

Matthew Aaron Hernandez – Research Statement

In my research, I explore the broad scope of the bildungsroman, coming of age stories, and the evolution of the form from its early roots in Goethe, as *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* is widely regarded as the first example of the bildungsroman, to the contemporary iterations utilized by authors from diverse, marginalized, and systemically oppressed groups. Specifically, I have written and presented on the use of counternarrative in reimagining contemporary events of racist violence within recent American young adult literature. I examine these narratives through the lenses of Critical Race Theory, Literary Criticism, and Trauma Theory, with an additional focus on the intersectional identity of the protagonists. These methodologies allow me to explore the connection between dialogism within counternarrative and Trauma Theory's examination of the effects of racism on the maturation of adolescents. Counternarrative in particular, upends hegemonic narratives of policing, exposing their roots in white racist structures of control, and reframes events of police brutality and other forms of racist violence. This unification of scholarly approaches shows that contemporary authors center counternarrative in the aesthetics of the bildungsroman form to promote empathy and reimagine events of racist violence for a generation of young adults who have undergone a traumatic maturation as a result of exposure to such events. In this research, I argue that the use of counternarrative makes it possible to strategically appropriate the dominant narratives of the past. And, by confronting these moments, to reimagine contemporary instances of racist violence, reframing them to promote solidarity and social action. As a graduate student I continue to expand my work as a Critical Race scholar, educator, and activist, while championing systemic change through my work in contemporary young adult literature.

Following this, I am investigating and codifying an emerging subgenre of young adult literature that reimagines coming of age narratives in response to the traumatic maturation, events of racist violence have forced upon contemporary audiences. My research spotlights this evolving subgenre of young adult literature as one that refuses dominant narratives of childhood "innocence" by emphasizing how racism informs adolescent maturation and centers the young person's ability to confront and combat racism as earlier novels of protest sought to do for adult readers. I demarcate these works as belonging to a category separate from the wider field of young adult literature, which predominately includes bildungsromane, into what I term novels of confrontation, which are more akin to the twentieth-century narratives of protest and social commentary written by James Baldwin or Zora Neale Hurston. As these early works did, contemporary young adult novels of confrontation seek to explore the impact of racism on minority and historically marginalized communities, offering nuanced characters and profound conversations about racist, homophobic, and ableist micro and macroaggressions. Counternarrative and Trauma Theory then, can be used to examine the experience and effects these have on narrative characters as well as their interpretation by a contemporary audiences.

Additionally, I am engaged in an ongoing study of the evolution of the bildungsroman, in which I argue that inherent in the genre, is a self-reflective awareness that pushes back against the idea of societal conformity and traditionalism, instead questioning the established tenets of the classic bildung while promoting this same self-awareness in their readers.

Throughout these projects I find that Critical Race Studies and Trauma Theory have offered me unique lenses through which to study the traditional tenets of young adult literature as a genre, its narrative modes and aims, and the contemporary evolution of young adult novels that confront those tenets in their subject matter. Through the challenging of those literary traditions, I believe these young adult novels of confrontation offer distinct and diverse voices that lend themselves to interdisciplinary examination.

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These scholarly pursuits have specifically been shaped by contemporary scholars like Jed Esty, Sarah Graham, Eric Tribunella, and Roberta Seelinger Trites, who have built upon and pushed back against writings by Mikhail Bakhtin and Franco Moretti, suggesting that inherent in the bildungsroman is a traumatic event that precedes the protagonist's coming of age, and that contemporary authors are upending the formal structures of the genre to showcase that a coming of age narrative has distinct needs depending on the culture or society in which the story is set.

While engaging in this research, I have developed tools to create a cohesive interpretive framework and apply my scholarship to practical challenges in the Humanities as a whole. Thus, as an extension of my work with counternarratives, I subvert traditional modes of pedagogy by incorporating tabletop role playing game (ttrpg) mechanics into my course assignments and structure. I continue to push the bounds of this work by showcasing how ttrpg mechanics can be used to promote empathy, cooperation, group learning, and accessibility. As the uses of role-play in navigating traumatic experiences has been previously studied in Psychology circles, its ability to create spaces of understanding is well documented. However, my work argues that these same aspects can be adapted for classroom use, allowing students to more fully inhabit characters from a given text, granting students a deeper understanding of theme and language.

Likewise, by centering these mechanics in both in-person and digital spaces, I am able to provide a wide array of accessible platforms for students with distinct learning needs. Currently, I am developing free-to-download materials that natively integrate into Google Classroom software, which support the incorporation of canonical and contemporary texts with current scholarly modes, and foster classroom discussions of these narratives and the ways they can be framed against the backdrop of the current sociopolitical moment in both the United States and abroad.

The application of these different fields of research has illustrated for me how publicly engaged scholarship can be used to practically change how we teach and narrate histories of race and racism, engage students, and provide different accessible pathways to learning in our classrooms.

Centered in this approach, I focus my pedagogy around connecting course texts with discussions of race, racism, class, and gender, and the many disparate ways people come of age into different cultural and societal groups. This in turn, allows me to create a classroom space that promotes communication and empathy and grants students the ability to inhabit in some small way, through role-play and literary examination, the space of people very different (or more similar than first imagined) from their own. Throughout these experiences, both practical and scholarly, I keep a conscientious understanding of the ethics associated with the intersection of the adolescent experience and bigotry's many forms, one that seeks to model ways in which young people can seize agency and create change. And while my research and pedagogy upend some of their traditional modes, my work is not centered in being contradictory, but rather in promoting curiosity and self-reflection in all aspects of life.