



Jacquemond, Laura E. 'Writing generative black anger in young adult historical fiction'

Leaf Journal, Volume 3, Issue 1, Jul 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/geke-7c29>

URL: <https://ojs.library.lancs.ac.uk/lj/index>

Writing Generative Black Anger in Young Adult Historical Fiction

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Abstract

In the face of social injustice and racism, Black people in the United States must be careful about showing strong emotions publicly. The label 'angry Black person' is often used by white Americans made uncomfortable by displays of anger by Black citizens. Historical fiction with Black characters immerses the young reader in an era and can show them how Black Americans may have reacted emotionally when confronted with unfairness, and unjust practices. Autumn Allen, Kim Johnson, and Michelle Coles have all written historical fiction featuring male protagonists, and in this article, I examine how they portray their main characters, who channel anger to positive, generative ends in difficult and even dangerous situations. While considering anger from different perspectives, such as the inner struggle, power dynamics and historical agency, I also analyse the positioning of anger within the narrative structure, so that writers can make better decisions when deciding where to place the emotion in their novels; this will also allow me to better structure my own work-in-progress.

Keywords: *creative writing for young people, historical fiction, African American studies, anger, social justice*

James Baldwin (1961:205) stated that “to be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time.” While Baldwin expresses justifiable anger at unfair practices, inequality and systemic racism, this rage doesn’t have to lead Black youth to violence – and to being labeled an angry Black person. Anger at injustice can instead be channeled into action to further the fight for equal rights; it is Young Adult (YA) fiction’s channeling of this anger which is the topic of my research.

In this article, I focus on three YA historical novels by Black authors with Black male protagonists: *All You Have to Do* by Autumn Allen (2023), *The Color of a Lie* by Kim Johnson (2024), and *Black Was the Ink* by Michelle Coles (2021). I set out four emergent ideas on the ways in which their authors channel Black anger. These works, set in the US, tackle subjects such as systemic racism, the effects of slavery on the lives of African Americans, and the civil rights movements. I chose these novels because they were published after the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent surge of protests against white supremacy. The novels thus respond to historical racism and to contemporary protests, linking history to the present day and showing that the struggle for equality is ongoing.

My interest in their male protagonists grew as I read the different ways in which male emotion is depicted. Although the protagonist in my work-in-progress is female, her anger at racism and injustice takes on a violence that she directs outward. I began with a belief that I could learn much from my chosen novels if I am to write about racism in my own narrative, which is set in 1973 with a mixed-race main character who doesn’t back down or apologize to white people. By reading these successful depictions of the interior and exterior lives of Black characters faced with unfairness, I hoped to learn more about avoiding the stereotype of the angry Black protagonist. I also wished to learn strategies for positioning their emotions within the narrative in relation to the plot.

I present the results of this inquiry in this article. Firstly, I identify inner struggle as an efficacious technique for presenting young Black characters faced with unfairness, examining how Allen depicts anger and tempers it with other emotions so that the protagonist is not a mere stereotype. A second emergent idea is the way Johnson addresses unequal power dynamics that lead young Black people to anger. From here, I observe how using anger in structural elements such as hooks and midpoints can function as a catalyst in the growth arc of the character. Finally, through Coles, I explore the relation of the character to the social structures which limit the scope of his actions: historical agency. Where relevant, I consider my own work-in-progress in relation to the aforementioned topics.

Inner Struggle

In *All You Have to Do* by Autumn Allen, Gibran begins the narrative on the first day of senior year in 1995 at a New England preparatory school, Lakeside Academy, with a predominantly white student body. In alternating chapters we follow Gibran and his uncle, Kevin, a sophomore at Columbia University, in 1968. Kevin is about nineteen, older than a typical protagonist in young adult fiction, so I will not examine his narrative in detail, but I will come back to his function in the novel.

Gibran, the main character, who speaks to us in first-person, present tense, shows an intensity of emotion, which often translates into action: he acts out against the injustices he perceives in school. Within the first few pages, he is angered by white boys dancing to a rap song at the school talent show. Much more than the mocking of Black dancing, Gibran sees beneath their costumes: “They wear a confidence that was never taken from them” (Allen, 2023:loc1). He decides to pull the plug on the audio system and he is told later that day that one more strike against him will lead to his expulsion. So, how does Allen make us care about Gibran so that we don’t see him as just an angry Black youth? Literary agent Donald Maass (2016:88) suggests that characters who appeal to readers model what he calls “heart values”, and one of these, “a commitment to justice” is something that Gibran displays throughout the narrative, trying to get the needs of Black students heard.

As author Lisa Cron (2016: loc1) writes, “Story is about an internal struggle [...] It’s about what the protagonist has to learn, to overcome, to deal with internally in order to solve the problem that the external plot poses.” Gibran is a self-aware seventeen-year-old, owning his “rebellious streak”, seething with an anger that has been growing ever since he began going to this prestigious high school that, in his opinion, doesn’t do enough to serve its Black students and protect them from racism (Allen, 2023: loc1). His inner struggle pulls him between pleasing his mother, who has worked hard to give her children a private school education, and fighting back, asserting himself as the man he’s growing into.

Allen allows the reader to see a softer side of Gibran in sections labelled: *What I don’t say* [emphasis from original], in which we are regularly invited into Gibran’s inner thoughts. In the first chapter, he looks back to when he started at the private school where his mother taught. It’s “an origin story, a myth, a legend of you, my mother” and “The magical mom who [...] had all of our friends over [...] and treated every child like her own and gave until there was nothing left” (loc1). Allen allows us into Gibran’s inner world: he loves his mother, and his unwillingness to tell her so may be that he wants to appear as a strong young man. By spelling out his inner struggles, Allen shows us that Gibran, rather than being the stereotypical angry Black youth, is a loving son, a teenager trying to figure out how to be a Black man, and a fighter for equal rights in the closed world of the prep school.

Power Dynamics

Another perspective from which we can study a protagonist is through their relationships, which “introduce the concept of power dynamics ...” (Kole, 2024:55). Educators, Caroline Clark, Suzanne G. Lewis and Alyssa Chrisman (2024:314), in their study of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in American schools, advocate for using YA literature instead of SEL materials, which they say “offer readers a view of emotions as internal states [...] which individuals need to manage [...] in order to preserve white and gendered norms ...” They define *role power* versus *personal power*, whereby some people through their role in society, for example, teachers, parents, or police officers, have power over others, while young people, or marginalized populations have only personal power, and may never attain role power. High school students are taught with SEL materials to choose behaviors that will avoid conflict rather than stand up to role power (Clark, Lewis, Chrisman, 2024). In the texts under discussion here, the power dynamics are often based in racial inequality but are also present within the family, with the parents exerting power over their children, through rules, or controlling information.

In *The Color of a Lie* by Kim Johnson, Calvin is forced to stand up to role power in numerous distinct ways because of the two worlds he inhabits. It’s the end of summer 1955, and he has just moved from Chicago to the white suburb of Levittown, Pennsylvania, with his parents; the three of them pass for white. Levittown houses were affordable and would become the model for the American suburbs. WWII Veterans received government aid for their purchase, however, African American veterans did not benefit from this aid and could not purchase houses in white neighborhoods (Planetizen, 2024). Calvin’s father takes this inequality hard, since he fought in the war alongside white soldiers, and so an army friend helps him by giving him his government bonus to buy the house. Calvin is enrolled in the new all-white Heritage High School.

At the beginning of this first-person, past tense novel, fear of being found out is the predominant emotion for Calvin. “[...] passing made me feel like I was falling apart, tearing at the seams. The fear of being discovered haunted my every moment” (Johnson, 2024:49). And the stakes are high since whites, by the very color of their skin, have role power, the role of the dominant race. Black people found to be transgressing racial segregation could be subjected to violence from angry whites who didn’t like their role power challenged – the very reason Calvin’s family had to leave Chicago. Lily, a Black girl, has enrolled at Heritage High and fearlessly attends classes. Calvin feels diminished compared to Lily, who realizes he is passing. “A girl who’d fight her way into a school that didn’t want her. How she was braver than me. Shame crawled through me.” His fear and shame give way to anger at his parents: “... *my parents made me*. I wrestled my inner voice, which was screaming, *I could have fought them harder*” [emphasis from original] (Johnson, 2024:76). Although we see an inner struggle through Calvin’s interiority, unlike Gibran, the result here is not to soften anger, but

rather to use it to highlight the power imbalance, as his parents have role power and decide where and how he lives.

And when Emmett Till is lynched, Calvin's parents keep the news from their son. Emmett is woven into the narrative as a cousin of Calvin's friend in Chicago, and Calvin feels he has been betrayed by his parents when white students laugh at the photos of Emmett published after his funeral. "Rage blazed inside me. I wanted to hurl my accusations at [his mother]" (107). And he does accuse his parents: "'I'm in disguise, but it doesn't erase who I am. You can't erase me. I won't let you'" (108). This creates a thematic parallel with Emmet Till's death and the mutilation that erased his face, as the role power of white supremacy erases Black folks from public spaces that would allow them equality: housing aid for veterans; integrated schools and neighborhoods, respect in public life. According to screenwriter and author, Christopher Vogler (1999:100), the "Call to Adventure" of the hero's journey can be a "stirring within the hero" or it might even be a fantasy. For Calvin, it takes the nightmarish form of erasure: "[...] thoughts of how I'd cease to exist if I spent all my time passing" (Johnson, 2024:87). The loss of his identity represents very high stakes indeed for this protagonist.

Johnson creates a catalyst for Calvin's anger at this midpoint of the novel's structure. When Calvin is asked to drive to Virginia with two Black boys, one a regional Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) leader, to take part in a CORE meeting, and to collect evidence of illegal attempts to safeguard local segregated spaces by Mr Vernon, owner of Vernon Realty, where Calvin works part-time, he hesitates, but agrees. He feels "the paralyzing effect of fear writhing through my veins" (133). However, it is while searching through his boss's files that his emotions coalesce into an anger that will catapult him into the second half of the novel, where instead of submitting to people who hold power over him – his parents, the town leaders, the white kids at school – he will fight back.

Maass (2016:97) describes the midpoint as "a mirror moment: [...] when your protagonist is utterly alone with himself, defined only by hope or by dread." In Mr Vernon's files, Calvin finds letters and plans on how to stop integration, including from the developers of Levittown, Levitt & Sons, stating that their homes are for whites only. Realizing that "Levittown was a white utopia disguised as an American dream", Calvin steals the files (Johnson, 2024:177). Thus, both his fear and anger give way to decisive action for racial equality. Chapter 21 ends with, "The pressure to do something with this information tightened up on me" (178). This push from inside himself, along with a paper bag filled with proof, fuels Calvin to make the drive to Virginia, where he meets Thurgood Marshal, the lawyer who fought for Brown v. Board and school desegregation, ruled by the Supreme Court in 1954. Johnson shows us how Calvin has gone from inner turmoil at having to pass for white to using his light skin as an advantage to fight against the role power of white racists.

Hook and Midpoint

Donald Maass (2016: 88) tells us that many manuscripts are missing “emotional hooks [...] a simple reason to care about a character.” Looking at Gibran’s anger in *All You Have to Do*, I found that Allen uses it to prompt him into action throughout his arc, beginning with the first rebellious act that hooks the reader, and continuing to the writing of a manifesto which he posts on school grounds. By contrast, Calvin, forty years earlier in time, struggles with his place in segregated America and seizes the opportunity to reveal the truth of segregation in Levittown only at the midpoint of the novel.

The hook and the midpoint are areas that I have neglected in writing my work-in-progress, for I did not until now realize their importance to the narrative. I will have to craft my opening to give my reader more than just a save-the-cat-type good deed as a reason to bond with my protagonist, following the advice of Maass (2016:50), who urges the writer to signal that the protagonist is good “early in the book”. Maass here acknowledges Snyder’s “screenwriter’s technique” of having a save-the-cat moment, yet he reminds us that “fiction employs a greater range of such signals, [...] based in self-awareness” (50). Kole (2024:117) says that “going from feeling defined by others to standing by your own sense of self is [...] a huge leap.” She tells us that this growth arc shows a “profound transformation” and is often found in fiction for young adults (117). I aim to study more YA historical fiction and examine how different authors write this transformation, looking for ways they depict the growing self-awareness of their protagonists.

As for the midpoint, author James Scott Bell (2014, loc:5) rejects the idea that this is a plot point, an external event that changes the direction of the narrative. He calls it a “character point, something internal, which has the added benefit of bonding audience and character on a deeper level” (2014, loc:5). I believe Calvin is more appealing to the reader at the midpoint, as he finally becomes the brave person he wanted to be, and this motivates me to craft such a moment for my protagonist.

Historical Agency

More than power dynamics between individual characters, the narratives of protagonists of historical fiction are set, by their authors, in a context of “broader social forces” that affect them. Human beings can influence events and conditions around them, but they are in turn limited by certain social structures, such as economics or geographical location (Damico, Baldin, Greenstone, 2010:2).

In *All You Have to Do*, Allen provides historical context through Kevin’s 1968 narrative showing the escalating fight for racial equality after Dr King’s death by delving deep into the occupation of Columbia University’s Harrison Hall. Allen shows the parallels of the predominantly white institutions in both points of view, along with the two marches: the March for Jobs and Freedom in 1968 and the Million Man March in 1995. This creates strong links between the two young men, as Allen forces them to grapple with their place in their respective privileged worlds. Institutions of prestige

and power shaped their students to fit into the structure of society as created by whites, and hindered any straying or outspokenness against established white norms (Bonilla-Silva, Peoples, 2022:2). Allen calls upon the reader to be vigilant still today at the suppression of Black voices by the white establishment.

The influence of the historical setting serves as a plot device in the time-slip novel *Black Was the Ink* by Michelle Coles. This narrative is told in third-person, past tense, and centers on Malcolm, a sixteen-year-old boy from Washington, D.C. who, in present day 2015, has escaped harm during a gangbanger shootout while playing basketball with a friend, but the two innocent boys are taken to the police station in handcuffs. Having lost Malcolm's father to police violence, Malcolm's frightened mother sends her son to spend the summer on his family's farm near Natchez, Mississippi.

As with Gibran's narrative in *All You Have to Do*, Coles allows anger to erupt in Chapter One for Malcolm: still at home in D.C., and shaken by the shooting, he flies into "a fit of rage" tearing up the posters of civil rights leaders that his father had hung. This is another character who shows the reader what anger at racial injustice looks like: "Is this the future these Black people dreamed of and died for?" (Coles, 2021, loc:1). In Mississippi, Malcolm balks at farm work on his great aunt's farm, which has been in Malcolm's family since Reconstruction. Uncle Leroy says, "You know how lucky you are to have this land in your family?" (loc:2). This is the "theme stated", whereby a secondary character hints at what the protagonist must learn before the end of the narrative, according to author Jessica Brody (2023, loc:2). The protagonist doesn't pay attention, but the seed is planted for the reader, and the character will work through their arc and understand by the end.

In this time-slip story, Coles thrusts Malcolm back to 1870 from the comfort of a beanbag chair in the farmhouse attic. His present-day anger gives way to other emotions. His first glimpse of the past is fraught with fear and disbelief when he finds himself in the body of ancestor Cedric Johnson, having survived the Mechanics' Institute Massacre of 1866 in New Orleans. Here, Coles shows us how emancipation, geographical location and economic factors affected the agency of Black folks: in the South, white people were left without their free labor force, and they were angered at Black people becoming US citizens, while ex-slaves were left with nothing. As Malcolm travels to the 1870s as Cedric, he observes first hand what newly-emancipated slaves had to fight against in order to carve out lives for themselves.

Coles uses a diary left in the attic as a device for Malcolm to learn about Cedric, and during his first trips back in time, Malcolm-as-Cedric is introduced to the inner workings of the Capitol, where Black Senators and Congressmen debate new laws. He is an assistant to Hiram Revels, the first Black Senator. The time-slip device is effective in giving the reader a glimpse into how Black representatives in the federal government worked to bring about change. Coles' depiction of the dedication and energy of these Black representatives will likely be, for certain readers, a discovery that Blacks held office after Reconstruction.

As Malcolm learns about Reconstruction, he questions why things are still difficult for Black people in the present day. As he continues to travel back in time, he stays for longer and longer periods, marveling at the rights Black people have: “He didn’t know Black people were doing such incredible things right after slavery ended—like serving in the US Senate, fighting for newly freed slaves to have land, and running banks” (Coles, 2021:loc20). Black people, such as Hiram Revels, born free, who were able to get an education and run for office, had more agency than the newly freed slaves, and these men worked for the rights of ex-slaves, until action by the Ku Klux Klan prevented Blacks from running for state or federal office.

As a result of what he learns, Malcolm’s anger grows in 2015 at the injustices that still exist: from statues of Confederate generals in the park to a showing of the film *The Birth of a Nation* at the cinema. In this instance, the midpoint brings relief and marks a moment of hope when Malcolm thinks back on what he’s just witnessed in South Carolina in 1871: five white men convicted of interfering with a Black family’s civil rights. As with Calvin, the midpoint for Malcolm is a character point; however, in addition, this midpoint intersects with historical agency. He accepts personal responsibility to continue his family’s fight for racial justice: “Each generation [...] had found its own unique way to [...] overcome the obstacles set in their path. He would do no less” (loc31). Malcolm has been changed by what he has experienced as Cedric, and this gives him the impetus to continue fighting in the present day. Coles shows that the fight for equality is intergenerational by having Malcolm accept personal responsibility, and align himself with his family’s historical agency: they never gave up even when outside events tried to impede their progress. In writing my manuscript, I will be aware of the importance of having my protagonist take responsibility for her fight against injustice and persist when faced with social structures that restrict her movement, finding ways to overcome impediments.

The male protagonists in my primary texts were able to move more freely in certain eras and situations than females: Malcolm working as a legislative assistant in 1870s and Calvin driving to Virginia at night in 1955, for example. But the female protagonists of *Angel of Greenwood* by Randy Pink (2021) and *Saving Savannah* by Tonyah Bolden (2020) both fight against the injustices of their day (the 1921 Tulsa race massacre and the women’s rights movement of 1919, respectively). And in *The Black Kids* by Christina Hammonds Reed (2020) the riots resulting from the acquittal of four policemen in the beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles is shown through the eyes of a teenage girl. My exploration of young Black anger will likely continue in an intersectional way as planned future research will consider how sexism might complicate my insights. I intend to show my protagonist, Virginia, fighting against inequalities in the age of *Roe v. Wade*, when American women won the right to abortion, and would keep that right for the next 49 years.

Anger has been present at many moments in the novels I have explored here, but they all end on a note of hope: at finding a high school that is a better fit for Gibran; at finding bravery he thought he didn’t have for Calvin; at discovering that working

with allies, Black and white, is one way of overcoming obstacles and fighting injustice as a group, which leads to saving the farm, for Malcolm.

Coles (2023) says of *Black Was the Ink* that it aims “to bring Americans together through an honest telling of history.” Her book shows how Black and white Senators and Congressmen worked together during the Reconstruction Era to pass legislation to protect the civil rights of newly-emancipated Black people (2023). Coles was responding to a ban on her novel: in a high school in Oklahoma, a class was reading *Black Was the Ink* and a complaint by one parent led to the book being taken out of the school (Social Justice Books, 2025).

Coles (NMAAHC, 2022:10:40-10:59) also speaks of “fragmented pieces of history the way [...] we’re taught in school [...] you didn’t see how it was all connected and how the struggle was continuous and ongoing.” Book banning helps keep this fragmentary view of history as the *only* view some American students will get during their time at school. Certain states have removed slavery, civil rights and racism from their curricula: 2021 legislation makes it “illegal for schools to teach slavery and racism as part of the ‘true founding’ of the country” in Texas (Edison, 2024). In Florida, students learn “how slaves developed skills which, [...] they could use for their personal benefit” (Ellis, 2023). Another 2021 law restricts how teachers in Oklahoma can teach race (Florida, 2023). Eighteen states have passed laws that restrict the teaching of concepts such as “critical race theory and diversity, equity and inclusion” (Forrest, 2024). I would argue that teens need historical fiction more than ever since it “gives students a sense of history as an ongoing, participatory drama” (Levstik and Barton, 2001, in Damico, Baildon and Greenstone, 2010).

PEN America (2024) report that school book bans are on the rise, with 4000 unique titles banned in the 2023-2024 school year; 44% of these include books with main and/or secondary characters of color. They define a school book ban as “any action taken against a book based on its content” by parents, school administration, or government decision, by which a book becomes unavailable or access to it is restricted. They emphasize that a school year passes quickly and limiting access to books has a lasting effect on students’ “learning, well-being and empathy” (PEN, 2024).

What does this mean for children’s publishing? It’s not clear whether the second Trump administration will see fewer books published by Black authors with Black protagonists, but the conservatives behind bans may feel they have free rein to restrict even more titles. I will strive to write historical fiction for young adults which shows characters who take action within their communities to fight injustice, and I can only hope that the publishing industry will see the importance of such narratives to today’s youth.

As Zinn (2003, in Damico, Baildon and Greenstone, 2010) states: “historical fiction also can give voice to those who might have been silenced [...] inviting students to question why some groups had less power, influence, or privilege than others.” Even though Black teens may feel everyday microaggressions and be victims of systemic racism, learning the roots of this racism and how it has been perpetuated in the United

States will give them the tools to question current and future practices and to take action to bring about change. I will endeavor to write fiction that shows the stories of marginalized groups and individuals, fiction that entices young readers to ask why.

In this article, I have explored characters' inner struggles, the power dynamics between individuals, structure, and also historical agency. Through close reading of these novels, I have discovered the importance of the opening hook to grab the reader, and also how interior thoughts and feelings can endear us to a character, even if he begins by displaying difficult emotions, such as anger.

By using my protagonist's commitment to justice, and showing her care for her family members, I believe I can create a character that the reader roots for. Like Coles, I use the time-slip device in my work-in-progress to take my protagonist back to moments in her family's past. After reading *Black Was the Ink*, I believe I could include more historical moments and facts in her ancestors' past, such as the 1870 census, the first one in which formerly enslaved people appeared by name, thus enabling Black people to trace their ancestry. Or the hardships faced by her ex-slave family just after emancipation. My character gets glimpses of her family's past, and must put the pieces together to understand their lives.

The midpoint moment has also emerged as a crucial point, "a moment within a scene [...] the true center from which everything will branch out [...] what the story is really all about" (Bell, 2014, loc:5). I will craft my own midpoint to show that a tough decision impacts the growth of the protagonist, as they display grit and guts, thus giving hope to the reader.

I have learned much about a part of US history that white supremacists would rather hide: that there were early Civil Rights Acts after emancipation that protected the rights of Black people; that the first Black Senators and Congressmen were not lazy or incompetent, as depicted in *The Birth of a Nation*; that the main reason for the lack of Black Congressmen and Senators for many years after the end of Reconstruction was the domestic terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan, which made it impossible for Black people to have full citizenship and exercise their right to vote in the United States after their emancipation.

The authors of these novels have created Black protagonists that, while angry at the inequality and injustices permeating every aspect of life in the US, neither swallow their emotion nor erupt in violence, but rather take action. These authors portray the inner thoughts and feelings of their characters, and the complexity of emotions that injustice generates in individuals. Whether it is through trial and error, overcoming fear, reaching out to other Black people or white allies for help along the way, these protagonists show that effort leads to change, even if it takes several generations. As a writer of YA historical fiction, although I feel anger when researching the unjust treatment of marginalized people at the hands of a more privileged group, I have a responsibility to make a plan, remain focused, and also to be as brave as the protagonists I create.

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