

No Human Is Illegal: Humanizing Immigrants Affected by Deportation and Detention in Three  
Young Adult Immigrant Novels

by

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## Abstract

How do three Young Adult books, published in the years 2016-17, tackle the much-politicized issues of deportation and undocumented status? What do these books add to social science research on, and literary representations of, deportation, detention, and immigration status? I focus in particular on the ways in which these novels—*The Sun Is Also A Star* (2016) by Nicola Yoon, *American Street* (2017) by Ibi Zoboi, and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017) by Erica L. Sánchez—thread narratives of deportation and undocumented status into their stories, all the while critiquing immigration institutions and, most importantly, humanizing their immigrant characters. Young Adult literature supplements social science research on these immigration issues by creating rounded, three-dimensional characters; engendering empathy in adolescent readers; and complicating the immigration narrative, telling stories that run counter to the mainstream notions of immigration.

In this thesis, I argue that Young Adult literature humanizes and complicates deportation and undocumented status in a way that the social sciences and journalism may not be able to achieve. These three Young Adult immigrant novels not only build on the political and psychological knowledge from social science scholarship, but they also incorporate them into their works, making clear to readers the sheer emotional toll deportation has on undocumented immigrants and their families. Yoon, Zoboi, and Sánchez weave a variety of narrative strategies to tell the stories of their protagonists: a Jamaican American immigrant teenage girl, a recent Haitian immigrant teenage girl, and a Mexican American teenage daughter of undocumented immigrants. Through a variety of writing techniques, the authors build a world for their immigrant characters who are affected by deportation and immigration status, but are not solely confined to the box of being an immigrant or a child of immigrants. The intended audience of adolescent readers also creates the opportunity for the authors to leverage empathy for these marginalized stories and to fashion their own personal experiences into these fictionalized spaces.

This thesis begins with a short preface on the current conditions under which my research has been completed. What follows next is an introduction with a brief personal anecdote on my own immigrant experience, as well as a short overview of important immigration legislation from the late 1990s to the mid-2010s. The first chapter dives into the social science research regarding deportation and undocumented status, with a particular focus on policy and psychology for adolescents. The second chapter focuses on the narrative strategies the authors employ, such as plot devices and narration. The third chapter closes with a discussion of the Young Adult genre and audience, as well as the relationship between writer and text. The conclusion reflects, but also looks forward: it is critical that we examine Young Adult literature that grapples with the reality of our immigration system, especially because that system has failed so many young people. As policies continue to harm immigrants and their communities, Young Adult immigrant literature offers an important and unique form of connection, of visibility, and of humanization.

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## Preface

In the last month of writing this thesis, the U.S. has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. The University of Michigan, like other colleges and universities across the nation, has moved its classes remotely and sent students home. States have ordered shelter-in-place, non-essential businesses have closed, and hospitals have become increasingly overwhelmed. Through it all, the specter of xenophobia has loomed large.

Racism against Asian Americans has been on the rise. The President himself has referred to the virus as the “Chinese virus.” It was used as an excuse to close the southern border with Mexico, with the President demonizing immigrants and asylum seekers as carriers of the virus—despite the fact that the U.S. has far more cases than its neighbors to the south. ICE raids have halted temporarily and there are increasing amounts of calls for officials to release immigrants from detention.

The pandemic has revealed, to those who were not already aware, the dehumanization which lies within the American immigration system. Already crowded, unsanitary conditions in immigration detention will have dire consequences for the hundreds of thousands of people who wait to hear whether or not they can stay in the U.S. The temporary pause on ICE raids and the calls to release detained immigrants have begged the question: why do these systems function like this in the first place?

In a time of crisis and uncertainty, we often turn to literature to answer our questions or to provide us a brief escape. The novels that I discuss in these pages followed after the 2016 election. When I began this project in the summer of 2019, I could not help but think of the caravans of asylum seekers and the children locked in cages as I was doing my research. As this thesis comes to a close, immigration issues have now been shadowed by COVID-19 and what it

means for those stuck at the border, for those behind bars, for those who fear turning to public assistance if it means putting their documentation status in jeopardy.

It is difficult to feel optimistic. It is difficult to finish this research project in the midst of a pandemic. But—despite everything which feels helpless—in a time of isolation, there have also been calls for compassion and connection. These three YA novels, too, ask us to understand and empathize with their immigrant characters. Literature may not be the cure; but it is a crucial aspect in our lives, reminding us of the humanity in all of our stories.

## Introduction

There are two separate photographs of me in front of the Statue of Liberty: one where my mom is holding my chubby three-year-old self, bundled in a winter coat and hat, and one where my dad is holding me. It was our first year in the United States; in 2000, my parents took a leap of faith and immigrated from South Korea to America so my dad could pursue his dream of earning a Master's in Business in the U.S.

I start with this image of the three of us in front of the Statue of Liberty because it is a common one. As part of the mythology of the United States, we are taught that the U.S. is a land of freedom, of bravery, that it welcomes immigrants and that the Statue of Liberty is the most poignant symbol of that welcoming spirit. The words "*Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free*" stick with us to the end. Yet despite the times that America has welcomed others, there are just as many instances when the nation has turned its back on those in most need of a place of refuge, or deliberately expelled long-standing residents back to their countries of origin simply because of their nationality. Recall the refusal to accept Jewish refugees fleeing genocide and persecution in Nazi Germany in 1939; recall the deportation of Chinese immigrants following the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act; recall the immigration quotas of the 1920s onward which restricted Southern and Eastern European as well as Asian immigrants; recall the deportation of Mexicans in the 1930s after the bracero program. Turning away immigrants is just as much a part of the American spirit as accepting them are.

Were it not for the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, my parents and I would not have been able to immigrate to the U.S. The Act ended the racist quotas of the 1920s, leading to a wave of immigration that historians and other political commentators often term the "third wave" of immigration. Just as my life has been shaped by immigration policy, so are the personal

lives detailed in three Young Adult immigrant novels published in the years 2016-17 also shaped by the politics of their time. While the three novels do not explicitly mention any recent immigration laws, they are informed by the changing structure of immigration policy, especially before and after the election of Donald J. Trump as U.S. President. *The Sun Is Also A Star* (2016) by Nicola Yoon follows Natasha, a Jamaican American, who attempts to fight her family's deportation. *American Street* (2017) by Ibi Zoboi is centered around Fabiola, a Haitian immigrant, who struggles to release her mother from immigration detention. *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017) by Erica L. Sánchez focuses on Julia, a Mexican American daughter of undocumented immigrants, who grapples with the unexpected death of her sister and yearns to move beyond the confines of her community and her family.

Much has changed within the immigration landscape in the new millennium, especially after the tragedy of 9/11. Many of the policies have led to the criminalization of the immigrant as well as the increased militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border. In turn, the justification of these policies has often relied not just on the rhetoric of homeland security, but on language that dehumanizes immigrants. It is this language, and the way Young Adult literature combats it, that interests me. In order to understand how U.S. immigration policy has dehumanized immigrants—and how, in contrast, Young Adult literature seeks to humanize them—I will provide brief historical context to a few key immigration policies that directly affect the YA novels, so that the reader may also grasp the kind of atmosphere that is shaping the writers' fictional and real worlds.

In the present moment, it may often feel like the immigration enforcement policies in the twenty-first century are extreme because they are new; however, much of the groundwork for the criminalization of immigrants and the militarization of the border was laid out in the 1990s. In

1994, the Violent Crime Control and Enforcement Act increased border militarization resources, raised penalties for those who did not leave or re-entered the U.S. after deportation, and established “grounds for expedited deportation” for immigrants (both documented and undocumented) with a criminal background, even after they served time in jail for an offense unrelated to immigration.<sup>1</sup> The execution of this process is alarmingly distinct from how the U.S. judicial system is supposed to function, since immigration is supposed to be considered under civil, rather than criminal, law.

Two years after the act was passed, President Clinton signed two acts<sup>2</sup> in 1996 which, like the 1994 law, limited immigrants’ rights and strengthened immigration enforcement. Both gave the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) more power to “arrest, detain, and deport unauthorized immigrants while significantly curtailing, and in certain circumstances eliminating, immigrant rights to appeal the decisions.”<sup>3</sup> The grounds on which people could be deported also expanded to include misdemeanors in state courts and past convictions. At the same time, border militarization increased and the number of border patrol agents doubled.<sup>4</sup> During this time, the addition of Section 287(g) to the Immigration and Nationality Act later allowed numerous states and cities to sign agreements with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) after its inception in 2002, which has authorized police to screen people for their immigration status, hold them until they are taken into ICE custody, and then proceed with the deportation process.<sup>5</sup> These laws not only made it easier for the immigrant to become the prey of the state, they

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<sup>1</sup> Valdez, "U.S. Immigration Exclusion," 644.

<sup>2</sup> These acts were the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Law (AEDPA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA).

<sup>3</sup> Douglas and Sáenz, "The Criminalization of Immigrants," 205.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas and Sáenz, 205.

<sup>5</sup> Amuedo-Dorantes and Puttitanum, "Undocumented youth in limbo," 600-601.

deliberately transformed the criminalization of a group of people. There is thus an overwhelming amount of precedent to the harsh policies which tear apart immigrants' lives.

After the tragedy of the September 11 terrorist attacks, the Bush administration enacted laws which intensified the power of different departments related to national security and border control. While it is understandable for the U.S. to have been worried about the state of its security and the safety of its people following the attacks, the policies significantly impinged upon the rights of immigrants, particularly those from the Middle East, South Asia, and Latin America. The discourse not only centered around the narrative about the immigrant as a criminal, but about the immigrant as a *terrorist*. The 2001 Patriot Act, for instance, introduced the indefinite detention of immigrants, including those who weren't terrorists.<sup>6</sup> The 2002 formation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) also created and expanded three separate agencies into the newly-formed department: Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA).<sup>7</sup> The creation of ICE in particular has shaped an atmosphere of fear that is pervasive among immigrant communities; indeed, it is the only immigration agency that is featured across all three YA novels. This is in part due to the immense increase in ICE raids of workplaces, which stems directly from DHS's shift to a "catch and detain" policy rather than "catch and release": whereas before in 2006, only Mexican immigrants were immediately detained upon arrest, after 2006, it expanded to other immigrant groups.<sup>8</sup>

These policies have, in turn, greatly expanded immigration detention. From 1994 to 2011, the average number of immigrant detainees has increased nearly fivefold.<sup>9</sup> Deportations also rose

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas and Sáenz, 208.

<sup>7</sup> Nuñez-Neto, "Border Security: Key Agencies," 47-48.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas and Sáenz, 206, 218.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas and Sáenz, 218.

between 1996 and 2012, from 70,000 in the former to more than five times that amount in 2012, at 409,000.<sup>10</sup> They have only increased in the past eight years. The inhumane criminalization of undocumented immigrants through detention and deportation has been coupled with the parallel militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, which has made the border-crossing journey even more dangerous than in the past. Rather than deterring immigrants, however, the hopeful immigrants instead turn to agents—called *coyotes*—to assist them, often paying highly exorbitant fees because of the increasingly hardened journey, which often results in their indentured servitude to these agents.<sup>11</sup>

These laws from the mid-90s onward have sought to deter immigration and punish those who have already made the treacherous journey to the U.S. And yet, in 2010, undocumented immigrants accounted for nearly a fourth of the U.S. population.<sup>12</sup> Because the number of undocumented immigrants has increased rather than decreased, Congress has attempted to pass comprehensive immigration reform with very little success. In 2012, the DREAM Act passed the House of Representatives but was filibustered in the Senate. Had it passed, it would have “provided a path to legal status for children of undocumented migrants who arrived as minors.”<sup>13</sup> Although the proposed act attempted to improve the rights of undocumented immigrants, it raised the bar for the path of citizenship to a very high degree: only high school graduates with “good moral character”—a vague phrase in and of itself—who served at least two years in the military or completed four years of college could qualify as a DREAMer.<sup>14</sup> In attempting to combat the dehumanizing rhetoric of the immigrant as a criminal, more progressive legislation

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<sup>10</sup> Valdez, 645.

<sup>11</sup> Douglas and Sáenz, 207.

<sup>12</sup> Suárez-Orozco et al. "Growing Up in the Shadows," 439.

<sup>13</sup> Valdez, 647.

<sup>14</sup> Valdez, 647.

instead established the category of the “good immigrant” as the only one worthy of full human rights. Similarly, the passage of DACA in 2014, by President Obama’s Executive Order, also sought to protect undocumented immigrants’ rights while simultaneously restricting *who* could be protected under the act.<sup>15</sup>

The two decades of restrictive immigration policies; increased surveillance, deportation, and detention; and infringement upon the civil rights of undocumented immigrants inform the background of the three Young Adult novels discussed in this thesis. The protagonists of *The Sun Is Also A Star*, *American Street*, and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* must grapple with immigration agencies and the xenophobia and racism that has both informed and resulted from these punitive laws. Why do the three authors include such a controversial topic into their books? While readers and scholars may traditionally suspect that politics plays a crucial role in adult literature, but might not expect the same for Young Adult literature, I argue that the latter can also cover a highly politicized, contested topic, and do so in a way that humanizes—rather than reduces—its characters. YA literature provides an additional lens in which to tackle immigration; while social science scholarship has engaged with deportation and undocumented status, YA literature offers a different, empathetic pathway to approach the subject, especially for readers in middle school and high school. These years form crucial moments of development and identity formation as an adolescent, and youth become more aware of the world around them. Young readers also rapidly approach the age of eighteen, the minimum age to vote, and thus, YA literature can be one window into a world that helps inform their civic actions.

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<sup>15</sup> Valdez, 647.

It is interesting to note that Natasha, the undocumented protagonist of *The Sun Is Also A Star*, could have qualified for DACA, and yet has not—potentially because of the expensive fees.

The coverage of deportation and undocumented status in *The Sun Is Also A Star*, *American Street*, and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* thus challenges readers to confront the harsh realities of immigrants in the U.S. in a way that seeks to humanize the characters—in defiance of the dehumanizing discourse of the state—and establish an empathetic link between reader and text. It intends to inform, but also complicate, the dominant narrative of immigration. In this thesis, therefore, I approach the three Young Adult books published in 2016-17 with the seriousness afforded to adult literature. Chapter One expands upon the introduction's brief glimpse of immigration policy to further the discussion of what social science research has found related to youth, deportation, and undocumented status. Chapter Two addresses the political and narrative strategies of the three YA novels in order to understand what similarities and differences emerge in three immigrant stories with three distinct protagonists of different ethnic identities. Chapter Three delves into the young adult audience and the ways in which the genre has significant impact on youths' empathy, as well as the ways in which the three authors' intentions inform how they frame their stories for such an audience.

As a first-generation immigrant, I am always looking for the stories which humanize our journeys, the ones that reach beyond statistics and the cold veneer of policy. With the rise of xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment not only in the U.S., but globally, it is important now more than ever to recognize the power of immigrant literature.<sup>16</sup> It is especially crucial for literary scholars to recognize the sociopolitical contexts that inform contemporary literature, especially Young Adult literature, which has become an increasingly popular genre in the new millennium. If this literature is ignored, then a new generation of writers' work is also ignored and not taken seriously; the communities they write for and about, and the audience who read

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<sup>16</sup> Although not completely relevant to this thesis, I am also interested in the power of immigrant stories told by the ones who deeply understand our struggles—rather than the ones told from those outside the struggle.

their books, are also then ignored. But if we recognize the value—emotionally, culturally, politically—in their work, we are one step closer in opening our minds around different stories.

If, as Philip Roth argues, literature asks us the question *how do we live?* then *The Sun Is Also A Star*, *American Street*, and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* ask us to consider how undocumented immigrants and their family members live, how their reality needs to be seen and heard. When government officials and structures seek to dehumanize immigrants, telling our stories is one way in which we challenge that dehumanization and reclaim our rights to take space, to declare: *we belong here, too.*

## Chapter One: A Social Sciences Dive into Deportation

Eighteen-year-old Joaquin Luna Jr. came to the U.S. with his parents as a 6-month-old infant. Growing up in the small town of Mission, Texas, among his American-born peers, this church-attending, guitar-playing, strong student had hoped to become the first in his family to pursue college. Despairing that his undocumented status would block his ability to achieve his dreams to go to college, however, he took his life on November 25, 2011.<sup>17</sup>

Thus begins an *American Behavioral Scientist* article on the mental health of undocumented youth in the United States. Already, the authors are providing a brief micro-narrative exemplifying the consequences of legal structure that excludes undocumented immigrants. Joaquin Luna Jr.'s arrival to the U.S. was not his decision, as an infant; the authors provide details which appeal to an all-American mind, through his hobbies and his dreams of college. The tragedy of Joaquin's story is followed by another paragraph about an undocumented immigrant: Yanelli Hernandez Serrano, who attempted suicide twice while in immigration detention. These powerful openings in a social science research paper—a narrative opening featuring two stories—shows how social science scholarship and storytelling can work in tandem with each other. This article, as well as many others I cite here in this chapter, feature the real stories of immigrants, whose lives help drive their points home, whether it is in policy, law, sociology, or psychology. Without the inclusion of a human story, we may not understand on an empathetic or analytic level how a policy or a circumstance emotionally and materially affects people. On the other hand, without the social science research to show how policies and circumstances affect people, those of us who focus exclusively on creative writing do not fully understand the way personal lives are affected by the political sphere.

This narrative commonality across the social sciences and arts motivates the existence of this chapter. Instead of moving back-and-forth between literary analysis and an overview of a

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<sup>17</sup> Gonzales et al. "No Place to Belong," 1175.

policy or psychological phenomenon, I will first establish some social science context regarding studies of deportation and immigration at large. Presumably, the authors of *The Sun Is Also A Star*, *American Street*, and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* are drawing not only from their personal experiences, but also from what they see on the news and what they hear from academia and research. In the hopes of establishing basic background knowledge on the political, sociological, and psychological circumstances of undocumented immigrants today, the later analysis of the three YA novels will be strengthened with this foregrounded knowledge.

Since all the novels in this thesis are in the Young Adult genre, with young adult protagonists and an intended young adult audience, much of the social science research I will include revolves around youth and families. Social science research is a very broad category, and yet it is a useful umbrella to encompass the following interests in policy and psychology, which are themselves fields with a variety of topics. Because my introduction has already provided a summary of U.S. immigration policy relevant to the three novels, the first sub-section of this chapter will focus on the impact of policies on immigrants, both documented and undocumented. The following sub-sections will center various psychological aspects of undocumented status and deportation, namely: identity formation and adaptation among undocumented immigrant youth and implications of deportation, detention, and family separation. With all this information in mind, readers will be better able to understand the contexts in which the authors have crafted their fictionalized worlds, and what their ultimate attitudes are toward deportation and undocumented immigrants.

## I. The political is personal: immigration policy

In recent years, especially under the Trump administration, there has been national media attention as ICE raids have increased in the workplace, targeting areas where undocumented people—especially those from Latin America—work. Often, these sites are found to have violated federal work policies, such as E-Verify, an online federal identity verification system that vets employees' identification requirements, such as Social Security numbers.<sup>18</sup> But the policy ends up having far greater consequences for undocumented employees, many of whom are separated from families, arrested, or deported—while very few employers are actually prosecuted for hiring undocumented workers.<sup>19</sup> The disparity in consequences for employee and employer is only one example of how federal policies and immigration agencies unfairly target undocumented immigrants. Much of the labor that undocumented people undertake, such as in factories and processing plants, is low-wage and physically and mentally arduous, exacting its toll on workers' health. Many, regardless of education level or skillset, end up in these harsh work environments because of the demand for low-wage labor.<sup>20</sup> The U.S. has also historically relied upon African American and migrant labor in numerous industries, for many employers assume that these marginalized communities would be less likely to demand higher wages and better working conditions and thus can be hired for cheaper pay than their white counterparts. When immigration hardliners falsely lament over how immigrants steal American jobs from hard-working white folk, they perhaps do not consider, or willfully ignore, the grueling conditions of factory and farmwork that most white people in America would not accept.

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<sup>18</sup> Androff et al, "U.S. Immigration Policy and Immigrant Children's Well-being," 83-84.

<sup>19</sup> "Few Prosecuted for Illegal Employment of Immigrants." *TRAC Immigration*.

<sup>20</sup> Androff et al, 83.

Despite their taxing work environments, undocumented workers often cannot demand better wages or working conditions (including reporting sexual harassment, which is frequent) because of the fear of retaliation: of getting fired, or worse, deported.<sup>21</sup> The combined stress of the work itself is thus exacerbated by the fear of being revealed as undocumented and hence, losing one's job, which is particularly detrimental to a household that may already rely on low-income work or which has family members who cannot easily obtain work due to their immigration status. Work stress has been shown to have particularly negative effects on the family structure in Mexican American communities, as parents have less time to spend with children, often resulting in "increased loneliness, isolation, and risk-taking behavior among children."<sup>22</sup>

Although undocumented people are eligible for free public elementary, middle, and high school education, the access to higher education comes with many economic barriers, stemming from anti-immigrant federal policies. Federal law does not allow the hiring of undocumented workers; thus, undocumented students are ineligible for federal work-study. This barrier is one reason why many do not apply for colleges, knowing they would be unable to work to help pay for exorbitant tuitions and other daily costs. Additionally, by federal legislation, educational benefits such as in-state tuition are not extended to undocumented students.<sup>23</sup> However, in 2019, Maryland and New York passed legislation providing tuition-free programs to undocumented students, joining California, Delaware, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Washington in offering forms of financial aid.<sup>24</sup> Although these states are enacting legislation to aid undocumented students,

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<sup>21</sup> Levin, Sam. "Immigration crackdown enables worker exploitation."

<sup>22</sup> Androff et al, 84.

<sup>23</sup> Androff et al, 84.

<sup>24</sup> Smith. "Promoting Tuition-Free Programs to Undocumented Students."

they are only a handful of the fifty in the U.S. Moreover, structural barriers, such as persisting poverty, may further the higher educational gap.

When it comes to federal and state policy concerning deportations of youth, local immigration enforcement has increased in recent years, especially after 9/11. Although President Obama emphasized the removal of undocumented people who committed serious crimes, half the detainees during his administration had only committed misdemeanors or traffic offenses: a far cry from what one might consider a “serious” or violent offense.<sup>25</sup> President Trump, in contrast, has made no verbal or actionable distinction in who is detained. He has lumped all undocumented immigrants together as criminals (even though a growing body of research has shown that immigrants *do not* commit more crimes than citizens) and has especially targeted those who have committed misdemeanors or traffic offenses more than Obama’s administration.<sup>26</sup>

Between 2005-2014, researchers have found that, generally, as interior immigration enforcement increased, juvenile deportation cases granted permission to stay in the U.S. decreased.<sup>27</sup> Researchers have also discussed how immigration courts and judges are affected by this environment: intensified immigration enforcement in conjunction with police-based agreements, they find, make it more likely for immigration courts to rule against undocumented youth.<sup>28</sup> This has large implications for undocumented youth, whose cases are already affected by whether or not they have legal representation. If their cases are reviewed in places that lean politically conservative *and* also have tough immigration enforcement laws in place with ICE, then they are more likely to face judges who have absorbed the anti-immigrant rhetoric and

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<sup>25</sup> Amuedo-Dorantes and Puttitanum. "Undocumented youth in limbo," 601.

<sup>26</sup> Nixon. "Immigration Arrests and Deportations Are Rising."

<sup>27</sup> Amuedo-Dorantes and Puttitanum, 599.

<sup>28</sup> Amuedo-Dorantes and Puttitanum, 616.

actions of their environment, which means they are more likely to receive a decision *against* their favor, which means they will be deported to a country they may have fled from or have little ties to.

Although around eleven million Americans are undocumented<sup>29</sup>, there has only recently been an uptick in research surrounding the psychology of undocumented youth as well as youth who live in a mixed-status household. As immigration enforcement and xenophobic anti-immigrant laws continue to be passed at the state and federal level, researchers have become more interested in the impacts these laws have on undocumented people. It is evident from the consequences of these policies how they have a large, harmful impact on the personal, daily experiences of undocumented immigrants. From a political and legal standpoint, however, the psychological toll on undocumented immigrants and their families is not always entirely obvious, or even taken into consideration. Thus, examining some of the psychological processes—such as identity formation and adaptation as well as the mental health effects of deportation and detention—is crucial to understanding how the YA authors may have incorporated some of this discourse and incorporated it into their novels. Even if they did not consult scholarship, they were most likely aware of the discussion around psychology and undocumented status, whether through people they knew or news articles they perused. Their novels include mental health descriptions which align with the studies outlined below.

## II. Identity formation and adaptation: growing up undocumented

We have all passed the stage of adolescence, and we know how formative that period is for the remainder of our adulthood. This is the stage, awkward as it may be, where one's

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<sup>29</sup> Brabeck et al. "The Psychosocial Impact of Detention and Deportation," 497.

understanding of one's identity is beginning to be formed. It is culturally marked by certain "rites of passage," which include, among other events, getting a driver's license, working a first job, and going to college; undocumented youth, however, cannot fully participate in these rites.<sup>30</sup>

What is the cost of their inability to cycle through the rites of passage that other young people are able to enjoy? The ethnographer Van Gennep has argued that before we undertake these rites of passage and enter into a new stage, we exist in a temporary space of liminality—of being in-between.<sup>31</sup> For undocumented youth, however, the space of liminality exists for an infinite amount of time, at least until they are able to receive some form of documented status. The barriers to these rites of passage hold many consequences for the development of undocumented youth. Some try to secure a rite of passage, such as obtaining a driver's license or getting a job, through illegal means, such as obtaining a false Social Security card or driver's license.<sup>32</sup> It is like a *Catch-22*, a phrase Joseph Heller uses in his novel of the same title to comment on the absurdity of war. Thinking of the issue through this metaphor can illuminate the absurdity of how undocumented immigrants must navigate the immigration system and structure: in order to obtain a job and make money to uplift the socioeconomic conditions of one's family, one must have some sort of identification; but because the federal government does not allow undocumented people to work in the U.S. or to obtain a driver's license, undocumented people must retrieve these markers of identity through fraudulent means, further adding to the xenophobic rhetoric of immigrants as criminals and putting them at risk for arrest and deportation.

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<sup>30</sup> Suárez-Orozco et al, "Growing Up in the Shadows," 443-444.

<sup>31</sup> Suárez-Orozco et al, "Growing Up in the Shadows," 443-444.

<sup>32</sup> Suárez-Orozco et al, "Growing Up in the Shadows," 455.

In their situations of liminality and constant fear, undocumented youth grapple with feelings of disorientation, of ambiguous belonging, and of anger—all of which can lead to the internalization and externalization of symptoms such as anxiety, depression, withdrawal, aggression, and acting out.<sup>33</sup> This is exacerbated by discrimination and negative stereotypes, especially for immigrants of color. Through belonging, people develop their sense of identity and emotional connectedness to social and physical worlds. A more specific aspect of belonging includes “territorial belonging,” which, as its name suggests, is a bond “between person and country that has significance for a person’s identity and well-being.”<sup>34</sup> For immigrant youth, regardless of documentation status, the status of territorial belonging is often complicated—what happens when one feels a sense of belonging to a land that rejects them? What happens when adolescents feel a sense of belonging to *two* places, but are not fully accepted in either? Belonging, moreover, impacts children’s well-being, affecting aspects of their lives such as life expectancy, physical and psychological development, material prospects, and standard of living.<sup>35</sup> What does this mean for undocumented youth and for children with American citizenship who have undocumented parents?

In a study of Mexican American citizen-children with undocumented parents, researchers found across the board for their participants a process of belonging concerning their immigration status. The process is as follows: 1) *discovery* of their parents’ documentation status, which leads to their awareness of the boundaries of belonging; 2) *exclusion* in social or material marginalization because of their parents’ legal status; and 3) *rupture*, whether that is the actual detainment or deportation of a parent, or the fear of such.<sup>36</sup> In the *discovery* period, researchers

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<sup>33</sup> Suárez-Orozco et al, "Growing Up in the Shadows," 453.

<sup>34</sup> Zayas and Gulbas. "Processes of Belonging for Citizen-Children," 2464.

<sup>35</sup> Zayas and Gulbas, 2471.

<sup>36</sup> Zayas and Gulbas, 2467, 2469.

found that citizen-children (children who are American citizens but whose parents are undocumented) recognize the limits of their own citizenship when there is constant fear their parents could be deported; this in turn reveals a tenuous belonging to the homeland and family.<sup>37</sup> *Exclusion* can often manifest in feelings of difference because of parents' documentation status, as well as the disruption of rites of passage. Although this study does not focus on undocumented youth, the same period of exclusion can apply for youth who feel uncertain about their futures, excluded from the cultural norms for people in their age group.<sup>38</sup> *Rupture* applies most directly to citizen-children who have been separated from their parents through detention or deportation, although citizen-children who have no experience of parental detention or deportation also report feelings of rupture, though at lower rates than those who have gone through family separation.<sup>39</sup> The latter stage has ramifications for citizen-children's sense of belonging, especially if they are separated by borders. Although this study's sole focus is on Mexican American citizen-children, the processes of belonging it outlines are crucial frameworks which can be considered for many immigrant families living in mixed-status households, as a number of the same emotions—especially exclusion and rupture—can be found in families with undocumented members, regardless of national origin.

Rites of passage are, as mentioned, important aspects of belonging and of adolescent development. Although undocumented youth are denied the rites of passage that initiate teenagers into adulthood, they are often forced into the burdensome responsibilities of adulthood. This is true for many youth with undocumented parents, who must often navigate struggling with their own problems while also aiding their parents in translation or looking after younger siblings

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<sup>37</sup> Zayas and Gulbas, 2469.

<sup>38</sup> Gonzales et al, 1175.

<sup>39</sup> Zayas and Gulbas, 2470.

when the parents are working.<sup>40</sup> For these youth living in mixed-status homes, a growing body of research has shown that they demonstrate less positive educational, economic, and mental health outcomes.<sup>41</sup> While undocumented youth and those in mixed-status families are tasked with adult responsibilities, their parents' engagement in their education is a challenge for numerous immigrant families. High engagement with children's education is "a positive predictor of academic achievement, higher self-esteem [...] and higher rates of high school completion and college enrollment."<sup>42</sup> Although youths' shouldering of adult responsibilities and the lack of parental engagement in youths' lives are common experiences across working-class families, the lack of documentation for such working-class families only exacerbate these issues. For youth whose parents are occupied with long hours at work and who do not understand the U.S. education system because of language and cultural barriers, this becomes yet another obstacle for undocumented and mixed-status youth.

As this summary shows, a multitude of negative psychological impacts have been demonstrated in the developmental context of undocumented youth and citizen-children of undocumented families. How does one cope with such circumstances? Maintaining hope is essential to mental health, but for undocumented youth and youth living in mixed-status homes, that sense of hope is often compromised. However, there are youth who have remained steadfast in their resilience, able to combat their dire situations by maintaining strong friendships or talking openly with caring adults. Among undocumented youth who reported having strong connections, they described less emotional distress.<sup>43</sup> Thus, it is important to keep in mind that feelings of hope can exist for undocumented youth and citizen-children with undocumented

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<sup>40</sup> Gonzales et al, 1183.

<sup>41</sup> Suárez-Orozco et al. "An Integrative Risk and Resilience Model," 790.

<sup>42</sup> Suárez-Orozco et al. "Growing Up in the Shadows," 458.

<sup>43</sup> Gonzales et al, 1188.

parents—they may be victims of an immigration system which seeks to disenfranchise and marginalize them, but they are also individuals with incredible resilience, even in the face of heart-wrenching policies concerning detention and deportation.

### III. Separation: detention and deportation's effects on immigrant youth

Family separation as a result of detention and deportation has an enormous impact on immigrant youth. In general, youth often absorb and experience the multiple risks of their parents' struggles. For immigrant youth with undocumented parents, they live in situations in which adults fear deportation; they are more likely to find difficulty obtaining work; and are more vulnerable to physical health problems, psychological distress, and acculturative stress, along with less access to services to address these issues.<sup>44</sup> This kind of environment leads to behavioral and emotional problems later in youths' lives, and the reality of detention and deportation only further exacerbate the risks undocumented adults already face. Moreover, a parent's detention is all too often abrupt, with a lack of transparency regarding the detention process. This creates a crisis for youth, especially since parents are largely detained while waiting for their deportation hearings, and therefore not given time to see their family or make the necessary preparations to keep the family afloat in their absence. The lack of transparency in the detention process also means families are unaware of what the detained relative is going through; in 2006 as well as in 2009, the investigative branch of DHS and Amnesty International U.S.A. found mistreatment and neglect of detained individuals, such as providing inadequate healthcare and preventing due process for reporting human rights violations.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Brabeck et al, 498.

<sup>45</sup> Brabeck et al, 499.

A single study on immigrant youth from different regions can shed further light on the impacts of detention and deportation. Researchers interviewed both parents and children who were separated during the migration process, looking at groups from Central America, China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico. They discovered that three-quarters of their participants were separated from one or both parents during migration. In the qualitative responses of children, researchers observed that the youth spoke emotionally about separation from their family members; it “was often described as one of the hardest things about coming to the United States.”<sup>46</sup> Compounding this pain was the complication of adapting to a new place and living with new family members without the comfort of having a familiar family member, i.e. a parent.<sup>47</sup> The psychological implications for these situations are great: in comparison to youth who experienced family separation, researchers found that youth who arrived with an intact family were less likely to report symptoms of depression and anxiety.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, youth who were never separated from their parents and youth who underwent separation of fewer than two years reported the lowest rates of psychological distress,<sup>49</sup> although it is important to recognize that this does not mean that they experienced *no* distress at all. In fact, although the short-term effects of separation are evident in this study, there still remains uncertainty about the long-term developmental, psychological, and relational impact on immigrant youth and their families.<sup>50</sup> Yet, in spite of the difficulty for immigrant youth, researchers found that most newcomers appeared to adjust to the separation and were resilient in grappling with the separation and adjusting to new family relations.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Suárez-Orozco et al, "I Felt Like My Heart Was Staying Behind," 240.

<sup>47</sup> Suárez-Orozco et al, "I Felt Like My Heart Was Staying Behind," 243.

<sup>48</sup> Suárez-Orozco et al, "I Felt Like My Heart Was Staying Behind," 247.

<sup>49</sup> Suárez-Orozco et al, "I Felt Like My Heart Was Staying Behind," 248.

<sup>50</sup> Suárez-Orozco et al, "I Felt Like My Heart Was Staying Behind," 249.

<sup>51</sup> Suárez-Orozco et al, "I Felt Like My Heart Was Staying Behind," 248.

Qualitative social science incorporates narrative features: nearly all of the research interweaved participants' stories of their experiences. However, these would often be, at most, one-paragraph excerpts of one aspect of participants' lives because of the subject of the research, invariably one of the most painful aspects of their lives. The reader only knows the participant through their deportation or their undocumented status; and if we are given information about the small details of their lives, like their habits and dreams, it is only a sentence at most. Although participants' stories illuminate the very personal nature of policy, they can often be reduced to just their immigration status in social science scholarship. In all three books I will explore, the authors do not limit their characters to just their documentation status or their situations of detention and deportation—they are rendered as rounded, three-dimensional humans. Although these are vital components of their identity and the struggles enmeshed in the plot, they are not the *only* parts that create the protagonists and the stories. Romance, career aspirations, pseudo-detective work, and more are aspects of the novels in which the reader briefly forgets the immigrant status of the protagonist. In knowing and understanding the protagonists *beyond* their documentation status or the situation of their immigrant families, Young Adult literature offers a path of empathy that the social sciences do not. This thesis builds on social science research by expanding on what they leave implicit in their work. In keeping all of this in mind, the following chapters will focus on the authors' craft and how they fictionalize a very real policy context, and what, ultimately, readers stand to gain from diving into the world of YA immigrant fiction.

## Chapter Two: Political and Narrative Features of Deportation

The skeptic of political art might ask themselves: what business does political commentary have existing in art? Shouldn't art be created for art's sake? For the sole purpose of aesthetics, and nothing else? And yet, arguably, the stance that art should not be political is itself a political stance. For we, as writers and human beings, are invariably shaped by the world around us, which includes the political circumstances of our world. How do the politics affect the ways we are allowed to move across different spaces—or forbidden to move? How do they affect where we live and who we interact with, as well as how others interact with us? How do they determine certain members of society worthy of the full rights and privileges of an American citizen, and others as irredeemably unworthy of these things?

Answering these questions and including the novel's political atmosphere is more than just simply referencing an institution. *The Sun Is Also A Star* by Nicola Yoon, *American Street* by Ibi Zoboi, and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erica L. Sánchez might center their plots and characters around deportation and undocumented status, but they do so in a variety of narrative ways that explores the relationship of immigration politics to the personal lives of teenage characters, while also humanizing their characters. Through plot devices, themes of coming of age, point of view, antagonistic forces, and non-realistic features, the three authors weave deportation and undocumented status into the foreground and background of their stories.

In *The Sun Is Also A Star* (2016), Natasha is an undocumented Jamaican American trying to save her family from being deported by the end of the day. Through a series of events, she meets Daniel, a first-generation Korean American. In the twenty-four hours she has left in America, she not only moves through New York City grasping for the last straws of salvation—

such as visiting the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) office and finding a last-minute lawyer—she simultaneously begins to fall in love with Daniel.

*American Street* (2017) follows a recent Haitian immigrant, Fabiola, who is immediately separated from her mother upon their arrival to the U.S. While her mother is taken away from her to immigration detention in New Jersey, Fabiola must adjust—by herself—to her new life in Detroit. She lives with her mother’s sister, Aunt Jo, and her three cousins, Chantal, Pri, and Donna. The novel explores the methods in which Fabiola tries to save her mother, while also navigating high school life, a new romantic interest, and the racial and economic politics of Detroit.

Unlike the previous two novels, *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017) centers itself around a protagonist who is an American citizen but who has undocumented parents. Julia grapples with depression after the unexpected death of her older sister, who has always been seen as the “perfect” Mexican daughter. While her mental health continues to decline, she also struggles with the cultural and generational expectations from her parents, the college application process, and her own self-love while exploring a new relationship.

The three YA novels include elements typical to the genre, such as adolescent identity formation and burgeoning romantic relationships. But in addition to the genre’s expectations, Yoon, Zoboi, and Sánchez purposefully include political and narrative elements of deportation not only to make a statement in humanizing a highly polarized topic, but also to complicate, for young readers, the complex immigration system of the United States. It is a system which lawmakers have, for decades, attempted to reform to little success. It has affected the real, lived experiences of immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants, in America. Although these YA novels follow different kinds of protagonists, from different ethnic backgrounds and with

different stories to tell, there are threads of commonality that can be found among the three and which speak to the anxieties immigrants have regarding deportation.

### I. Deportation as a plot device

As a literary device, deportation is a key plot point in *The Sun is Also a Star* and *American Street*. Nearly every action that the protagonists, Natasha and Fabiola, respectively, take are driven by their desire to prevent deportation. In Natasha's case, this is the prevention of her and her family's deportation; in Fabiola's, it is the prevention of her mother's deportation. As a plot device, one could argue that deportation is the only aspect propelling the narrative forward. On the other hand, the novels deal with *so much more* than just deportation, particularly teenage romance, that deportation cannot be the sole driver of the plot. In contrast, there is no immediate threat of deportation in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*; here, deportation takes a clear background role, though that does not mean that it is not central to the novel's conflicts, particularly between the protagonist, Julia, and her mother.

In creative writing workshops, writers often revolve around two questions for plot construction: what does this character want and/or what are they afraid of?<sup>52</sup> In *The Sun is Also a Star*, Natasha wants to prevent her family's deportation and to be with Daniel; she is also afraid of being deported to Jamaica and is afraid of falling in love with Daniel because of her fear that she will have to leave. In *American Street*, Fabiola wants to be reunited with her mother, prevent her deportation to Haiti, and transition smoothly to her life in America; she is also afraid that her mother will be deported. In *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, Julia wants to find out what secret her recently deceased sister has been hiding and to survive the rest of high school

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<sup>52</sup> Baxter, Charles. "Charles Baxter on the Request Moment."

and get into college; she is also afraid of further alienating herself from her parents, of being stuck in Chicago, and the general fear of others discovering her parents' undocumented status.

These are simple answers to what these novels grapple with. Charles Baxter argues that the question of a character's desire and fear is "one-half of the full picture" and that, for much of our lives, we are performing actions that other people have requested of us, which become *transferred* desires.<sup>53</sup> The request moment, then, is when a character has asked another to do something for them. Baxter finds many uses for the request moment in literature, which he breaks down into three categories. First, it happens in a social world, which means the characters involved in the request exchange operate in a specific society with its own set of obligations. The request moment thus has social consequences. Second, it reveals power relationships between the asker and the answerer, showing who holds power, who does not, and what actions people take or think of taking while holding such power. In turn, revelations about the characters' relationships and their relative power dynamics are exposed after the request is made. Third, it uncovers the ethical obligations that people feel toward others. The choices characters make—whether to fulfill the request, whether to reject it, whether to do something in between—reveal much about who they are.<sup>54</sup>

If we apply Baxter's request moment to all three novels, we can see how very complicated the stories actually are. Both *Natasha* and *Fabiola* take matters of preventing deportation into their own hands after a request they have made to adult relatives has not been met. These adult relatives are often presented and perceived as authority figures, but have, in these cases, lack of control over their own situations as well as the protagonists'. *Natasha* and her family's pending deportation, as we learn in *The Sun is Also A Star*, is, in her own opinion, her

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<sup>53</sup> Baxter.

<sup>54</sup> Baxter.

father's fault. While he was pulled over by a cop for drunk driving, he drunkenly blurted out his family's history, including how they came to America—and how they overstayed their visas. When Natasha wonders to herself why this awful situation is happening to them, she remembers something her father said: “You can't always see God's plan”; in response, Natasha thinks, “I want to tell him that maybe he shouldn't leave everything up to God and that hoping against hope is not a life strategy.”<sup>55</sup> Her frustration with her father is evident: she believes he has given up on their case. Her life strategy, in contrast to her father's, is to continue the fight to stay in the country, when both her parents have given up. Because she is their child, she has less power than her parents in terms of age; she cannot force them to accept her request. However, she has her own power in *disobeying* her parents, going to the USCIS office without ever telling them about her plans. Later, when Attorney Fitzgerald—who tries to help her case—asks her why she went to USCIS, when immigration proceedings like deportation are not even in their jurisdiction, Natasha responds, with tears in her eyes, “I didn't know what else to do.”<sup>56</sup> Her frustration and feelings of hopelessness are evident through her tears and her uncertainty over what to do; and yet, Natasha has tried everything she could. The failure of her parents to abide her request—and Natasha's decision to take the hardship upon herself—is what sets the narrative in motion.

In a similar fashion, Fabiola's failed request moment propels her to move forward with the goal of freeing her mother from immigration detention and preventing her deportation to Haiti. Though she has requested the help of her aunt and her three cousins, they have refused, citing the complexities of the immigration bureaucracy. When Fabiola confronts Aunt Jo for the first time about her mother's continued absence, her aunt replies, “Fabiola, those people and their rules are like sorcerers. If I go digging too deep into their trickery, I will end up with an ass for a

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<sup>55</sup> Yoon, *The Sun Is Also a Star*, 34.

<sup>56</sup> Yoon, 233.

face, and a face for an ass.” Fabiola recognizes the convoluted, vague answer her aunt gives, and replies straightforwardly, “You are saying no.”<sup>57</sup> Again, a power dynamic is exposed here, similar to that found in *The Sun is Also A Star*. Aunt Jo, being older, has more power over Fabiola, with money and influence and more knowledge of the complexities of the U.S. immigration system. Fabiola, however, can manipulate this power dynamic and try to seek other methods. A week later, she approaches her cousins with the same request, already having packed a small bag for her intended trip to find her mother. Fabiola asks, somewhat naively—since she is new to America, and does not understand the distance between Detroit and New Jersey, where her mother is detained—how she can get to New Jersey. Her oldest cousin, Chantal, says that she will not take Fabiola to New Jersey. She instead tries to reassure Fabiola: “Ma is finding everything out. If she say to wait, then you wait. If she say to move, then you move.”<sup>58</sup> Here, she invokes the power dynamic between her mother as the head of the household and Fabiola as her dependent. This also bares the ethical obligations Chantal holds to Fabiola: although they are cousins, she only recently got to *truly* know Fabiola, and she is preoccupied with her own life while also looking after her family.

Fabiola, however, cannot let go of her own ethical obligations to her mother. Although Fabiola’s mother has not requested her daughter to save her, Fabiola has taken it upon herself to do the work. On the same day she asks Chantal how she can get to New Jersey, she is confronted by her other cousin, Pri. In frustration at Pri’s attempts to try to dissuade her, Fabiola says, “No one is helping me with my mother. She’s in a prison. *Prison!* Her only crime was coming here to this country to make a better life for us. So I know she’s counting on me. I have to help her.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Zobi, *American Street*, 55.

<sup>58</sup> Zobi, 85.

<sup>59</sup> Zobi, 86.

Again, Fabiola feels the obligation as a daughter to help her mother; beyond obligation, of course, is familial love. Before her mother's detention, Fabiola has never been separated from her beloved mother and feels the loss acutely. She feels the poignancy of separation so desperately she wants to take matters into her own hands. And she does: her request and her family's failure in responding to it leads her to secretly talk to a detective from Grosse Pointe.

In contrast to the two novels already discussed, *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* does not have an explicit request moment related to deportation. However, much of the last moments of the novel are caught up in the ethical obligations and social consequences that come with a request moment and its ties to immigration. Julia's quest to find out more about her dead older sister, Olga, results in her discovering that Olga had an affair with an older, married man and was pregnant with his child when she died unexpectedly. When Julia confronts Olga's lover about the affair, he pleads with her, "Please, don't tell your parents. Olga never wanted to hurt them."<sup>60</sup> Julia mulls over his request—should she, or should she not, tell her parents, who are very conservative when it comes to sex, about Olga's affair and her pregnancy? Both know that the information would destroy Julia's parents, though the thought of keeping this secret all to herself frustrates Julia. When her therapist asks if she has been thinking of telling her parents about Olga, Julia wonders,

Is it considered lying when you hold something locked up inside you? What if the information would only cause people pain? Who would benefit from knowing about Olga's affair and pregnancy? Is it kind or selfish for me to keep this all to myself? [...] But what kind of person would I be if I told my parents? Haven't they suffered enough? Isn't that why Amá never told us what happened to her on the border? I know she'd die

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<sup>60</sup> Sánchez, *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, 312.

with that story still inside her, partly out of shame, but mostly to protect us. And why would Olga need to know that about herself? Apá was her father, no matter what.<sup>61</sup>

Julia's thoughts—all structured in the form of questions—reveal the compelling, complicated human interactions that result from a request moment. There is the matter of ethical obligation: Julia considers the value of telling the truth or keeping the truth hidden to spare people the pain of such information that would change her whole family's perception of Olga, who is now, after all, dead. She wonders about her own role in this, too, as Olga's younger sister, and whether her adherence to secrecy would be kind or selfish to her parents. Ultimately, Julia decides to abide by the request to keep Olga's secret. She considers the social consequences of *not* accepting the request: she would cause harm to her parents, which would change her relationship to them and their relationship to her dead sister, as well as reveal to herself what kind of person she is. She uses her own struggles with secrecy to empathize with her mother, whom she found out was raped while crossing the border and became pregnant with Olga. In thinking about the social consequences of telling Olga's secret, Julia understands why her mother kept this secret and never told her daughters about what happened at the border: it would only hurt them, and all she wanted to do, as a mother, was protect her daughters. And, as Julia reflects, the identity of Olga's biological father didn't matter, because Apá had always been a father to her. Ultimately, though this request moment appears late in the novel, it reflects a very humanizing side to the fiction and gives weight to the story.

Like *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, *The Sun Is Also A Star* contains a request moment unrelated to deportation or documentation status that is given equal weight. That request is made by Daniel, who asks Natasha to give him the chance to fall in love with him by the end

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<sup>61</sup> Sánchez, 314.

of the day.<sup>62</sup> Natasha reluctantly agrees, not because she does not find Daniel attractive, but because she is wary of forming such an intense bond when there is a likely possibility she will no longer be in America by the end of the day. This request sets forth its own series of important plot points with important social consequences, which have more to do with the budding romance between Daniel and Natasha (fast-paced romance being a common trope in YA books) than with deportation itself—although it does function as one barrier between the two characters' love. Significant moments in their love story, and to the novel as a whole, include Daniel and Natasha's trip to Daniel's parents' black beauty hair store; their visit to *norebang* (Korean karaoke); their separation once Daniel discovers Natasha's undocumented status and her pending deportation; their reunion and intimate moment on the rooftop of a building; and their cab ride to the airport together after discovering Attorney Fitzgerald is unable to prevent Natasha's deportation. Thus, the bulk of the reader's emotional connection to the novel becomes more about whether Daniel and Natasha will be able to stay together than if Natasha will be able to stay in America—although that is certainly a crucial part of the stakes. Yoon purposefully makes sure that deportation is not the only central preoccupation in the novel, but that teenage romance and familial relationships are included as well. She thus creates a rich story in which the protagonist is not merely a victim of hard-liner immigration policy, but her own person, with her own story, defined not just by the immigration system which throws her life out of balance.

The traditional creative framework of a plot driven by a character's desires is a fine tool for analysis of a writer's work, but Baxter's request moment allows us to delve deeper into the inherent social relations of a fictional world. The request moment helps us understand that sometimes, a character's needs and wants do not necessarily originate from themselves. They

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<sup>62</sup> Yoon, 83.

can stem from the needs and wants of *other* characters, who request actions from them; whether or not the character agrees or disagrees to that request, and how they may choose to carry or not carry out the request, sets forth an avalanche of events which drive the plot forward. Readers thus understand characters not as sole actors, but as people who interact with other people—just as we, in the real world, are never really alone, are always reacting to something. The request moment thus functions as an important tool in thinking about how the three authors crafted their plots, and how deportation fits into it all, as both a primary motivation for the protagonists' actions and a lurking worry. The examination of the request moment is primarily centered around plot, but the craft of narration is another crucial component of how deportation is politically and narratively featured in the three YA novels.

## II. Coming of age under deportation

The Young Adult novel, with its intended audience of adolescents and teenagers and its cast of characters of the same age, is often framed as a coming-of-age story. But rather than the traditional *Bildungsroman*, Roberta Seelinger Trites has argued that YA literature is closer to an *Entwicklungsroman*, which concerns how an adolescent character grows, in contrast to the *Bildungsroman*'s structure of adolescent maturing into adulthood.<sup>63</sup> It is useful to consider these books in the context of the *Entwicklungsroman* and how the authors complicate this growth and development process through the lens of deportation and documentation status. The three protagonists undoubtedly grow by the end of the three novels: Natasha has struggled through the complicated immigration bureaucracy and fallen in love with Daniel; Fabiola has navigated the immigration detention system and successfully released her mother from detention, all while

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<sup>63</sup> Pattee, "Between Youth and Adulthood," 221.

dealing with two deaths in her new community; and Julia has grappled through her depression and suicide attempt after her sister's death and is on her way to New York University at the end of the novel. But as the reader might remember from the first chapter on social science research, the growth and developmental process for adolescents—which includes crucial rites of passage and a strong sense of belonging—is often hindered by the consequences of deportation and the hardship of living as an undocumented immigrant.

Thus, while Natasha, Fabiola, and Julia all certainly grow by the end of their respective stories, Yoon, Zoboi, and Sánchez complicate that growth with deportation and documentation status, whether of the characters themselves or their parents. This is done primarily through the process of belonging outlined in Chapter One, in which *discovery* comes first, *exclusion* second, and *rupture* third. It is unclear when Natasha discovered her status as an undocumented immigrant, but throughout the novel, she is constantly aware of it as she fights her own deportation. The exclusion as a result of her documentation status is made clear in the way she is kept out of significant adolescent rites of passage, such as applying to college. She is angry, for instance, at her best friend Bev, who has been worrying about where to apply to college.<sup>64</sup> Part of Natasha's anger is directed at the fact that she is put in a terrible situation where she must be separated from her friends and her well-established life in America, but part of her anger is also at Bev, who can participate in the rite of passage of applying to colleges, while Natasha is left out of the experience of college-searching that many of her peers are currently going through. Indeed, though Natasha has been bottling up her feelings for months, she finally breaks down in the USCIS office when she asks her case officer, "What about college?"<sup>65</sup> after he initially tells her he cannot do more for her situation. The rupture, of course, is her own deportation at the end

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<sup>64</sup> Yoon, 20-21.

<sup>65</sup> Yoon, 22.

of the novel; but throughout *The Sun Is Also A Star*, Natasha is constantly aware of what such a separation will do to her relationships, and is part of the reason why she is at first reluctant about her feelings for Daniel. Even before the final decision is made regarding her deportation case, Natasha has already begun to slip away from her relationships, knowing there is a chance she will no longer belong in America even though, in her heart, she truly feels she does.

Unlike Natasha in *The Sun Is Also A Star*, Julia in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* reflects on how her discovery of her parents' status as undocumented immigrants affected her as a child, especially in her sense of exclusion and fear of rupture. She reflects,

I grew up learning to be afraid of *la migra* and listened to my parents and family members go on and on about *papeles*. For a long time, I didn't understand what was so important about these pieces of paper, but I eventually figured it out. My parents could have been sent back to Mexico at any moment, leaving me and Olga here to fend for ourselves.<sup>66</sup>

Since she was young, Julia has grown up in a household fearfully aware of their undocumented status and their vulnerability. The discovery of her parents' undocumented status also includes her realization over why their legal status is important: it can determine their fate in being able to live in America. At first, as Julia narrates, she wasn't aware of the consequences of their legal status; when she does, the fear of rupture becomes much more tangible when she understands that her parents could have been sent to Mexico, with her and her sister left to "fend" for themselves. The word choice of "fend" is significant, indicating a defensive, predator-prey situation; in this case, the predator is ICE, the prey the citizen-children left without their undocumented parents. Indeed, as children, it would have been difficult to navigate their lives

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<sup>66</sup> Sánchez, 167.

without their parents. Although this process of belonging often results in exclusion, the type of exclusion Julia faces is more complicated. She lives in a majority Mexican American community in Chicago, many of whom also have undocumented family members. Julia's situation, therefore, is not a rarity. She continues to reflect that, like other people in her situation, she and Olga probably would have lived with one of their documented aunts or gone back to Mexico with their parents. Her exclusion is not necessarily from her community of fellow Mexican Americans, but rather the exclusion from a majority white society. Julia experiences racism from the way white people view her as Other, as not belonging. She notes: "Like my parents, I've always been suspicious of white people, because they're the ones who call immigration, who are rude to you at stores and restaurants, who follow you when you're shopping..."<sup>67</sup> Her suspicion is valid considering the fear she feels about her parents' documentation status being found out, and her exclusion in majority-white spaces in stores and restaurants which lead to her feelings of alienation. Finally, the stage of fear is most palpable concerning her father, who works at a factory:

I remember the raids in Apá's factory when I was little. *La migra* shipped *mojados* back by the busload, separating families forever. It must have been some sort of miracle that these sweeps were never during his shift. Although Apá is only physically present most of the time, like some sort of household fixture, I can't imagine what it would be like to live without him.<sup>68</sup>

Julia's memory centers primarily on her father, though other members of her community have had their lives irrevocably changed, too. She begins first with the personal, then the more macro story, then back to the personal. It is truly a miracle that Julia's father was never detained by ICE

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<sup>67</sup> Sánchez, 167.

<sup>68</sup> Sánchez, 167.

in these situations; in reality, this probably would not have been the case, considering ICE came for multiple raids. Nevertheless, Julia's fear of rupture is real: though she has a tense relationship with her father—seeing him as a household fixture rather than a dynamic relative—she cannot even imagine her life without him. It would be unthinkable. The details about the raids and the separation of families also takes on a heightened political tone, considering recent news coverage over the increase in ICE raids in workplaces and the cruel separation of families at the U.S.-Mexico border.

In contrast to both Julia and Natasha, Fabiola, having just recently arrived to the U.S. from Haiti, struggles with different notions of belonging. Whereas the liminality of belonging in Natasha and Julia's cases are largely a result of how external factors perceive of their right to belong in the nation (namely because of racist notions of who belongs in America), Fabiola's liminality is not just due to others' perceptions but her own emotional conflict between Haiti and the United States. This is in part embodied by her mother, who comes to stand for Haiti itself, especially when Fabiola thinks about what she misses about Haiti:

I miss rice and beans. I miss spicy stewed chicken and red snapper seasoned to the bone. I miss *banan peze*, fried plantains [...] I miss the hot sun and sweating all day and the beach and eating cold *fresco* with my friends and long walks up and down hills and Cola Lakay and deep-fried beef patties. I miss my mother.<sup>69</sup>

The anaphora of “I miss” drives home the sense of longing for her country of birth. Much of the things Fabiola misses is food-related, but she also misses the weather, the feeling of being surrounded by a familiar setting, of being with her friends. In short, Fabiola misses home. After she lists all these things, she thinks, simply: “I miss my mother.” The fact that her mother is

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<sup>69</sup> Zobi, 192.

followed by all the concrete things she misses about Haiti indicates how Fabiola's mother has come to stand for Haiti itself. She embodies the nation; the mother is the motherland. Being separated from her mother is also being separated from her home, from the only country she has ever known. Although her aunt grew up in Haiti, she refuses to speak Creole and engage in cultural practices with Fabiola; thus, her tether to Haiti has been cut from her, locked in immigration detention. Fabiola struggles to fit into American society, as any immigrant would, but her situation is exacerbated by the separation from her mother due to detention.

These complicated processes of belonging nuance the three protagonists' growth in their respective *Entwicklungsroman* frameworks. Their exclusion from rites of passage, their feelings of alienation and not belonging to the larger society, and their rupture—or fear of rupture—from their loved ones make their *Entwicklungsroman* journeys complex. This structural choice is not the only way in which readers become aware of their growth, however. In all three YA novels, we also see their growth at a close distance through first-person narration.

### III. Me, myself, and I: first-person narration

*The Sun Is Also A Star*, *American Street*, and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* are Young Adult novels with different immigrant stories, but another important similarity is the fact that they are all, to some extent, written in first-person narration. Most of *The Sun is Also A Star* is told in Natasha and Daniel's first-person perspectives, with the occasional third-person narration from a minor or peripheral character, as well as a few general third-person omniscient narrations that delve into cultural aspects of Natasha and Daniel's lives. Similarly, the vast majority of *American Street* is told from Fabiola's first-person perspective, with brief first-person sections from each supporting character peppered throughout the book. *I Am Not Your*

*Perfect Mexican Daughter*, on the other hand, is told entirely from Julia's first-person perspective.

The choice to write in the first-person is deliberate. It reflects what Amy Cummins, in her work on border crossing narratives in Young Adult literature, has called "immediate-engaging-first-person-narration," a term coined by Andrea Schwenke Wylie.<sup>70</sup> Through this type of engaging narration, which is commonly found in children and YA literature, "readers align closely with the subjective experience of narrator-protagonists."<sup>71</sup> This in turn creates more of a link between reader and protagonist, as the reader becomes immersed in the protagonist's immediate world, especially in their thoughts. In some ways, because the style constantly relies on the "I," it is reminiscent of memoir or life-writing. This may help make certain events feel more *real*, even in a fictionalized sphere. Additionally, writers may choose to employ this literary style for the purpose of establishing empathy. In the context of readers in middle school and high school, which is the target audience for the YA genre, this becomes important in creating a link between young readers and the protagonists, whose situations may or may not seem familiar.

The proximity to the protagonists' thoughts in *The Sun Is Also A Star*, *American Street*, and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* allows us to understand how deportation affects them psychologically. The distance between the narrator and the protagonist is close to nonexistent, and the thoughts can often read as a stream-of-consciousness process. For instance, when Natasha first goes to Attorney Fitzgerald's office to ask for his help in her deportation case, his paralegal asks her to fill out a short form asking about her immigration story. As Natasha thinks about what to write, she wonders,

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<sup>70</sup> Cummins, "Border Crossings: Contemporary Young Adult Literature," 61.

<sup>71</sup> Cummins, 61.

[...] Does [Attorney Fitzgerald] want to know how we entered the country? How we hid? How it feels every time I write down my fake social security number on a school form? How every time I do, I picture my mom getting on that bus to Florida? Does he want to know how it feels to be undocumented? Or how I keep waiting for someone to find out I don't belong here at all?"<sup>72</sup>

The use of anaphora in Natasha's thoughts indicates a stream-of-consciousness-like process, in which one question leads to another leads to another. As the reader, we do not see word-for-word what Natasha writes; there are no explicit answers to these questions. And yet, if this were a third-person omniscient narration, readers would not necessarily gain insight into Natasha's thoughts to the extent that we do in this engaged first-person narration. Readers are very close to Natasha's interiority, therefore we are invited to begin to understand—based on the events that have happened thus far in the novel and her reactions to them—how she feels. In this moment, we are partly identifying *with* her, instead of seeing her from afar. The questions she asks of herself reveal her emotions, whether they are surface-level or subconscious. We begin to understand how someone in her situation considers her immigration status differently than that of a lawyer, who might want to know the practical facts of how her family entered the country and how they hid their undocumented status. But for Natasha, her feelings are what matter most. She feels fear for her mother—who is also undocumented—but also gratitude, for risking her safety to obtain a fake social security number for Natasha. This kind of moment is one where their undocumented status leads them to undertake an illegal action which recalls the Catch-22 cycle mentioned in Chapter One. Additionally, Natasha feels a complexity of emotions in being undocumented, which align with the psychological responses also mentioned in the previous

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<sup>72</sup> Yoon, 111-112.

chapter, such as a liminal state of belonging. And of course, she fears others' discovery of her undocumented status, fearing that people will believe she does not belong in America, even though in her heart, she does. As readers we are taken along for the journey as Natasha fights to stay in America, as she falls in love with Daniel. Through first-person engaged narration, we absorb her thoughts and want her to stay in America as much as she is desperate to stay.

Immediate-engaging-first-person narration, unlike third person narration, fuses the narrator and the focalizer as the same person.<sup>73</sup> In closing the distance between narrator and character, these writers are deliberately choosing a narrative style that engenders more empathy from the reader. Zobi uses this strategy to comment on the psychological toll that Fabiola's mother's detainment has on Fabiola. Throughout the novel, as Fabiola adjusts to life in Detroit, she yearns for her separated mother. Because nearly all of *American Street* is from Fabiola's first-person narration, we get intimate access to her thoughts, such as below:

“Back upstairs, I drop my body down onto Chantal's bed, press my face against her pillow, and scream. Drops of anger trickle out, little by little, as if every single setback over these past few weeks has exploded. Tiny bombs escape me. I sob and my body shakes trying to get everything out.

I take Chantal's blanket, wrap it around me, and pretend it's my mother's arms. I rock myself until there is nothing left but my small whimpers. I'm like an infant, slowly sliding into sleep.”<sup>74</sup>

The diction Zobi uses in conveying Fabiola's thoughts through first-person is important. “Drops of anger,” “exploded,” “tiny bombs,” and “shakes” call to mind a war. For Fabiola, the separation from her mother is a war against her happiness, her well-being, her adjustment to

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<sup>73</sup> Pattee, 221.

<sup>74</sup> Zobi, 149.

America. This kind of despair and depressive response has been noted in numerous cases of separated children and mothers due to immigration enforcement. Through the engaged first-person, readers are invited into the protagonist's interiority. Imagine, for a moment, if this excerpt were written in a third-person perspective: readers would not be able to get Fabiola's own process of thoughts, such as when she states she *pretends* the blanket is her mother's arms. In a detached third-person voice, we also would not be able to receive the last thought, that Fabiola sees herself as an infant, rocking herself to sleep as if she is in the protective embrace of her mother's arms. The imagery of physical objects (such as the blanket) replacing the mother, who cannot be physically present, clearly points to Fabiola's emotions. If the perspective was a third-person narration very close to the protagonist, then the reader might feel similarly as we do in the engaged first-person narration. Ultimately, however, the reader would also be aware that because the narrator is telling the story in the third person, a greater distance between narrator and focalizer is found than in the first-person. The reader is acutely aware that the narrator telling the story is coming from a different position than the protagonist. The engaged first-person narration thus enhances the reader's understanding of Fabiola's struggles due to the forced separation from her mother.

Unlike *The Sun Is Also A Star* and *American Street*, readers spend the entirety of *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* in the first-person perspective of one character: the protagonist Julia. And like the other two novels, the engaged first-person narration creates a strong link between narrator and reader that invites the reader into the consciousness of the most important character of the novel. One important example is the scene where Julia reflects on her college essay. For those of us who have applied to college, we understand that the Common App essay (and college application essays in general) are one of our first tests in writing about

ourselves. Though we never see word-for-word what Julia wrote for her essay, we do get a sense of her topic: the responsibility she feels toward her family.

In some ways, I think that part of what I'm trying to accomplish—whether Amá really understands it or not—is to live for her, Apá, and Olga. It's not that I'm living life *for* them, exactly, but I have so many choices they've never had, and I feel like I can do so much with what I've been given. What a waste their journey would be if I just settled for a dull, mediocre life.<sup>75</sup>

Julia feels a sense of responsibility that many children of immigrants—especially children of undocumented immigrants—carry. It is the idea that because of their parents' sacrifice—in Julia's case, her parents' harrowing border crossing and their dehumanizing jobs—they must be successful and do what their parents could not accomplish. Julia recognizes the limitations to her parents' documentation status, noting that she has many *choices* they can never be offered because of the way America has criminalized them. Imagine if Julia wrote about the burdens of her personal responsibility in the third-person for her college essay; the distance between narrator, character, and reader would feel much wider. The same, I would argue, would apply to this novel: we are along for the ride with Julia as she struggles with depression after her sister's death, with a suicide attempt, with the escalating tensions between her and her mother. By the end of the novel we gain an understanding of Julia's innermost thoughts as told through the "I" voice; Sánchez invites the reader into the consciousness of her protagonist and bares Julia's vulnerabilities.

For readers who find themselves in the same situations as the protagonists, the engaged first-person narration can provide recognition and validation. Though the characters are

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<sup>75</sup> Sánchez, 339.

fictionalized figments of an author's mind, the fictionalized experiences are drawn from real, lived ones to which an undocumented immigrant or a child of undocumented immigrants can relate.<sup>76</sup> The set-up of immediately-engaging-first-person-narration creates a clear divide between protagonist and antagonist. Readers are meant to align with the protagonists of the books, whose stories are told from their perspectives. We spend the majority of time in their heads, and so we align with them when they are faced with antagonists, or rather, antagonistic forces found in immigration institutions.

#### IV. Immigration institutions as antagonistic forces

In her work on border crossing literature, Cummins finds that many novels feature antagonistic forces of immigration laws. Characters face challenges against *la migra*, which encompass immigration laws and the border officials who enforce them.<sup>77</sup> Although only one of the three novels I consider include border crossing as the form of migration, Cummins's framework of immigration laws as antagonists is still useful, for these novels portray immigration institutions as antagonists as well. This is done primarily through the officials who work for these institutions, whose actions reflect the status quo of the immigration institution itself. There are also officials who work outside of these institutions—but are in fields that are in close proximity to immigration, such as lawyers and law enforcement—who also contribute to the status quo.

*La migra* becomes a fearful antagonistic force for undocumented immigrants in immigrant literature because of its potential to disrupt families and to upend people's lives.

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<sup>76</sup> Seeing one's identity reflected in fiction is important for identity formation for youth as well, as has been seen in recent discussions over films such as *Black Panther* and *Crazy Rich Asians*.

<sup>77</sup> Cummins, 66.

When Julia is preparing to write her college essay with the help of her English teacher, Mr. Ingman, he insists that she should emphasize her parents' documentation status, saying that admission committees are interested in those kinds of stories. But Julia, who has constantly grown up with the fear of the discovery of her parents' documentation status, replies, "My parents told us we weren't supposed to tell anyone. What if I send in my application, and then the school calls immigration and my parents get deported? Then what?"<sup>78</sup> Immigration institutions have figured as antagonistic forces for arguably all of Julia's life—there have been ICE raids at the factory where her father works, after all—and because she has seen members of her community deported, she fears the same would happen to her parents, validly so. In a climate of fear where ICE officials can show up randomly at worksites, Julia is afraid that ICE would somehow find out about her parents' documentation status through the admissions committee, and they would be deported. Although Mr. Ingman tries to reassure Julia by telling her that he has helped many other students who are in similar positions, and that no one will read her essay and track down her parents, Julia is still ultimately reluctant to include information about her parents' documentation status. Though she might be safe, it does not mean her fear is any less valid or that *la migra* looms as any less of an antagonistic force.

While the antagonistic force of an immigration institution figures as the general fear of ICE in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, in *The Sun Is Also A Star* it is represented by two USCIS workers whom Natasha encounters early in the book. The first is a guard, Irene, who monitors security and takes a long time going through Natasha's things. Natasha is impatient, worried about being delayed and missing her appointment; however, she does not say anything to Irene, because:

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<sup>78</sup> Sánchez, 166.

... I don't want to make her angry. Probably she hates her job. I don't want to give her a reason to delay me even further. She glances up at me again but shows no sign that she recognizes me, even though I've been here every day for the last week. To her I'm just another anonymous face, another *applicant*, another someone who wants something from America."<sup>79</sup>

Natasha's thoughts reflect the fact that immigration officials and the larger immigration enforcement system do not see her as human: she is unrecognized, she is just an "applicant," an indistinct body who takes and takes from America. Although Natasha believes these are Irene's thoughts, she is contradicted in the next chapter, where a brief third-person omniscient perspective shows how Irene struggles with mental health issues of her own, and how "Natasha is not at all correct about Irene."<sup>80</sup> That being said, although Irene is not exactly an antagonistic force, her job and the institution she represents are antagonists. Additionally, although Irene may not have the thoughts Natasha attributes to her, the kind of worries Natasha has about how she is perceived as an undocumented immigrant are real, as many stereotypes and myths abound about immigrants and their relationships to crime and welfare. No matter where she goes or who she encounters, she is wary of how people will treat her due to her undocumented status, especially the people who work for the institutions that make the life-changing decisions over her ability to stay in the U.S.

Similarly, Natasha's encounter with the USCIS receptionist portrays the indifference of immigration officials and authorities for undocumented people's circumstances. When Natasha is five minutes late to her appointment—getting delayed at security by Irene—the receptionist will not let Natasha through and says that her case worker is already with another applicant.

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<sup>79</sup> Yoon, 7-8.

<sup>80</sup> Yoon, 9.

Natasha notes, “She says it like English is not my first language,”<sup>81</sup> indicating her patronizing attitude toward Natasha, who speaks English fluently and without a Jamaican accent. When Natasha keeps pleading with her to call the case worker, the receptionist “nods at a security guard standing by the door,”<sup>82</sup> pointing to the fact that the receptionist does not care about Natasha’s situation and sees her as a potential threat, possibly because of both her immigration status and skin color, since Black immigrants are much more likely to be racially profiled than non-Black immigrants.<sup>83</sup> Natasha’s overall sense of USCIS is that, “Everyone here has seen everything before, and they don’t really care that it’s all new to you.”<sup>84</sup> This conveys the idea that immigration officials are jaded and indifferent to a situation because they see everything as the same; they are no longer moved by the very real human conditions undocumented immigrants face. Although the situation may be new to the immigrant, the USCIS worker who has seen other similar cases is unable to empathize with the newness of it all for that immigrant. Irene and the receptionist’s treatment of Natasha, or perceived treatment, stand for the larger system of immigration enforcement and authority, a significant antagonistic force to Natasha, the protagonist. She wants to stay and live in America but they do not care about whether or not she is forcibly deported.

Like Natasha in *The Sun Is Also A Star*, Fabiola’s first experience of the immigration institution as an antagonistic force in *American Street* is through an official working for that institution. After their arrival to JFK airport in New York, Fabiola is immediately separated from her mother after immigration officials review their documents:

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<sup>81</sup> Yoon, 17.

<sup>82</sup> Yoon, 18.

<sup>83</sup> Raff. “The ‘Double Punishment’ for Black Undocumented Immigrants.”

<sup>84</sup> Yoon, 17.

“Ms. Valerie Toussaint, I need you to come with me,” the man had said. His voice was like the pebbled streets in Delmas, rough and unsteady as they pulled Manman’s hand from mine; as they motioned for me to continue through the line with Manman’s desperate pleas trailing behind me...<sup>85</sup>

In this scene, the unnamed immigration official—who represents a larger immigration institution (though unnamed, we can assume Customs and Border Protection)—is an antagonist to Fabiola, as he is the one who physically separates her from her mother. The word choice is crucial to the portrayal: the man’s voice is “rough and unsteady,” indicating the man’s brusque approach and clear lack of explanation as to *why* Fabiola’s mother is being separated. This is followed by her mother’s “desperate pleas,” and from these two words it is clear what the emotional toll is already on mother and daughter. There is also a lack of transparency in *why* Fabiola’s mother is being detained; the man never explains why, just orders her to come with them, and then physically takes her from Fabiola. Before this scene, Fabiola, as narrator, provides context:

Manman had carried all our important documents in a big yellow envelope tucked into her large purse—our passports, her visa, and the papers to prove that we are who we say we are, that we are from the city of Port-au-Prince; that I am an American citizen by birth and I left for good when I was only an infant; that we own a little house in the neighborhood of Delmas; and that Manman has a business selling brand-name *pépé*—secondhand American clothes. All these things to prove that we are only visiting relatives and plan to return home to Haiti.<sup>86</sup>

The matter-of-fact manner in which Fabiola lists these facts is then contrasted by a series of questions in which she is unsure of the answer to each: “But how could they have read our

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<sup>85</sup> Zobi, 2.

<sup>86</sup> Zobi, 1-2.

minds? How could they have known that my mother's big sister in Detroit had been sending us money to leave Haiti forever? How could they have known that we didn't plan to go back?"<sup>87</sup>

Although Fabiola's thoughts show how she and her mother never intended for their visit to America to be a short period of travel, but rather, to stay and live here, the language in this scene does not portray them as responsible for their own fate. How could they have known, after all, that they would be separated, despite having a legal means of arriving to the U.S., no matter their overall intention? It is not until halfway through the novel that we discover exactly why Fabiola's mother has been detained. The reason, we learn, is because when Fabiola's mother and aunt first arrived to the U.S. before Fabiola was born, Fabiola's mother overstayed her visa. It also begs the question: when does the act of immigrating become considered an illegal act? The rhetoric around border crossing deems the act of crossing the border itself as illegal, despite the fact that many people come with documents. In addition, many people see it as a last attempt at entering the country because they have been denied visas by the U.S. embassy in their nations of origin, and many people use the border to apply for asylum. For immigrants who come with visas, the rhetoric seems murkier. Many people may not be aware that they initially overstayed their visas, as it seems is the case with Fabiola's mother. Many immigrants, moreover, regardless of the path of migration, cannot often afford the hefty (and currently increasing) fees to obtain a green card or an application for citizenship. The sudden separation and confusion over Fabiola's mother's detainment, as well as the immigration official's own actions, paint him—and the institution he represents—as an antagonist to Fabiola's story.

In addition to officials who work within the immigration system, there are those who work adjacent to the system. Natasha has another encounter that reveals how the immigration

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<sup>87</sup> Zobei, 2.

system works against her. This example is less clear-cut, however, as it concerns Attorney Fitzgerald, who agrees to help reverse her case, but is ultimately unable to change the deportation proceeding. It is not until we get a third-person narration about Attorney Fitzgerald that we discover he didn't even try at all: he misses a court appointment with the judge who could have reversed the Voluntary Removal, instead pursuing an extramarital affair with his paralegal. Although it was never guaranteed that Attorney Fitzgerald could have convinced the judge to reverse the deportation decision on Natasha's family, his agreement to help Natasha is the first time she feels a sense of hope all day. The fact that he lied to Daniel about the real reason he was unable to stop Natasha's deportation further paints him in a negative light. Nevertheless, Fitzgerald's character is a symptom of the ways the immigration system has failed those who must go through it: Natasha's fate relies on an experienced lawyer who has a contact with a judge that could rule more favorably in her family's favor. Not everyone has the money or access to a lawyer, and not every lawyer has access to a judge who would be more sympathetic to a case like Natasha's. Indeed, as was mentioned in the previous social sciences chapter, judges' decisions are heavily influenced by the political environment around them.

Attorney Fitzgerald's role in Natasha's deportation case is a similar parallel to how Detective Stevens plays a part in Fabiola's mother's deportation case. Detective Stevens, who works for the Grosse Pointe Police Department, tells Fabiola: "Fabiola, we can get her out. *And* we can expedite the process for her to obtain a green card."<sup>88</sup> Detective Stevens does not specify who "we" is, though presumably, she is talking about the police department. When Fabiola asks how much this would cost, Detective Stevens replies that she needs information on her cousin's boyfriend, who is being blamed for the recent death of a white teenage girl in Grosse Pointe.

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<sup>88</sup> Zobi, 91.

Although Fabiola feels guilty for the betrayal, she feels she has no other option but to work with Detective Stevens. After all, she has no way of contacting her mother or ICE to figure out the process to fight for her mother's right to stay in the U.S.; she has no access to a lawyer, no money to hire one. The deal that Detective Stevens and Fabiola strike is essentially blackmail: give me this information about your cousin's boyfriend, and I'll help your mother. The corrupt nature of the deal does not deter Fabiola from accepting it, for she is desperate to do whatever she can to reunite with her mother. Detective Stevens is a character who wears the façade of helping Fabiola, when in fact, she is only looking out for the interests of the police department, which also works with ICE. The fact that Detective Stevens is able to get away with this kind of bribery is a symptom of the institution which antagonizes Fabiola and her mother.

The various political and narrative features of deportation—immigration institutions as antagonistic forces, immediate-engaging-first-person-narration, coming-of-age, and deportation as a plot device—are all modes of realism. They reflect the political and cultural reality undocumented immigrants and their families currently face in the United States and yet—these novels are fiction for a reason. Must fiction adhere to the strict boundaries of realism, of the everyday forces readers encounter in their own lives? Literature allows for the exploration of such contentious topics like deportation to exist beyond the bounds of realism: employing a non-realist element could in fact further challenge readers to question the confines of their reality. Two out of three of these Young Adult novels are not solely socially realist, but instead, cross the border into other narrative modes. They employ aspects of science fiction and magical realism to experiment with our rigid understanding of how individuals are affected by the immigration system, and how that system works in a fictionalized space versus how it works in a parallel, real universe.

## V. Beyond the border of realism

We might expect a novel about immigration, especially one that critiques the current state of immigration in the U.S., to be fully realized in the mode of realism. However, there are novels of the “literary fiction” genre which provide social, cultural, and political commentary on the United States, but which break the boundaries of realism. Such novels, like *The Underground Railroad* and *Exit West*, subvert our expectations and make us wonder: what would the story look like without an actualized underground railroad and without portals, respectively? Similarly, *The Sun Is Also A Star* and *American Street* operate in a largely realist fictional space but subvert readerly expectations when the borders of that space are broken by elements of science fiction and magical realism. As mentioned previously, *The Sun Is Also A Star* is mostly told in the first-person perspectives of Natasha and Daniel, with the occasional third-person omniscient narration from a minor character or from an informational standpoint. One example of the latter is a chapter called “multiverses: A Quantum History,” which introduces the concept of multiverses. The last paragraph is key, as it relates to Natasha’s deportation case:

There is, for example, a universe where Samuel Kingsley does not derail his daughter’s life. A universe where he does derail it but Natasha is able to fix it. A universe where he does derail it and she is not able to fix it. Natasha is not quite sure which universe she’s living in now.<sup>89</sup>

Multiple universes exist, with multiple possibilities for how the day may end. The narrator cycles through these different possibilities, but the reader knows the novel is already operating in the universe where Natasha’s father, Samuel Kingsley, has derailed her life and Natasha is attempting to fix it. At this moment in the novel, the reader—and Natasha—is not sure which

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<sup>89</sup> Yoon, 79.

course her universe is taking. The narrator presents one universe where she can fix her father's mistake and one where she cannot. Part of the reason the reader keeps turning the page, then, is to discover—just like Natasha—just exactly which universe she is in; it is, unfortunately, the universe where she is unable to fix her father's mistake. This introduction to the multiverse is complicated by the epilogue, which is presented with this subtitle: “Irene: An Alternate History” [emphasis mine]. Knowing what we already know about multiverses, is the epilogue—deemed an *alternate* history—part of the universe the novel operates in, or part of a separate universe entirely? In the very first paragraph, we discover what, in this alternate history, has happened to Irene, the USCIS officer Natasha encounters at the very beginning of the novel:

One of the case officers—Lester Barnes—stopped by her station. He told her that a girl left a message on his voice mail for her. The girl had said thank you. Irene never knew what she was being thanked for, but the thank-you came just in time. Because at the end of the day, Irene had planned to commit suicide.<sup>90</sup>

We are in Natasha's first-person narration when she leaves that voicemail for Barnes. But we never know if the message was ever delivered, until this epilogue, which again, is emphasized as an *alternate* history. Does this mean that in the universe of the novel, the message is never delivered to Irene, and Irene thus ends her life? Does it matter?

It does. A page later, Irene, who is now a flight attendant in this “alternate history,” recognizes Natasha as one of her passengers. She approaches her and asks if she remembers her and before Natasha responds, we are interrupted with this narration:

Time hiccups and Irene feels herself torn between two universes. [...] She and the passengers are suspended in midair with nothing to hold them except possibility. Next,

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<sup>90</sup> Yoon, 341.

the passengers themselves shimmer and dematerialize. One by one they flicker and vanish, phantoms of a different history.<sup>91</sup>

The phrases “Time hiccups,” “two universes,” and “phantoms of a different history” all indicate the idea of the multiverse. Being up in the sky, in the ether, hung between two alternate “real” places, also leans into the framework of a multiverse. After this odd, surreal vision that Irene has, Natasha finally answers her to say she remembers Irene, and tells Irene her name. A man in the row in front of her hears her, and this man, when he turns around, we discover is Daniel. In this universe, Irene survives, she runs into Natasha on a flight, Natasha remembers her and says her name out loud, causing Daniel to turn around, causing the two to be aware of each other’s presence. But as detailed in the excerpt above, “time hiccups,” and there’s a moment where Irene can feel she is between two universes. Thus, there may be a universe in which Natasha *does not* remember Irene, and thus does not say what her own name is, which Daniel does not overhear, which does not make him turn around to face her. There is also the universe, of course, where Irene commits suicide and does not become a flight attendant and does not approach Natasha about how she once saved her life, which does not lead to the concluding events above. All this is to say is that perhaps there is a universe in which Attorney Fitzgerald *is* able to reverse Natasha’s deportation order and her family is able to stay. Perhaps there is a universe where he tries and is still unable to prevent her deportation. What may seem like an arbitrary choice—visiting the USCIS for a last-ditch effort, for example, or forgetting to see an immigration judge about a girl’s deportation case—can in fact have multiple possibilities of consequences. Yoon seems to be indicating, then, that the choices we make—whether they seem significant or not—do in fact matter.

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<sup>91</sup> Yoon, 343-344.

While *The Sun Is Also A Star* employs elements of science fiction to destabilize the realist narrative, *American Street* uses magical realism based in the Haitian religion of vodou to cross the boundaries of realism. Fabiola and her mother practice vodou, praying to the various gods of their religion. It is one of the main ways Fabiola attempts to stay tethered to her mother. The very first time Fabiola prays to the *lwas* (gods), she is able to see a vision of her detained mother: “You’re on a bed on top of another bed. And a thin layer of itchy fabric is barely enough to cover your body.”<sup>92</sup> The “thin layer of itchy fabric”—not even enough to be called a blanket—is an example of the inhumane conditions at the detention center. Fabiola does not find out this information from ICE officials, who give her no information about the details of her mother’s detainment, but rather, she obtains information about her mother through vodou. Zoboi points to the lack of transparency within the immigration system and shows how the protagonist must rely on herself and her religion to discover crucial information about her mother.

The other way in which magical realism manifests in *American Street* is through the character of Bad Leg/Papa Legba. Initially, Fabiola (and readers) think that Bad Leg is a random homeless man who lives on the corner of American Street and Joy Street, where Fabiola’s aunt and cousins live. But he sings songs full of riddles, and soon Fabiola comes to the conclusion that he is Papa Legba, the god of crossroads. After this discovery, Fabiola follows and uses his song riddles as a way to help her mother. For instance, she heeds his directions to obtain information for Detective Stevens. But the clearest example of magical realism, which extends beyond Fabiola’s religious views and the socially realist landscape of *American Street*, is toward the very end of the novel, when Bad Leg saves Fabiola from getting shot. Before she can get shot at, Bad Leg shoots the perpetrator first. He then proceeds to sing a song, and as he sings,

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<sup>92</sup> Zoboi, 32.

... the streetlight begins to shine through him as if he is made of nothing. Slowly, the top hat, the tuxedo, the cane, and the man begin to disappear right before our eyes. He becomes the smoke in his cigar—thick cloudy air blending with the light and cold air.<sup>93</sup>

Bad Leg *literally* disappears. He is there one moment saving Fabiola's life, and in the next moment he is gone, becoming smoke and fading into the air. Just when we think he may not return, we see one last image of Bad Leg/Papa Legba on the day Fabiola, her aunt, and her cousins leave the house on American Street:

... I turn to see Papa Legba leaning against the lamppost with a cigar in his hand and his cane by his side. He turns to me with his white glistening eyes and tips his hat.

I smile and nod and mouth *mesi*. Thank you. He has brought my mother to the other side.<sup>94</sup>

Papa Legba is with the same cigar, cane, and top hat as in the previous excerpt. Despite vanishing into thin air, he is back in front of Fabiola's eyes—though only her eyes, as her aunt and cousins are not aware of his returned presence. Right before the exchange, Detective Stevens informs Fabiola that an ICE official has started the termination of her mother's deportation proceedings: ICE will drop the charges and release her mother to the U.S.<sup>95</sup> Fabiola could not have done this by herself; her gratitude to Bad Leg/Papa Legba stems from her belief that he was the one, ultimately, to bring her mother back to her. Again, without the help of Papa Legba and magical realism, Fabiola would not have been able to follow through on her deal with Detective Stevens, who somehow has a contact in ICE who will terminate Fabiola's mother's deportation

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<sup>93</sup> Zobi, 311.

<sup>94</sup> Zobi, 324.

<sup>95</sup> Zobi, 320.

proceedings. By including this godly figure in *American Street*, Zoboi calls attention to the arbitrary manner of immigration decisions regarding deportation and detention.

The variety of ways in which deportation figures politically and narratively in *The Sun Is Also A Star*, *American Street*, and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* reveals how the three authors frame complicated narratives around a political subject that is often simplified by the government or media. They bring to light the harsh realities undocumented immigrants and their families experience, as well as how teenage characters grapple with something as life changing as deportation and detention. What impact does including such an emotionally-charged, politically-charged event have for an audience intended for young adult readers? What, ultimately, are the authors' stances on deportation and documentation status considering their intended audience?

### Chapter Three: Oh, The Youth These Days

The year before I started writing this thesis, I knew, generally, that I wanted to write about immigrant literature. But the field of immigrant literature is so wide—do I start in the 1800s? Contemporary? Focus on one ethnic group?—that I found myself stuck on how to narrow my topic. It wasn't until I had a conversation with a friend, and we were discussing our nostalgia over Young Adult books, that she asked me, "Why don't you write your thesis on immigrant YA books?"

It didn't necessarily occur to me before then to even consider writing an academic paper on Young Adult literature, primarily because I had never read any scholarship on the genre. In the late '90s, Caroline Hunt pointed out how scholars did not seriously consider Young Adult literature as separate from children's literature, and how the emerging field remained fragmented.<sup>96</sup> And even as recent as 2017, Amy Pattee has noted how, despite increased attention in critical writing on YA literature, the scholarship still remains divided.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, when I conducted research for this thesis, it was often difficult to find literary scholarship on contemporary Young Adult literature, much less YA fiction on immigration. However, the genre demands our serious attention and critical analysis: as has already been seen in the discussion of *The Sun Is Also A Star*, *American Street*, and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, these Young Adult books grapple with complex and difficult issues such as immigration, racism, classism, and so forth. These YA books are not exceptions to the genre<sup>98</sup>; were I to list every single YA book that touches upon some social justice issue, the introduction to this chapter would certainly be far too long.

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<sup>96</sup> Hunt, "Young Adult Literature Evades the Theorists," 7.

<sup>97</sup> Pattee, 218.

<sup>98</sup> Contemporary YA novels such as *The Hate U Give* and *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* provide compelling stories with young protagonists struggling through the societal ills that young people face as reality.

Why include such complicated topics—and topics that even adults avoid—in books meant for young adult readers? There is a variety of scholarship and discourse on the role of Young Adult literature in the classroom to widen the empathy of students, and there is the authors' own identities and perspectives to examine. What then, ultimately, are the authors' positions on deportation and documentation status and how they frame immigration to young readers? And, of course, the question that haunts all writers and scholars—why does it matter?

#### I. Beyond the canon: YA literature in the classroom

Literature can often be thought of as a way to dispel prejudice about a group of people and reach beyond stereotype to create a fuller picture of humans we may have never met. This becomes critical when considering how the race and ethnicity of the authors in the high school English canon and their characters are incongruous with the changing demographics of children in America today. For instance, the 2010 census data shows that fewer than half of all three-year-old children (the youngest age group) are white, indicating a future where the majority of Americans will no longer be white.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, many of the studies I have included in this thesis—spanning different disciplines such as sociology, education, literature, and psychology—have referenced the growing number of children of color in the United States as well as the growing numbers of undocumented immigrants and immigrants in general. If the literature we read in school does not reflect the changing face of our nation, what impact does that leave on students? If they live in a homogenous neighborhood and go to a homogenous school, they may have a gap in understanding different cultures and lives within the U.S. That is in part why many educators have published journal articles, essays, and studies on the necessity of young adult multicultural

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<sup>99</sup> Hayn and Burns, "Multicultural Adolescent Literature," 136.

literature in the classroom.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) released a policy research brief in which they stated that “adolescents are successful when they understand that texts are written in social settings and for social purposes,”<sup>101</sup> indicating that literacy is not just about being able to understand the content of the book, but to understand its wider context in society at large. Young adult students are capable of connecting wider social issues to the novels they read, and the three books discussed throughout this thesis—written with a young adult audience in mind—certainly do not shy away from social justice issues.

The concept of using Young Adult literature to expose students to cultures and livelihoods other than their own can also be tied to the important notion of counter-storytelling. The term emerged from critical race theory and is defined as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told,”<sup>102</sup> namely to counteract the vicious stereotypes that mainstream media and hegemonic stories propagate about marginalized communities. While this definition may initially position privileged communities (for example, white people) as the sole beneficiaries of counter-storytelling, members of marginalized groups also benefit greatly from reading literature in the form of counter-storytelling. Critical race theorists state that they:

Gain healing from becoming familiar with their own historic oppression and victimization; realize that they are not alone; that others have the same thoughts and

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<sup>100</sup> For additional readings on this topic, see:

Barker, Lisa M. "Promoting Social Justice: Rehearsing Discussion Leadership in a Young Adult Literature Course." *English Journal* 107, no. 5 (2018): 87-90.

Glasgow, Jacqueline N. "Teaching Social Justice through Young Adult Literature." *The English Journal* 90, no. 6 (July 2001): 54-61.

Wolk, Steven. "Reading for a Better World: Teaching for Social Responsibility with Young Adult Literature." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52, no. 8 (May 2009): 664-73.

<sup>101</sup> Stover and Jacqueline, "Young Adult Literature as Social Activism," 205.

<sup>102</sup> Hughes-Hassell, "Multicultural Young Adult Literature as Counter-Storytelling," 214.

experiences; stop blaming themselves for their marginal position; and construct additional counter-stories to challenge the dominant story.<sup>103</sup>

Thus, Young Adult literature that incorporates counter-storytelling allows marginalized readers to see themselves reflected in novels in a nuanced and positive way to combat their own potential internalized biases.

In telling the stories of undocumented immigrants and the children of undocumented immigrants, Yoon, Zoboi, and Sánchez create stories which include elements that run counter to the mainstream narrative. Although the coverage of immigration in the media might make it seem that undocumented immigration occurs solely through border crossing, *The Sun Is Also A Star* and *American Street* provide stories in which members of the protagonists' families have overstayed their visas and thereby become undocumented. And though *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* includes what we may think of as the "stereotypical" border-crossing narrative, as Julia's parents hired a coyote to guide them over the U.S.-Mexico border, her parents are not constantly *defined* by the act of border-crossing.

Similarly, the low-income immigrant family is a common stereotype in American media, and though the three novels' protagonists are part of low-income immigrant families, the expressions of their characters are not solely limited to the positions of their class. The circumstances of their low-income status are in part included to demonstrate how numerous undocumented immigrants and their families are low-income and their unique struggles in an impoverished situation. As noted in the first chapter, the income status of undocumented immigrants takes a particular toll on their lives. Natasha and her family live in a one-bedroom apartment, where she and Peter sleep in the living room that doubles as their shared bedroom

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<sup>103</sup> Hughes-Hassell, 215.

with a curtain down the middle for privacy.<sup>104</sup> The Detroit neighborhood that Fabiola's aunt and her cousins live in is lined with small houses built close together, and her family's house itself is crowded by furniture overtaking a small space.<sup>105</sup> And Julia's family lives in a roach-infested, air conditioner-less apartment.<sup>106</sup> Yet there is also complicated love for the places where they live. Natasha describes the adjoined clapboard houses in her Brooklyn neighborhood as "small and aging but colorful and well-loved,"<sup>107</sup> the language of her description conveying the sense of emotional warmth for this place. Fabiola appreciates her new sense of freedom in America, even in a small space: "Here, I can sit on the leather couches for as long as I want and watch all the movies in the world as if I'm at the cinema."<sup>108</sup> Julia, though desperate to leave Chicago, still likes the sound of late-night traffic,<sup>109</sup> is still surrounded by the sights and smells and sounds of her culture: frying chorizo, vendors selling fruit and corn from carts, Mexican music blaring from every corner.<sup>110</sup> The characters' relationship to their socioeconomic status is not presented as one-dimensional, but rather, nuanced, counteracting the monolithic stereotype of the low-income immigrant family. They also tellingly portray the realities of living in both an undocumented and low-income household.

In thinking about the relationship between the adolescent reader and the text, we must consider how readers respond to Young Adult texts that contain difficult material around social justice issues, whether that response be an informative experience, a relatable one, or in-between. The discussion around YA literature in the classroom considers the seriousness with which YA

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<sup>104</sup> Yoon, 4.

<sup>105</sup> Zoboi, 15.

<sup>106</sup> Sánchez, 140.

<sup>107</sup> Yoon, 319.

<sup>108</sup> Zoboi, 19.

<sup>109</sup> Sánchez, 77.

<sup>110</sup> Sánchez, 37.

books should be taken, especially when it frames narratives as modes of counter-storytelling. Readers of *The Sun Is Also A Star*, *American Street*, and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* recognize and respond to the inclusion of political and narrative features of deportation, the exploration of the characters' psyche in response to deportation, and the modes of counter-storytelling present in these three works of fiction. Though much time has been spent in the relationship between the reader and the text, the spotlight will now shift, momentarily, to the people behind the texts: the writers themselves.

## II. (Not) the death of the author: the relationship between writer and text

In 1968, Roland Barthes announced the “death of the author” in his essay of the same title, asserting the independence of a text from its author’s intention. This early phase of post-structuralism declared the text free from the restraints of the writer’s authority; Barthes also wrote that the death of the author means the birth of the reader.<sup>111</sup> While the concept of the death of the author may lend more freedom to the reader’s interpretation, what happens when the author includes, at the end of the text, a note in which they briefly declare their intentions in craft? What happens when they write themselves into the text? Tellingly, all three Young Adult novels include some form or another of an author’s note or Q&A with an author at the end of the book. Though a reader may choose to ignore this part, the fact that it exists at all may cue us into the idea that the writers themselves *wanted* their intentions, at least some of them, to be known.

In the author’s note directly following the last sentence of *American Street*, Zoboi explains how this story began with an article about Detroit that reminded her of her own experience in Brooklyn. She begins with her own immigration story: she was four years old

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<sup>111</sup> Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 63-64.

when she and her mother left Haiti. She then thought of telling “the story of an immigrant girl who, like me, found her way to the other side, out of poverty and chaos.”<sup>112</sup> Similarly, in an author Q&A at the end of the book, Yoon mentions that she drew from her own life experience while writing *The Sun Is Also A Star*: she and her parents immigrated from Jamaica when she was eleven years old.<sup>113</sup> While Sánchez does not directly state the impact her own experiences have had on her novel, she does mention that there are parts of her that are in Julia, and it is implied that some aspects of the novel may be derived from her own personal experience, such as the relationship between Julia and her mother. Sánchez, like Julia, is a first-generation American, and like Julia, fought a lot with her mother when she was a teenager.<sup>114</sup> Although parent-child tensions are a fairly common teenage experience across identity, Sánchez’s own experiences growing up bi-cultural—and the intergenerational conflicts borne out of that type of household—inform her shaping of Julia’s conflicts with her mother, which often stem from disagreements about Mexican culture. Both Yoon and Sánchez make sure to state that their novels are not autobiographical but do admit they’ve drawn from their life experiences. It is not uncommon for authors to write from experience; indeed, it is a cliché of many creative writing classes to “write from what you know.” But in the case of these three YA books and these three authors, the experiences they draw from are important in the context of counter-storytelling. It is clear they are writing not from an outsider perspective, but an insider perspective.

This kind of intention—to write for their communities—is expressed by two of the three authors. Zobi does not only just think about her own relationship to the text, but how others would see themselves. In particular, she is thinking about Black immigrant girls who struggle to

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<sup>112</sup> Zobi.

<sup>113</sup> Yoon.

<sup>114</sup> Sánchez, 345-346.

fit into African American girlhood; she writes, “I saw Fabiola in these girls, and that’s how this story was truly born.”<sup>115</sup> Similar to Zoboi, Sánchez kept a specific experience in mind when writing her novel, noting in her Q&A how difficult it is to be bicultural, to be a child of immigrants. She says, “I know so many people like [Julia], and I wanted to write a book for them.”<sup>116</sup> This desire to write for the experiences of young people, especially immigrant youth and children of immigrants, is related to the power of counter-storytelling detailed previously. In writing these stories, Zoboi and Sánchez wanted to make sure that the people they thought about—Black immigrant girls and children of immigrants—felt seen in the books they read. Considering the changing demographics of this nation and the persistent minimal (though growing) number of children and YA books with people of color, Zoboi’s and Sánchez’s intentions are important in considering not only the personal, emotional act of writing, but how the reason for their writing is political.

From textual evidence, it can be gleaned that these three YA novels are political. Yet the fact that the authors take the time to explicitly address and include their political intent is noteworthy: it means they want readers to know that politics is important in the reading and writing of their stories. In an exclusive essay titled “On the Power of Words” featured at the back of *The Sun Is Also A Star*, Yoon writes, “I wrote this book for many reasons, but one of them was to address the divisiveness of the times we live in.”<sup>117</sup> The novel was published in late 2016; Yoon may have been referring to the increasing polarization in American society, to the number of racist and sexist and other problematic -ist remarks made during the presidential campaign that year. She situates her book in the context of divisiveness, but especially divisiveness over

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<sup>115</sup> Zoboi, 326.

<sup>116</sup> Sánchez, 347.

<sup>117</sup> Yoon.

immigration, with anti-immigrant rhetoric prolific during 2016 (and before that, and beyond as well, of course). While this is the most obvious articulation of political intent, politics can also be found in the acknowledgments, especially when the authors challenge the xenophobic rhetoric conservatives espouse. Yoon writes,

Immigrating to a new country is an act of hope, bravery, and, sometimes, desperation. I'd like to say a big thank-you to all the people who've made long journeys to distant shores for whatever reason. May you find what you're looking for. Always know that the country of your destination is better for having you in it.<sup>118</sup>

The last comment directly speaks to those who believe immigrants are a detriment to America: they are criminals, they steal jobs, they take advantage of social services. Yet Yoon directly contradicts those misconceptions: she mentions how difficult the immigration journey is, how courageous people have to be, no matter how they've done it or why. This second part is also speaking to the preference of accepting "higher-skilled" and documented immigrants; Yoon wants to thank all immigrants for their journeys, regardless of why they have left in the first place. Like Yoon, Sánchez recognizes immigrants in her acknowledgments. She writes, "I would also like to acknowledge all the immigrants who have risked their lives to come to this country, and the children of those immigrants. *You* are what make America great."<sup>119</sup> She also invokes the hardship of migration and the hardship that does not end when feet have touched new soil. And like Yoon, Sánchez responds to conservative rhetoric, this time turning it on its head: countering Trump's "Make America Great Again" to declare that immigrants are what make America great. These stories of immigrants carry greater weight when we are aware that the authors are responding to the political circumstances of their current moment. They are counter-stories to

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<sup>118</sup> Yoon, 345.

<sup>119</sup> Sánchez, 344.

what the government would like us all to believe; they humanize and politicize the stories of individuals.

### III. Finis: the stance on deportation

While the authors seek to provide positive yet nuanced stories of immigrants in their novels, their intent does not necessarily mean that their books are completely radical in their stances: for example, there is no call for open borders or decriminalization. One might consider the intended audience and its youth and use that as an excuse for the authors to shy away from the complicated nature of deportation and documentation status. But that would be a disservice to young readers, who are critical thinkers or at least beginning to engage in critical thought. If, however, the purpose is to appeal to a mass audience, to make sure not to alienate too many readers, then creating an immigrant story that will make the reader sympathize *most* with the characters may lead to less radical depictions.

The notion of agency comes into question when thinking about the reader's sympathy. In Cummins's article on border-crossing YA books, she notes that half of the novels she analyzed featured protagonists who were transported by their parents over the border; consequently, readers can perceive these young protagonists to be "victims rather than criminals."<sup>120</sup> Agency and blame are called into question most clearly in *The Sun Is Also A Star*. As has already been discussed in previous chapters, Natasha's tense relationship with her father is partially because she blames him for their pending deportation. She was not the one who obtained the visas to stay in the U.S.; she was not the one to drunkenly confess their documentation status to a police officer; she had no choice in leaving Jamaica. Natasha has little to no ties to Jamaica and

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<sup>120</sup> Cummins, 63.

ardently wants to stay in America. In the media, we often see similar coverage of undocumented immigrants who have not been to their countries of birth in decades, who have no family left, who might not know the language. Often, their loyalty to America and their insistence on being *only* Americans garner sympathy for their cases, especially when they are slated to be deported.

But what about undocumented immigrants who have more complicated ties to their countries of birth? What about those people who both miss their home and are glad they left? Do they deserve less of our sympathy? Julia's dad, who is undocumented, at one point says, "I wish I never would have left," in reference to his hometown of Los Ojos. Other family members agree with him. In response, Julia wonders, "If they love that town so much, why don't they just go back and live there?"<sup>121</sup> Julia's thoughts echo the xenophobic rhetoric of immigration hardliners who ask this same question of immigrants, regardless of documentation status. But it is not until Julia is sent to Mexico for a few weeks, to stay with her grandmother after her attempted suicide, that she begins to understand the conditions under which her parents left and why they don't go back. Her tío Chucho is being extorted by a gang because they want his son, Andrés, to join.<sup>122</sup> And Julia is forced to cut short her visit to her family in Los Ojos because the narcos have begun killing one another other again.<sup>123</sup> The danger in being forced to return to a person's country of origin is one exploration of the inhumane consequences of deportation. Although both Fabiola's mother and Julia's parents miss their countries of origin—and indeed, there are both positive and negative representation of these countries—they would fear greatly for their lives if they were to return to Haiti and Mexico, respectively. We often see such stories on the news, of undocumented immigrants or asylum seekers being forced to return to their countries of origin

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<sup>121</sup> Sánchez, 82.

<sup>122</sup> Sánchez, 264.

<sup>123</sup> Sánchez, 279.

and being killed mere weeks or months after their forced return. But such is not the case in *The Sun Is Also the Star*; although Natasha worries about the dangers of returning to Jamaica (listing off statistics of the murder and poverty rate to Daniel, for example<sup>124</sup>), her family's deportation to Jamaica has a more optimistic ending. In the penultimate chapter, a third-person omniscient narrator tells the reader, "Money is scarce, so [Natasha] waitresses to help her family. She fakes a Jamaican accent until it becomes real. She finds a family of friends. She learns to like and then to love the country of her birth."<sup>125</sup> There is acknowledgment of their continued struggles as a working-class family, but the glossing over of time shows that Natasha ends with a generally happy ending, in contrast to the despair she felt the night of her deportation. It is of course not impossible for a deported immigrant to experience happiness in their country of birth, and this ending further complicates Natasha's original feelings toward being deported to Jamaica. But under the circumstances that numerous immigrants face when being deported to their countries of origin, is it realistic? Perhaps the optimistic ending is created for a sense of hope; but perhaps the optimistic ending, if leaned into heavily, could idealize a tragic situation.

To be fair, of course, these are just three books out of many in the genre. One immigrant novel cannot cover the issue in its entirety; it would be asking too much for both the author and the reader. The reluctance to engage in a more complicated ending for the characters may reflect a desire to generate as much sympathy as possible for these protagonists, whose identities have already been marginalized in our society. Despite this, the power of including a narrative that has become so politicized—and humanizing that narrative—is to give weight to the power of stories and words. Perhaps a Jamaican American immigrant girl or a Haitian American immigrant girl or a Mexican American daughter of immigrants will read these novels, recognize similarities in

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<sup>124</sup> Yoon, 309.

<sup>125</sup> Yoon, 337.

their own stories, respond to the differences, and be inspired to write their own stories, to lift the voices of their communities, to announce, *we exist*.

## Conclusion

“[The border]’s nothing but a giant wound, a big gash between the two countries. Why does it have to be like that? I don’t understand. It’s just some random, stupid line. How can anyone tell people where they can and can’t go?”<sup>126</sup>

The immigration debate has become microscopically fixated on the U.S.-Mexico border. From the caravans of asylum-seeking people to the rhetoric of “Build the Wall,” the attention on the southern border has only increased within recent years. Julia—the protagonist of *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*—poignantly expresses her anger and frustration towards an arbitrarily constructed, demarcated line that seeks to keep people out. Day after day, we hear more news about another person who has died under ICE custody, about another asylum seeker whose application was rejected, about another family separation at the border or another family separation after an ICE raid, about human beings locked in cages or stranded in tent cities with conditions that no human being should have to suffer through. Day after day, we may become gradually desensitized. Another person dying or rejected becomes just one more number in the hundreds of thousands of people they have joined. We forget their names, their faces; we never learn their stories beyond their immigration journey.

When we read and examine Young Adult literature which grapples with immigration, and more specifically, deportation and undocumented status, we begin to see the humans again, not the numbers. Instead of the rhetoric propagated by government officials and the media describing immigrants as a “horde” or a “mass,” literature—especially YA fiction that places us in close proximity to the characters, that engages with these characters as if they are real—individualizes these humans. As Chapter One outlined, the novels are informed by the political context and consequences of policies regarding deportation and undocumented status. Thus, though the

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<sup>126</sup> Sánchez, 280.

characters are fictional, they don't feel anonymous or anomalous; they feel like people we know. As Chapter Two considered, the stories weave deportation and undocumented status not just politically, but narratively. They give us tethers to latch onto the protagonists and experience their journeys with them: by including the other aspects of life unrelated to immigration and by deploying the closeness of first-person narration. And as Chapter Three reminds us, the empathy the authors have established between their young adult readers and their teenage characters can make all the difference, especially for the communities they come from and the communities they are writing *for*.

However, the burden to write perfect stories for marginalized groups—in this case, undocumented immigrants—should not fall to just one piece of literature. No novel is perfect, of course, and the same rings true for *The Sun Is Also A Star*, *American Street*, and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*. In seeking to elicit as much sympathy as possible from the reader, these novels emphasize the child as a victim of adults' decisions, construct optimistic endings, and create highly achieving characters. But that does not mean that these stories are not valid or that they should not be read. Rather, this thesis sets the opportunity forward for further research on common threads along an even greater amount of Young Adult immigrant literature.

The way we often consider social change and activism is through direct action, such as grassroots community organizing, or legal policy, such as pro bono service. But culture and policy often inform and bounce off each other in ways that affect both areas: how can literature and other pop culture propagate the narrative about the immigrant as a criminal alien who needs to be removed from America? How can literature counter that narrative and instead create a compelling story of a human being—a human being with desires, with emotions, with endearing quirks and complicated flaws—who takes a leap of faith to leave a country and make an entirely

new life in another one? The goal of these novels might not be to create political change; but they at least tell the closed-minded people, *these are the kinds of lives you don't see on television* and they at least tell the young adults who come from these communities, *you exist and I see you*. Readers encounter Young Adult literature at different stages of their lives, and these readers may come from different backgrounds and live in different places. There is the reader who is already intimately familiar with deportation and undocumented status and the reader whose first encounter with the subject matter is through a genre often chosen for entertainment. One can, of course, turn to the news. But if journalism's intent is to report the facts on a macro scale, then literature's intent is to create a narrative rooted in both our individualized and collective humanity. And literature is able to move around more freely, less restrictively than certain groups of people are able to do.

Nicola Yoon and Ibi Zoboi are both immigrants, and Erica L. Sánchez is a child of an immigrant. In a sense, they are telling parts of their stories and the reality of a political issue in their communities' lives. Joan Didion once wrote, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live."<sup>127</sup> But we also tell *our* stories in order to live. We tell our stories to make sense of the mess in our lives, to find connection with others who also experience this mess, in the hope that they may feel less alone. We read these stories—the stories about a Jamaican American girl trying to save her family from deportation, about a Haitian girl finding her footing in America without her detained mother, about a Mexican American girl struggling with her relationship to her undocumented parents—to understand a thread of American life, to understand how to live, to confront the reality of immigration and declare: these are humans.

And these stories matter.

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<sup>127</sup> Didion, "The White Album," 11.

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