positive representation is an important step toward understanding. "Facts don't care about [our] feelings," but feelings alter our perception of the facts. I have assembled this particular collection of works by primarily Black authors to address our cultural blind spots and prevent the further spread of disbelief at the existence of racial inequality.

Annotated Bibliography

Harris, Fred R., and Alan Curtis. Healing Our Divided Society: Investing in America Fifty Years after the Kerner Report: Investing in America Fifty Years after the Kerner Report by Fred Harris. *Goodreads*, Temple University Press, 1 Mar. 2018, [goodreads.com/book/show/36627569](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/36627569). Following the 1967 Detroit Riot—which resulted in 43 deaths, over 1,000 reported injuries, and some 7,000 arrests—President Lyndon B. Johnson established the Kerner Commission to answer three simple questions: What happened, why did it happen, and what can be done to prevent it from happening again? After seven months of investigation, the Kerner Report was published in 1968 and met with overwhelming demand. The Kerner Report, exhaustive in its coverage, answered the simple question of what can be done with not-so-simple solutions. Perhaps that is why, over fifty years later, the last surviving member of the Kerner Commission—Fred R. Harris—has, along with Eisenhower Foundation CEO Alan Curtis, assembled a new report that details the strides we must undertake to achieve the original goals set forth in the Kerner Report. This work contains essential knowledge for young adults that could help them understand the often-oversimplified chapters of U.S. history. By introducing them to a more nuanced framework, it would allow them to better appreciate the concepts covered in canonical and young adult works

involving themes of Black identity. In a post-BLM (Black Lives Matter) America, *Healing Our Divided Society* can equip young adults with proper resources that tackle the daily influences upon their lives that have arisen from rapidly increasing racial tensions.

Thomas, Angie. *The Hate U Give*. *Goodreads*, Balzer Bray, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 28 Feb. 2017, [goodreads.com/book/show/32075671](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/32075671). Starr Carter is a young Black teen from an impoverished neighborhood that attends a fancy prep school uptown. She has a best friend, whose name is Khalil, and becomes the unfortunate witness to his untimely demise at the hands of a police officer. Khalil's senseless death makes national headlines and fuels a political movement as Starr navigates two very different worlds—one significantly less forgiving and prone to disbelief at her friend's innocence. Based upon the real-life events surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement, *The Hate U Give* offers a firsthand account of the continued profiling of African-Americans. Young adults can engage in the revived political discussion surrounding Black discrimination by reading about them in a setting detached from (yet still resembling) their own. With the inclusion of voices from across the political spectrum, they can engage in a manner that reveals the reactionary undercurrent. By filtering out the less fruitful talking points, *The Hate U Give* can help fuel a discussion that establishes a mutual understanding.

Jackson, Tiffany D. *Monday's Not Coming*. *Goodreads*, Katherine Tegen Books, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 22 May 2018,

[goodreads.com/book/show/35068534](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/35068534). On the first day of her eighth-grade year, Claudia notices that her best friend, Monday, is absent. Monday's mother says she is with her father, and her sister says she is with her aunt. Claudia suspects something is wrong and as she investigates, she is shocked to find that no one seems to remember when her best friend was last seen. Worse yet, no one seems to be talking about her disappearance. When a White girl goes missing in America, she typically makes news headlines. But, all too often, when a Black girl goes missing, her absence is met with silence. Monday's Not Coming introduces young adult readers to the often-overlooked topic regarding the safety of Black women in America. Seeing these events through the eyes of the grief-stricken, they are allowed a glimpse at the profound impact this has on Black communities, and particularly Black women. By reinforcing this underappreciated narrative, Monday's Not Coming reveals to young adults the startling lack of autonomy that comes with a neglected population left to fend for themselves.

Carey, M.R. *The Girl With All The Gifts*. *Goodreads*, Turtleback Books, 2015,

[goodreads.com/book/show/17235026](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/17235026). Melanie isn't your average little girl. She is a young woman of color that can quickly memorize complex strings of knowledge. She is also a prisoner, an experiment, a hungry—a unique twist on the zombie archetype that results not in a shambling, undead subhuman, but a posthuman. That's what makes her so valuable to her captors, the human survivors of the hungry apocalypse. *The Girl With All The Gifts* is a novel that transcends the boundaries of the public imagination by reversing the role of young women of

color to one of dominance rather than subservience. Because of Melanie's endearingly optimistic personality and youthful innocence, this dominance is framed not as a threat, but a gift. By thinking critically about their own personal implicit biases, young adults can ask themselves just how different things might be if we listened more to the needs of women, especially Black women of color.

Adeyemi, Tomi. Children of Blood and Bone. *Goodreads*, Henry Holt and Company, 2018, [goodreads.com/book/show/34728667](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/34728667). Penned by Nigerian-American author Tomi Adeyemi, *Children of Blood and Bone* marks the first chapter in the continuing *Legacy of Orisha* series. A fantasy novel told from the intertwining perspectives of two children of a ruling tyrant as well as the perspectives of two opposing underclass siblings, *Children of Blood and Bone* is full of magic, African deities, and perilous adventures. Because of fantasy's roots in "universal truths," young adults can expect to view the story through a Black lens (with a distinctly West African inspiration and focus). By confronting themes of oppression in this fantastical context, *Children of Blood and Bone* can help ease non-Black readers into a more abstractly critical mindset, where the stakes of being "ignorant" are much less impactful. As for Black young adult audiences, the book offers a thrilling journey through a genre that tends to fetishize pale skin.

Ireland, Justina. Dread Nation. *Goodreads*, Balzer & Bray/Harperteen, 2018, [goodreads.com/book/show/30223025](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/30223025). In an alternate version of America, Black and Native descendants are forced to undergo rigorous training to become the first line of defense in a war against the undead. Jane, born to a White mother and

a Black father, is training to become an Attendant—the personal bodyguards of the White, wealthy elite. As families suddenly start to go missing, Jane, because of her precarious position as an Attendant, finds herself in the midst of an insidious political conspiracy. The novel's reimagining of chattel slavery and American Indian boarding schools, in a world where the North and South must put aside their differences to fight a greater threat, stresses to young adults the importance of working together to dismantle oppressive forces. The novel presents these forces in the form of zombie hordes, and by framing it as an issue that endangers Americans indiscriminately, teaches the benefits to all, regardless of their race, the dismantling of oppression.

Jemisin, N.K. How Long 'til Black Future Month. *Goodreads*, Orbit, 2018,

[goodreads.com/book/show/40855636](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/40855636). How Long 'til Black Future Month is three-time Hugo Award winner N. K. Jemisin's first assembly of short stories. From Dragons in New Orleans to Jim Crow era faeries, Jemisin offers creative imaginings that challenge the typical portrayal of African-Americans in storytelling. By challenging stereotypical narratives, How Long 'Til Black Future Month? confronts the unnecessary biases that inundate our youth. To change the dialogue surrounding Black lives into something more original and transformative, young adults can walk away from the book with a fresh set of eyes, set to critique and further challenge predictably problematic Black representation in media.

LaValle, Victor. The Ballad of Black Tom. *Goodreads*, Tor Books, 2016.

[goodreads.com/book/show/26883558](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/26883558). Charles Thomas Tester, a New Yorker

through and through, works hard to put food on the table. On the promise of good pay, he delivers an odd occult tome to a strange sorceress in Queens, ignorant to the horrors it would awaken. LaValle's jazzy novel plays Lovecraftian horror for the folks that it set out to mock by taking inspiration from one of H.P. Lovecraft's most egregious examples, *The Horror At Red Hook*. Though an excellent writer and canonical innovator of horror, Lovecraft's blatant racism and xenophobia cannot be ignored, and *Black Tom* helps sell his unique brand of horror to a wider, more inclusive audience. A unique way for young adults to read this would be to read Lovecraft's original work, *The Horror At Red Hook*, and witness the undercurrent of racism for themselves and follow that reading with *The Ballad of Black Tom*. This would introduce to them the importance and impact of reclamation to the disenfranchised, which includes not only people of color but other demographic minorities within the LGBTQIA community and persons living with disabilities. Reclamation is a powerful tool for teaching young adults healthy ways for empowering one another.

Zoboi, Ibi. *American Street*. *Goodreads*, Balzer Bray, an Imprint of

HarperCollinsPublishers, 2018, [goodreads.com/book/show/30256109](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/30256109). Fabiola Toussaint and her mother are leaving Haiti to live a better life with their cousins in Detroit when her mother is detained by U.S. immigration. Left to navigate her strange new surroundings alone, she questions the cost of freedom and wonders whether The American Dream more closely resembles a nightmare. The unfortunate reality for many American immigrants is that they find themselves

merged with demographic minorities. They're also greeted with additional setbacks. Just to name a few, these include: a society that leverages its economy on the backs of said demographics; a lack of familiarity with a diverse and divided culture; and the disdain of xenophobes. Through *American Street's* analysis of Black struggles from the perspective an immigrant, young adults can learn about the overwhelming alienation they feel even from within their own racial demographic. And by witnessing the familial cost of immigration, they can get a feel for the fear and dread faced by those integrating. Hopefully, in doing so, young adults might feel more inclined to reach out and be more inclusive of the immigrants in their communities, thereby offering them a greater chance at successful integration.

Zicree, Marc Scott. Brooks, Avery. *Summarized from memory*, Star Trek: Deep Space Nine "Far Beyond the Stars." Season 6, episode 13, 11 Feb. 1998. Following the death of a close friend, Captain Benjamin Sisko (the first Black captain to lead a Star Trek series) speaks with his father about his desire to quit Star Fleet to escape the wear and tear of the Dominion War to his mental and emotional stability. Their conversation is interrupted as Captain Sisko receives visions of himself as Benny Russell, a black science-fiction writer living in 1950s New York City. As the episode progresses, Sisko finds that his visions of Benny are lasting longer. Eventually, he is lost within these visions and the episode takes place entirely from Benny's perspective. But when Benny begins to receive visions of himself as Captain Sisko, he finds himself compelled to capture them in a new

story which he titles "Deep Space Nine." Drawn to the idea of a future in which an African-American can be in command of a space station, Benny begins writing "Deep Space Nine," but unlike his previous works which featured only white characters, he runs into trouble in the writer's room at the magazine office where he works after he tries to pitch his idea to the magazine editor. The importance of *Star Trek* to the relatively brief history of positive representation of various underrepresented groups cannot be understated, and this is especially true of *Deep Space Nine*. There are several other *Deep Space Nine* episodes that could've made it into this citation, but none are as explicit or given as proper of a treatment as can be seen in "Far Beyond the Stars." Confronting audiences with overtones of afrofuturism, its final scenes provide a painful, yet uplifting, message of empowerment and perseverance in the face of adversity. Written by Keith R.A. DeCandido, further analysis on this episode can be read in a "Rewatch" article published on the *Tor Books* official website:

tor.com/2014/09/23/star-trek-deep-space-nine-rewatch-qfar-beyond-the-starsq/