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“Dear George, with Love”: Reading *All Boys Aren’t Blue* Through a Lens of Critical Love Amidst Rampant Book Bans

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Introduction

In 2021, George M. Johnson's memoir-manifesto *All Boys Aren't Blue* (2020) was nominated a Top Ten book of 2021 by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), an organization which brings together librarians, educators, and researchers to empower and support young adult learning and enrichment. Concurrently, it was the third-most banned book of the same year in research collected by the American Library Association (ALA). The ALA cites the most common reasons for *All Boys Aren't Blue*'s banning are its LGBTQIAP+ content, profanity, and sexual explicitness ("Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists"). Noreen Naseem Rodríguez certifies that we are living in a moment in which youth literature written by and about Indigenous People, People of Color, and LGBTQIAP+ folks is under attack. It is imperative that we emphasize Blackness and Queerness as distinct identities that are the most frequently targeted within the realm of book banning. In reflection, George M. Johnson suggests no surprise at the challenges, noting that Black storytelling has been banned for centuries; they stand by their text as a "tool so that Black queer kids and LGBTQIAP+ teens can see themselves and read about themselves and learn about themselves within the book's pages, something that they historically have not been able to do" (Johnson, "The Silencing of Black & Queer Voices"). In consideration of the sexual content, Johnson sees their text as providing youth with a form of sex education by talking openly about agency and consent through their own experiences (Johnson, "Their Memoir Has Been Removed").

Book challenges represent dangerous resistance to what counts as love and whose stories of love are worth telling. It is within this context—of silencing Black, queer stories—that we chose to conduct a critical content analysis (CCA) of the memoir-manifesto *All Boys Aren't Blue* through a lens of love. Specifically, we question, how does love manifest in Johnson's memoir,

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All Boys Aren't Blue? We also consider how book challenges counter the expressions of love in the memoir. We argue that Johnson's memoir encourages readers to consider love as a method of reclaiming power, enacting agency, and questioning heteronormativity; as a means to combat the erasure of historically untold and underrepresented narratives with an authentic account of Johnson's experiences, which invites discourses of love and liberation; and as a form of courage in sharing their own story of what it means to navigate trauma as a queer, Black youth. In this way, Johnson commits an act of love by engaging in radical self-acceptance through the tenet of self-examination and by employing storytelling to detail experiences that are typically diminished or ignored as a result of the continued prevalence of systemic oppression and white supremacy in our current society.

In acknowledgment of the continued struggle for oppressed and marginalized voices to find freedom and liberation from censorship, we must situate ourselves in this work through recognition of our own positionality. We are two white, women researchers and teacher educators and former high school English Language Arts teachers. We acknowledge the societal conditioning we have experienced in the ways we have interrogated and named our own sexual orientations as we identify as bisexual. As women navigating a patriarchal world and as positioned as women in the Academy, we have our own understandings of oppression. We also fully recognize we could never begin to understand the violence and trauma that has been committed against Communities of Color and queer People of Color. We humbly recognize that in taking on this work, we do so gracefully and in loving awareness of the distance between our own and the lived experiences of writers like George M. Johnson and the queer, Black youth who can identify closely with their story. Ultimately, we hold this work up as an act of love to encourage high school teachers to consider taking up this text with their communities of learners

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to begin to shift critical love from the radical and revolutionary and into the everyday practices of education.

Theoretical Framework: Defining Love Across Scholarship

We employ a theoretical framework that spans across theories and pedagogies of love. When situated alongside theories of love, we reference how scholars have been taking up and naming love in teaching and learning. To define theories of love, we turn attention to Paulo Freire and his testament of teaching as an act of love. Further expanding on these notions, Ohito speaks of love as offering a “freeing potential” that “forwards the pursuit of justice” (143), which connects to another of hooks’ sentiments about the impossibility of love and justice being disparate from one another. Other scholars have begun using terms such as “radical love” (Robinson-Morris), “revolutionary love” (L. Johnson et al.; Wynter-Hoyte et al.), and “critical love” (Sealey-Ruiz) to elaborate on the contextual and cultural notions of love in education, particularly for the liberation of Black people.

These collective definitions are leveraged for varying applications in teaching and learning. For instance, in their discussion of teaching as an act of revolutionary love, Lamar Johnson et al. assert their understanding of revolutionary love as rooted in critical theories and in the process of “locating students” (57) by supporting them in sharing their identities and experiences. Wynter-Hoyte et al. define revolutionary love through three specific tenets: self-examination, interconnectedness, and liberation. Robinson-Morris discusses radical love as an action, a choice, and as “an ethical, social, political, cultural responsibility and commitment to truth, to overcoming domination, oppression, and subordination” (27). Further, Sealey-Ruiz elaborates on critical love as a “profound ethical commitment to caring for the communities in

which we work," emphasizing the close connections across the various ways scholars are defining theories of love ("Archaeology of the Self").

By examining different theories of love, we center the following tenets in our critical content analysis as they speak to the ways in which love has manifested in George M. Johnson's memoir of his childhood: self-examination and storytelling. We conceptualize love through these lenses and in our analysis as necessarily honest and unconditional; as a verb guiding actionable steps to create time and space to get to know ourselves; as a reclamation of power and a means to enact agency, question heteronormativity, and engage in radical self-acceptance; and as a source of courage to both share one's life story and accept others by speaking on what it means to navigate trauma and oppression. Through these lenses, we define love in our analysis as radical self-acceptance, as a means to enact agency, and through the courageous act of telling our stories.

Self-examination

Situating this work in Sealey-Ruiz's critical love framework, we review the process of reflecting and introspecting on one's experience. Sealey-Ruiz demonstrates how a foundational piece to understanding one's self begins with critical love, which is visually represented in her framework, the archaeology of the self. Sealey-Ruiz invites people to get to know themselves deeply through this framework. Winter-Hoyte et al. elaborate on self-examination as a key tenet of revolutionary love and discuss self-examination as "a constant process and not a place where you arrive" (268). The authors explain, "The way we see and perceive others is influenced by the social messages we receive from our immediate circle at large. Therefore, while you are learning about your students' identities you must always reflect on yourself" (Winter-Hoyte 268).

Reflecting on self-examination as a loving practice, we stand in solidarity with Robinson-Morris's assertion of love as "an action," and as an "ethical, social, political, cultural responsibility and commitment to truth, to overcoming domination, oppression, and subordination," and we argue how love, as an ethic, can be called on to honor the often silenced stories that have been so prominently diminished and ignored as a result of our nation's current infatuation with maintaining heteronormativity (27). By looking deeply at who we are, we can embody Robinson-Morris's declaration of love as a verb as we take actionable steps to create time and space to get to know ourselves.

Storytelling

Drawing on bell hooks' theories of love for teachers—grounded in communication, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust—we argue this second tenet of storytelling allows Johnson to establish the communication of love as necessarily honest and unconditional. hooks' discussion about storytelling emphasizes how stories "help us heal" and "help us connect to a world beyond the self" (52-53). It has long been established that storytelling can serve as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors into people's lives (Bishop), particularly to those lives that unfold beyond one's own lived experience. As such, the act of storytelling offers a loving space, one intertwined in healing and connection for the writer and the reader. Storytelling becomes a space that challenges literacy normativity. We stand by L. Johnson et al.'s assertion that to enact love in teaching and learning means "teaching in ways that resist the hegemonic structures that (mis)represent Black youths' culture, language, stories and experiences" (49). To situate love in learning means inviting youth to share their own stories and inviting them to read literature from queer authors of Color. Storytelling as an act of love can serve as an entry point for young people to see themselves and others in loving, authentic ways.

Elaborating on theories of love, we invite queer theory into our analysis as it includes deconstructing and questioning norms surrounding heteronormativity (Pennell).

Heteronormativity suggests that norms are meant to be left unquestioned and undisturbed.

Heterosexuality is often seen as the only acceptable sexual orientation or the gender binary's construction of masculinity and femininity as the only acceptable way of performing gender; heteronormativity in society "is oppressive [and] promotes heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia, as well as bullying, harassment, and other aggressive policing behavior" (Staley and Leonardi 211). Judith Butler similarly addresses the public implications of heteronormativity, arguing that who counts as human and who is deemed dispensable has become a humiliating and violent defense of tradition and normativity. Book banning is arguably one such manifestation of this form of oppression, especially when book bans target the lives of queer people.

Literature Review

Literature implicates young people within the context of book bans as a time when they who "have found themselves in banned books are being told that their stories, histories, and identities—their existences—are controversial" (Dallacqua 135) due to the efforts of groups such as, but not limited to, parents, school boards, community based organizations, local libraries, and various education stakeholders, who deem the content of various works to be contrary to their own views and beliefs. Despite such efforts, organizations such as the National Convention of Teachers of English (NCTE) continue to release statements such as their 2018 guidelines titled "The Students' Right to Read" that affirm censorship is arbitrary and irrational. NCTE's position statements urge educators to defend young adult (YA) novels as serious and worthwhile pathways to critical inquiry, asserting that freedom of choice is pertinent to successful education.

Amid heteronormativity's connection to book challenges, YA authors continue to evaluate and uphold the liberating ways in which YA texts consider the livelihoods of youth intertwined with queer identities and other expressions of sexuality. Henderson explores how author Malinda Lo "[troubled] the horizons of expectations that traditionally hang over queer characters and their narratives" (3) to specifically disrupt the marginalization of queer characters. Crisp et al. look beyond fiction to nonfiction texts to analyze depictions of queer-identified people as portrayed in winners of the Orbis Pictus Award Book winners from across two decades considering elements such as queer erasure and compulsory heterosexuality. In the latter, the authors argue that while nonfiction texts "are ideological constructions that present depictions that may possibly reflect reality ... [they also] influence the ways in which readers view and understand themselves, the people they love, and the individuals and life experiences by which they are surrounded" (248). We recognize the importance of creating spaces where young people can interact with texts that reveal a multitude of identities and experiences, especially when such identities are the ones that are so often silenced.

Rodríguez elaborates on these notions by speaking about a world where "children of color, Indigenous children, and queer children get teased and bullied about their identities very young [...] if kids are old enough to experience oppression, aren't they old enough to learn about it?" As practicing educators, we recognize the negative implications that come with a system of education that does not make room for students to interrogate their intersecting and multidimensional identities. If we consider Johnson's memoir-manifesto as an entry into the life experience of one author, what does it mean to silence their voice? What does it mean to say that their life is not worth learning about?

Methods: Centering Youth in Critical Content Analysis

As two former English Language Arts (ELA) teachers and current teacher educators working to center youth, their interests, and their expertise, we first looked to book lists that were generated by young adults. The American Library Association's (ALA) 2021 Teens' Top Ten is one such list that gathers nominations for their favorite YA books of the year from young adult book groups in schools and libraries across the nation. Although we privilege young adults' book choices, we also acknowledge the limitations around who has access to young adult book groups who are invited to select the year's top reads. After determining that centering students' selections was an approach grounded in love, as it complicates the power differentials that have historically come from adults positioned as all-knowing in terms of what young people should be reading, we began reading each of the books. There was one specific book that caught our attention in the ways that it embodies a critical and revolutionary love: *All Boys Aren't Blue*, a memoir-manifesto by George M. Johnson. We were struck by the ways love was expressed in Johnson's story and deeply concerned by how the access restrictions placed upon this memoir limits the representation of the humanity of our students.

In response to the resistance toward centering stories from queer, Black people, the selection of critical content analysis (CCA) as a method provides us with a stance to consider whose truths are recognized, whose humanity is considered normative, and whose stories get to be told (Short). Considering the affordances of CCA, we follow Freire's commitment to both deconstruction and reconstruction by moving from critique to hope to action to consider new possibilities to empower teachers to take up the text (Freire; Short). We further align ourselves with Miller et al. who advocate for CCA as a means to inform teachers and scholars in their development of curricular choices when teaching challenging discussions, such as sexual assault,

in secondary classrooms. As well, Wilson, like Johnson, advocates for the rights of youth to read about sex to free them from the colonization of adults in restricting young adults' ability to grapple with and understand both sex and sexuality. In encouraging close reading through a lens of love, we made the intentional decision to center love in our approach to critical content analysis to honor young adult agency and support their rights to read.

To engage in CCA, we first read with an open heart to the multitude of ways in which love manifests across the text. In locating instances of love in the work, we began to notice several distinct themes around which Johnson continued to center the narrative of their early life. As examples, we observed love as agency, freedom, expression, commitment, and as community oriented. We then curated specific quotes and passages that showcased our understanding of love as outlined by the tenets we name in the theoretical framework: self-examination and storytelling. We organized our second reading around these tenets and held several discussions to explore our own perspectives as readers as to how the writing spoke to and through the tenets of love we selected. We identified specific excerpts from the book that spoke to the ways we were conceptualizing love based on our experiences as humans, teachers, and through our theoretical framework. After discussing specific aspects of the memoir that served as manifestations of love, we named specific themes that could serve as representations of the tenets of storytelling and self-examination.

Findings: Self-examination and Storytelling as Acts of Love

In our analysis, we center our findings on two articulations of love in the text: self-examination and storytelling. Through self-examination, Johnson yields understandings of how

adolescents can investigate themselves in an effort to understand their identity, particularly when that identity is marginalized and erased, by immortalizing their own Black and queer experience.

Self-examination

Early on in their memoir-manifesto, Johnson speaks about loving their Blackness, and how in doing so, they can resist white supremacy and the ways their Blackness has been minimized and erased through white supremacist ideologies. Within the first ten pages of their writing, Johnson details how the n-word has been used to dehumanize Black folks, and the controversy around whether or not Black people should use a word that has held a long line of generational trauma and hatred. Rather than giving way to the negative, harmful connotations of the word, Johnson reclaims the word, positioning themselves powerfully in their Black identity. Johnson writes, "[m]y love for my Blackness meant that I had every right to fight for my people and every right to take back ownership of that word" (9-10), signifying how their resistance to injustice has manifested through the acknowledgement and celebration of their Blackness. Explicitly stating their love of their Blackness allows them to fight racial injustices that have worked tirelessly to diminish Black people's existence. These collective examples suggest that self-examination is an act of self-love and a liberating force (Wynter-Hoyte et al.).

Further examining their identity, Johnson speaks about the criticality of allowing people to identify themselves in whatever way feels authentic to them. Johnson invites readers to consider how they would like to identify themselves, and how they would like others to address them. Specifically, they write,

It's important that, like everything else you grow to love in your life, your name is something you appreciate as well. Should you not like your name, change it. It is yours, and it will stay with you forever, so do with it what you wish... suffice to say, respect

people for their names, and for how they choose to identify. This also goes for respecting people and their choice of pronouns—he/him, she/her, they/them, god, goddess, or whatever. (Johnson 50)

Such an assertion reveals how Johnson interrogates their name and other aspects of their distinct identities that may or may not be the most accurate representations of themselves. Furthermore, self-reflection around who has identified them and how that may be disparate from how they prefer to identify highlights self-examination as a loving practice that inspires agency, change, and reclamations of power and freedom (Wynter-Hoyte et al.).

Elaborating on the prominence of choosing how people identify themselves, Johnson suggests the ways in which readers might call heteronormative ideals into question to position themselves lovingly and powerfully:

let yourself unlearn everything you thought you knew about yourself, and listen to what you need to know about those who navigate life outside the margins of a heterosexual box. I bet most of you never thought to ever question if you even like your name. Or question that if that was something you had the power to change if you didn't. I hope you will now. (Johnson 50)

In direct address to the reader, Johnson posits the importance of naming ourselves for ourselves, which exemplifies love in the way we acknowledge and honor who we are. Johnson calls on readers to question what they have learned about themselves and how knowledge has been informed by societal expectations as suggested by overwhelming heteronormativity. Johnson's sentiments encourage readers to engage in critical self-examination and deep excavations of themselves to make authentic declarations about their identities (Sealey-Ruiz).

In a letter they write to their brother, Johnson details their brother's love for them, and how the love their brother expresses through their upbringing together has informed Johnson's love for himself. In this letter, Johnson shares,

You have always operated from a place of love. You saw that I was gay, but that it was only one piece of me. You have always done an amazing job of seeing me as fully human—something I wish others in our community learned to do better. My queer identity is a part of my Blackness, and you never made me separate the two. (Johnson 127)

Here Johnson expresses the significance of being and feeling seen across all of their identities and the criticality of not having to compartmentalize different aspects of themselves. To engage in self-examination as a loving practice requires the interrogation, acknowledgement, and honoring of the whole self, not just the pieces of ourselves that present as most appealing to others. Johnson makes clear how necessary it is for them to express their queer identity alongside their Black identity and how being fully embraced in their wholeness served as a profound expression of love. Such expressions urge readers to consider how they might implicate themselves in the process of fully seeing themselves to invite liberation and compassion.

Engaging in deep self-reflection practices and in interrogations of our histories can bring former anxieties and fears to the surface. Rather than turning away from these fears, Johnson speaks about them directly, detailing how fear kept them from expressing their love for a former romantic partner. Specifically, Johnson explains, "I wish that I could have been that proud to live as I was back then, but I wasn't. I was fearful of what people would think of seeing me with someone like you" (169). Johnson makes known the remorse that can arise as a result of minimizing one's self to meet others' expectations while revealing how much they have grown in establishing comfortability and pride in their multiple identities. Offering insight into their

past, Johnson demonstrates how expressing ourselves authentically requires us to exchange fear for love through reflection. Further elaborating on their queer identity, Johnson testifies, "Being queer is a journey. One that is ever changing as identities that were once in the dark come to light. As relationships that once needed to be hidden come to a place of greater visibility" (169). With this insight, Johnson asserts that love will not ever ask us to abandon ourselves, alluding to how acknowledging the ways we may have minimized ourselves for others can keep us isolated rather than connected. Johnson speaks of the need to support others, particularly children, in honoring their identities by posing questions and inviting discourse around the identities they reveal and conceal throughout their journey.

Storytelling

One of the initial elements of storytelling that stands out to us is the labeling of this text as a memoir-manifesto. Making the explicit decision to name their life as a manifesto honors the authentic portrayal of Johnson's journey as pushing the boundaries of what storytelling can be.

As the text begins, the author's note allows Johnson to speak to the selection of this genre as both memory and political. In a direct address to the audience, they express "hope" that this book will facilitate understanding of and between people "you may have never spoken to because of their differences from you [because] we are not as different as you think, and all our stories matter and deserve to be celebrated and told" (ix). Johnson uses an epistolary frame throughout the text in writing letters to their audience that plays with both first and second-person address, shifting between narrative recount and direct address to the audience or to an important actor in their life. In reflection of their writing process, Johnson admits feeling "a bit narcissistic at first" in writing a young adult memoir at age thirty-three (294). And yet, Johnson returns to advocating for their story as a manifesto "knowing that the legacy of the book isn't

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about me removes all those feelings. It’s about you” (294), directing their storytelling as a “legacy” to be carried forward in service of the youth reading their story.

Johnson addresses their stance on justice and activism explicitly. They often respond to inquiries about their activist work by stating, “‘The first person you are ever an activist for is yourself.’ If I wasn’t gonna fight for me, who else was? In turn, I became a voice for us all” (102). Consistently throughout the memoir-manifesto, and through the use of devices such as rhetorical questions and the inclusion of the pronoun “us,” the author situates their own story within the greater historical narrative of Black and queer life—or perhaps more pertinently, as a response to the absence of this narrative.

Woven throughout the text is a candid response to exclusion of “the Black queer experience that has been erased from the history books. An existence that has been here forever” (13). Within the narrative are stories providing history that explores this erasure of Black voices. The text invites criticism of the relegation of Black history to its single month, exposing the backwardness of how “although we were taught to love and adore Abe Lincoln for freeing us from slavery, I never once questioned why a hundred years later, Martin Luther King Jr. was still fighting for our civil rights” (83). Detailed renditions of their schooling experiences that speak to erasure, such as the uncritical worship of Abraham Lincoln, problematize their own understanding of love as it allowed them to be complicit in the erasure itself. Grappling with this complicity on the page leads Johnson back to the direct address that solidifies their resolve:

the greatest tool you have in fighting the oppression of your Blackness and queerness and anything else within your identity is to be fully educated on it. Knowledge is truly your sharpest weapon in a world hell-bent on telling you stories that are simply not true.
Honest Abe lied to you. I won’t. (104)

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The recognition of storytelling as knowledge and as a means to fight hegemonic oppression situates Johnson's text within the celebratory discourses of storytelling as resistance to normativity (hooks). With language of blunt and loving encouragement, Johnson moves toward conceptions of truth and untruth and what it means to break free from the dominant educational discourse of what counts as knowledge.

Within this impetus of pushing back against whose narrative gets recognition as truth and knowledge, Johnson makes clear their commitment to honesty, reflected clearly in the telling of their personal narratives of sexual history. These stories are framed by the resolve to speak on pain to establish a truthful account of their life. Johnson admits that the story of their encounter with sexual abuse "is complicated, but [they] don't want it to be confusing" (212), establishing the precedence for clarity as privileged above avoidance or erasure of this element of their past. Johnson returns to second person address to reiterate, "[i]t is not a requirement that you ever find empathy for an abuser. Make it a requirement to hold your abuser accountable" (212). In sharing openly and without hesitation their encounters with both sexual abuse and loss of virginity, these specific inclusions honor the obligation for the story to intentionally break trends of erasure and silence.

Accordingly, the genre of the story as both memoir and manifesto functions as an educational endeavor empowering its audience with knowledge. In declaration, Johnson contends, "[t]here is so much danger in not providing proper education about sex to kids, especially for those who are having sex outside of the heteronormative boxes" (273). With foresight to the book bans to come, the text acknowledges the forthcoming pushback to these parts of their story in naming that their writing on sexual experiences will face the most resistance, all the while remaining true to its endeavor in sharing that their "greatest fear is that

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queer teens will be left to trial and error in their sexual experience" and affirming that "it's worth [them] feeling a little embarrassed so that you all are a bit more prepared" (276). Here love manifests in the joint testimony between author and reader as we bear witness to proclamations of unabashed storytelling of the most intimate moments of their life.

The narrative exists as a project of love in its telling of stories about the people in Johnson's life who have themselves been emblematic of loving unconditionally. Johnson's grandmother, Nanny, is positioned as the leading example of love in their history (as memoir) deserving of central figured-ness in the text as advocacy for unconditional acceptance of all lives and livelihoods (as manifesto). "Because she [Nanny] saw me," Johnson maintains, "I get the chance to tell everyone about her. And maybe, just maybe, an LGBTQIAP+ person's family members or peers will read these words and enough of her spirit will rub off" (143). The story that Johnson tells of Nanny's presence in their life is one predicated on care and the act of being seen.

Johnson's reflection on his grandmother's support in helping them see their whole self, and in turn, their reciprocal taking care of her in old age—which they advance as "one of the most powerful and transformative things you could do on this earth" (191) —stems from the tenet of self-examination and guides the narrative's purpose. True to the epistolary frame, the letter written to Nanny moves readers to see her love as instrumental to both their being alive and this writing to be possible at all: "Your saving me will allow me, my words, and our story to save others, because at the end of the day, this is all about storytelling" (191). Nanny's love for Johnson becomes attributed to the reflexivity of their narrative as instructive about "the hardest lesson we all have to learn about love and loss [that] no one's days are infinite, and [they] can't keep anyone here forever" (182), and the immortalization of writing Nanny's story as "beauty"

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in knowing that her story "will now live on forever through my words, so that whoever may read them can know they exist because you existed" (176). They are ultimately empowered to write this narrative to tell a story of unconditional love and acceptance of Johnson's whole self, which they express in hope might inspire others to embrace love in unconditional acceptance of others and their whole selves.

Conclusion: Implications for Teachers

Reflecting on the various ways Johnson details representations of love in their life through their memoir-manifesto *All Boys Aren't Blue*, we consider how Johnson's narrative can encourage students to interrogate heteronormative definitions of love, to share their own conceptions of love, and to contemplate how love may be manifesting in their day-to-day experiences. We also consider how Johnson's story can serve as a mentor text for students to write their own memoir-manifestos, and how students can engage in storytelling with one another as a loving act.

Johnson's memoir-manifesto reveals to readers the possibilities that can emerge when writing about their experiences and in sharing those experiences with others, which makes apparent how students can engage in their own self-examination and storytelling processes. Reading Johnson's story can encourage young people to love themselves and others unapologetically, similar to the way Johnson expresses their love for themselves in bravely writing and sharing their journey with the world. In connection to Johnson's memoir-manifesto, and in how teachers can invite discourse among students about notions of love in the text, we invite teachers to consider posing questions such as the following to their students:

- How does Johnson define love through the experiences they share? How might that definition be different from or similar to your definition of love?
- What does love *look* like to you, or what has it looked like to you based on your past experiences? What does love *not look* like, or what has it not looked like?
- How might sharing your own story be considered an act of love?
- What stories feel important for you to share with others? What stories might be easier for you to share than others and why?
- Who has earned the right to hear your story? What does it mean for someone to earn that right?

To best support students' learning when reading Johnson's memoir-manifesto, we invite teachers to call on self-examination and storytelling to understand themselves deeply; doing so allows them to consider the extent to which their identities are implicated in Johnson's memoir-manifesto and positions them vulnerably alongside their students. To engage young people with Johnson's memoir-manifesto requires that teachers frame the text delicately, tenderly, and truthfully. For instance, we encourage teachers to share the emotions and reactions they themselves had when reading Johnson's story with their students, and to emphasize how some students may have their own deep, visceral reactions to the text. It is imperative for teachers to preface different aspects of the text to ensure students feel safe to read about experiences that may ignite feelings of discomfort for them.

Lastly, we profess to all stakeholders the importance of making Johnson's memoir-manifesto and other books that disrupt white supremacist ideologies available to students. Despite the myriad ways this book has been challenged and across book reconsideration committees, it is critical to counter these challenges by expressing how a story like Johnson's can

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encourage young people to courageously allow themselves to be heard and seen. Reading can ensure that those who keep the devastating aspects of their journeys to themselves out of fear or uncertainty can see that they do not have to carry such burdens alone. Johnson's writings encourage all of us to acknowledge and honor our stories and all of the ways we are wholeheartedly and unapologetically worthy of love.

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