



'TIS THE SEASON: POPULAR ROMANCE FICTION AND THE PRACTICE OF DEMOCRACY

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In his 1993 book *American Political Cultures*, Richard Ellis identified “voting in competitive elections, representative government, accountable leadership, and the freedom to pursue one’s own private interests,” as the key features that “most Americans took to be the essence of the democratic ideal.” Despite differences in scholarly as well as public opinion regarding the very first activity in Ellis’s list, elections in America— as in every other representative democracy— reveal a picture of the nation, its people, and their primary concerns unlike any other act of civil engagement. This article aims to analyze such representations of the United States in two recent popular romance novels that utilize two different kinds of elections in the nation as the backdrop for primarily romance-oriented plots – the young adult novel *Yes No Maybe So* (2020) by bestselling authors Becky Albertalli and Aisha Saeed, and Casey McQuiston’s *Red, White & Royal Blue* (2019). In both novels, the election seasons become a mode through which the novels travel through a sociocultural map of the United States in the post-2016 era under Donald Trump’s presidency, focusing on the conflicts around racial and religious identity and sexual orientation. To use Ellis’s list again, these novels utilize the first element (elections) to explore conflicts around “the freedom to pursue one’s own private interests,” which include, in these narratives, the pursuit of religion and romantic love.

Both McQuiston as well as Albertalli and Saeed begin the authors’ notes at the end of their novel with a reference to the 2016 election, and the authors very decidedly consider the results of the presidential election as disastrous – the YA writers duo express their “horror and panic” at the event, while McQuiston sums up their reaction in one word, “Yikes.” The reactions are not unexpected, considering the heavy focus of these novels on the issues of homophobia and Christian nationalism in the contemporary United States, and how closely related Trump’s policies and supporters are to these same issues (Moreau 2018; Whitehead et al. 2018). As Liam Kennedy



writes: “For a great many Americans, America changed on 9 November 2016” (Kennedy 2020, 1), and the post-2016 settings of the novels being discussed, whether set in the real world or in an alternate one, directly and indirectly address this “changed” America. A peripheral Jewish character in *Yes No Maybe So* expresses despair at this change, claiming that the 2016 election “wrecked” (emphasis in original) him and “turned [his] world upside down,” further stating, “And I’m just another white Jew. Not even close to the worst off” (409). Liam Kennedy describes Trump’s election as a “paradigm shift,” interpreting the change in political atmosphere as follows:

[Trump] speaks to latent desires in the body politic and emboldens expressions of identity that had been marginalised or silenced by the hegemony of liberal democracy. In this, he is not interested in illuminating the hypocrisies of liberal values but rather in displacing them with nativist and conservative ones that have remained as submerged but powerful currents of American political culture. (3)

While the promise of economic improvement has been one of Trump’s campaign points, his “nativist and conservative” beliefs have mingled with this promise, thereby turning it exclusionary. He has, for instance, consistently “attributed the decline of U.S. well-being and prosperity to undocumented Latina and Latino immigration” (Pérez Huber 2016, 224). As Lindsay Pérez Huber further notes, this anti-Latinx racial prejudice goes on to be extended towards other minority groups: “Trump now vows to ‘make American *safe* again’ with a new emphasis on the collective threat of ‘violent’ African Americans, ‘dangerous’ undocumented Latina and Latino immigrants, and ‘treacherous’ Muslims” (244). Despite Trump’s claims that he intends to fight anti-Semitism, his blatantly problematic rhetoric has led him to be accused of inciting anti-Semitic feelings too (Shanes 2019). It is no mystery then why, for minority groups, Trump’s election not only stood for ideological differences, but also brought about real fears regarding personal safety in both public and private spaces. LGBTQ communities and people of color have spoken up about such fears and anxieties after the result of the 2016 election was declared, and even reportedly shown signs of trauma (Holloway 2017; Gonzalez et al. 2018; Holpuch, 2016).

In the note following *Yes No Maybe So*, the authors further recount their personal experiences in a real-life special election for a seat in their district in Georgia for the US House of Representatives in 2017, which inspired a similar narrative in the novel. This election was won by the Republican candidate Karen Handel against Jon Ossoff, the Democrat candidate, but the authors remind that “less than eighteen months after Ossoff’s narrow defeat, Democrat Lucy McBath defeated the Republican incumbent in the 2018 midterm elections,” becoming the “first Democrat to represent [that] district



in forty years” (Albertalli and Saeed 2020).¹ In the “Acknowledgements” section for *Red, White & Royal Blue*, McQuiston at once attaches the novel to, as well as removes it from, reality, terming it as “escapist, trauma-soothing, alternate-but-realistic reality.” What is clear is that in both cases, the novels and the notes that follow are self-admittedly responding to the Republican regime in late 2010s America, a dark and oppressive era for minority groups according to the authors of these texts, and intend to be a reminder of “hope” — a word that both notes mention.

Responses to the 2016 election in the American literary world are not uncommon in any sense— the event seems to have had immediate reactions in fictional creations of the time.² Noting literary agent Eric Hane’s complaint that “an overwhelming number of aspiring novelists started writing about Trump” after the elections of 2016 (Hane 2018), Stephen Hock defines “Trump fiction” as “texts that directly depict or refer to Trump, texts in which Trump, specifically, figures as a signifier” (Hock 2020, 4). Hock also, however, notes, “‘Trump fiction’ can open up new avenues for understanding not just (or even necessarily primarily) Trump himself, but rather those larger cultural, historical, and political structures ordering life in the United States, of which Trump stands as an effect, in which he is a willing participant, and for which he functions in these texts as a figure” (4). The texts being discussed therefore, by virtue of time period and themes, do fall into the corpus of these “Trump novels” in a sense, as this article will continue to illustrate. These novels, however, erase the “signifier” Trump (he is never mentioned by name in either text) and instead focus on the “larger cultural, historical, and political structures” and the impact of the Trump Era on them. The election process itself instead becomes central to these texts, as do the relations between political and cultural beliefs that constitute the contemporary United States.

Described as an “election-year romance” (Martaus 2020), the young adult novel *Yes No Maybe So* was published in 2020 and revolves around a Jewish boy and a Pakistani-American Muslim girl in high school, who volunteer for a Democratic campaign in the local senate election. Set in suburban Georgia, the novel is in some ways very much focused on local politics and its deep Southern setting, as Jamie and Maya go from one neighborhood to another and interact with potential voters for the state senate special elections, campaigning for the fictional Democratic candidate Jordan Rossum. Inevitably, the preparation around the activity of participatory elections raises several conversations about not only how politics affects day-to-day life of the people in the

¹ Ossoff himself later went on to win the run-off elections in 2021, along with Rev. Raphael Warnock, who became the first African American Democrat senator elected from Georgia.

² Even in fiction targeted towards a younger audience, there have been other examples of the same phenomenon. Instances include Brandy Colbert’s *The Voting Booth* (2020) and Shaun David Hutchinson’s *The State of Us* (2020), which, like the primary texts discussed in this article, respectively portray the involvement of young people of color in the election process and an alternate history about the sons of fictional presidential candidates.



United States, but also reciprocally how socio-cultural identities of the people impact their democratic decisions. The characters that the two narrators encounter both in their daily lives and while canvassing, bring to the foreground a wide spectrum of ideals, including parents who “love [their] son’s gay friends” but regularly vote for Republicans, much to Jamie’s confusion (189), and friends who “go to rallies and marches” but refuse to vote, considering the entire political sphere to be a “corrupt system” (232). This very tension between political ideals and how it materializes in an individual’s decision-making is thus what characterizes Albertalli and Saeed’s representation of the United States.

Yes No Maybe So thus portrays the election process mainly from the side of the voters, particularly hovering upon the intersection between political opinions and attitudes towards race/religion. When faced with antagonism from a voter (implied to be a supporter of the Republican party) while canvassing, an incident that solidifies Jamie and Maya’s personal investment in the elections and in Rossum’s campaign, Maya points out to Jamie that their particular location within the United States presents an additional challenge:

It’s ridiculously not okay. But Jamie, we live in the suburbs. In Georgia. I’m a Pakistani American Muslim. People get pissed when cashiers don’t say ‘Merry Christmas’ here, you know?... It’s not like being Muslim in New York. (99)

As Imani Perry sums up in her recent monograph, “‘racism,’ despite all evidence of its ubiquity, is still commonly described as “‘belonging” to the South,” and Maya’s comment reflects this very belief (Perry 2022). While it is complicated to compare levels of racism based on geography, research also suggests that the Southern population, especially lifelong residents of that part of the country, display racist attitudes more commonly (Carter 2014). Although statistically speaking, as Bullock pointed out, Georgia has moved away from V.O. Key’s mid-20th century notion of the “Rule of the Rustics” (Key 1949), a term that pointed towards the overwhelming impact of rural conservative voters in Georgia, the politics of the state does in fact remain largely connected with racial identity (Bullock 2010). Following this same incident, Jamie’s initial incredulous reaction contains a different logic, but also points towards the assumption of a double America: “We’re in Sandy Springs, not, like, middle of nowhere Georgia” (96). While Maya is distinguishing between the seemingly liberal North and the conservative South, with Georgia on the latter side, Jamie is considering the rural/urban divide, surprised and disappointed that their geographical proximity to Atlanta does not guarantee the absence of blatant and dangerously racist behavior. This ‘difference’ between the political attitudes prevalent in urban and rural spaces is a commonly held belief, one that was deconstructed in many pieces of writing and media that emerged after the ‘surprising’ victory of Donald Trump in 2016. In a 2018 essay published in the *Atlanta Magazine*, for instance, attorney



Winfield Ward Murray makes a claim that echoes Jamie's belief that Atlanta's urban location would somehow make it immune to racism, only to later realize differently: "There is no longer a reason to tell people I am from Atlanta, as if Atlanta is somehow better than the rest of the state. In the future, I'll explain that I am from Georgia. I realize now there is no difference. There never was" (Murray 2018). Research has also suggested that in terms of electoral politics, Trump's victory in 2016 was "more than a rural revolt," and scholars believe, "The rural-urban binary is an outdated concept that never really supported an accurate analysis of the spatial organization of American society" (Monnat and Brown 2017). The racist and xenophobic reactions that the youngsters encounter in the suburbs of Atlanta, not only in the above mentioned incident but also in multiple other moments of the narrative, disprove the same binary.

Alongside bringing together rural and urban Georgia, ultimately the setting of *Yes No Maybe So* presents a microcosmic representation of the nation as a whole, for almost all of the political concerns it brings up are relevant to the entirety of the United States. While the election here itself is considered as "small... in the grand scheme of things" in relation to national politics (409), the concerns of racism and Islamophobia that the novel interlinks with political beliefs are considered at the nation-wide scale. In the scene quoted earlier, where Maya sets up a difference between being a Muslim in New York and in suburban Georgia, she immediately follows up the statement by second-guessing this point: "It's not like being Muslim in New York. Though, actually, that's probably not a cakewalk either. People can be awful. And it's been... kind of worse in the last few years. For obvious reasons" (99). Although Islamophobia in the United States has been on a rise since 9/11, Trump as a President has had multiple ties with anti-Islamic sentiments, including his 2017 travel ban (infamously called "Muslim ban" by some) on people travelling from certain Muslim-majority countries to the US (Lopez 2017). In a study just prior to the 2016 presidential election, Philip Klinker had also found that "those who think the word "violent" describes Muslims well, and those who believe President Obama is a Muslim have much more positive views of Trump compared with Clinton" (Klinker 2016). Maya's belated realization that racism operates everywhere, even if in different forms, breaks down the liberal North/conservative South dichotomy she had set up earlier, portraying a nation that is as a whole fractured with cultural prejudices, and specifically linking it to contemporary times. The ultimate vision of the novel is the overcoming of these cultural and religious differences, through political decisions to some extent, and building an America that allows a dream-like harmonious coexistence of multiple communities.

In *Yes No Maybe So*, the characters rest their hopes for at least a semblance of this kind of America in the Democratic Party, and an early scene in the novel provides a type of demonstration of the harmony that the Democratic candidate Rossum promises. When the Atlanta Interfaith Alliance co-hosts an iftar dinner with the local



Muslim community where both Democratic and Republican candidates are invited and only the former (Jordan Rossum) chooses to attend and make it a “campaign stop” (51), the reader is greeted with a view of “Pastor Jones, Rabbi Levinson, and Imam Jackson... huddled over by the punch bowl,” discussing their “summer basketball league” (46). It is a reassuring scene of the casual coexistence of diversity and unity, in which the neighborhood representatives of different religions, despite being brought together here for larger political purposes, stand and discuss something as trivial and mundane as local sports. The scene parallels precisely the other kind of ‘alliance’ that this YA romance is aiming towards – that between the Jewish and Muslim protagonists, in the backdrop of the still-Christian majority of the United States. Although the novel ends with the victory of the Republican candidate, the romantic relationship receives at least temporary fulfillment, but even their final kiss is closely preceded with the hope that “next time,” by when Jamie and Maya will reach voting age (435), they “might win” or “might actually change things” (436).

Casey McQuiston’s *Red, White & Royal Blue*, published in 2019, offers another view of American politics, but in a counterfactual or alternative timeline. The novel depicts not only a fictional version of the 2016 election that results in the appointment of the first female president of the United States, but also her 2020 reelection, despite controversies regarding her son’s homosexual relationship with a prince of England. Despite having characters who are of voting age and with a front-seat view of American politics, in some ways this contemporary romance is less actively involved with electoral politics in comparison to *Yes No Maybe So*. Whereas the latter shows the view of local elections from the perspectives of several voters in a small section of the United States, McQuiston’s novel shows the presidential elections from the perspective of a candidate and her family, and their attempts to construct an image of the ideal state leader who they believe the voters demand. In 2021, Anna Michelson conducted a reader-response-based study of this novel, noting the reactions towards this insertion of a political narrative within the (in)famously “escapist” genre of romance, concluding that while there are readers who would prefer to have the romance plot kept “apolitical,” there are those who find that “these real-world problems” add to the genre’s “hopeful” quality, helping to emphasize further the “heal[ing]” power of love (204). While Michelson’s article reveals much about the reception of political subtext in American romance fiction, *Red, White & Royal Blue* presents a particular view of the nation itself that is worth noting in detail.

As Michelson also notes, McQuiston remarked in an interview, “I feel that’s an underexplored narrative— people from the South and red states are progressive” (2019a). *Red, White & Royal Blue* is largely set in Washington D.C., but the South becomes important to this plot as well, for Texas being the protagonist’s homestate, he is very much invested in its politics. The protagonist Alex Claremont-Diaz, the fictional first son of the United States, even keeps a “Texas Binder” containing a wide



range of statistics regarding Texan demographic and “voting records,” which becomes a symbol of the narrative concern over the South’s political interests even when the action is unfolding in the capital (2019b, 174). To a large extent, the novel indeed attempts to show a more “progressive” South, the biggest example being that in the finale of the narrative, President Claremont wins not only the elections but also in her home state Texas — a location that had been a source of tension since her loss in the state in 2016, and especially considering her identity as a woman, a single mother, once married to a man of Mexican origin, now supporting her son’s homosexual relationship with an English prince. McQuiston further uses Alex as a mouthpiece for this precise remark. When he hears Texas being referred to as “one of the most backward states in the country” (208), and that there “just aren’t the same number of bigots in the blue states” (209), Alex furiously counters by reminding his campaigning office colleague Hunter that Hunter himself was campaigning for a “blue” candidate who was, nonetheless, a Texan (209). Alex’s conversation with Hunter forms a brief moment in the novel, but it is important as a revelation of the protagonist’s passion for Southern politics, as well as a defense of even the South that exists outside of the fictional world. While in *Yes No Maybe So* the teens’ experiences slowly blurred the urban/rural North/South divides, in *Red, White & Royal Blue*, Alex’s rant performs the same function: “Why don’t we talk about how there’s a chapter of the Klan in every state? You think there aren’t racists and homophobes growing up in Vermont?” (209). There is no reason therefore, according to Alex, why “WASPy Hunter” should feel “special” and “pretend like it’s someone else’s problem,” for racist and homophobic sentiments are in no way exclusive to Texas or the South (209).

And yet, later in the novel, the same Alex is “afraid of wearing anything too flashy for [his] first post-coming-out trip home, on account of Texans’ delicate hetero sensibilities” (394). So far, the Texas in *Red, White & Royal Blue* indeed seems like a faithful (in both senses of the term: accurate, but also full of faith) representation of the real state with its realistically diverse population but predictable majority. President Claremont lost here in the fictional 2016 election, and Alex’s family remains weary particularly of the way Texas will receive their many non-conforming identities, even up until the moment the results for the elections are declared in the novel:

“I always felt like Texas claiming me as their son was, you know, kind of conditional.” [Alex] paces, rubbing the back of his neck. “The whole half-Mexican, all Democrat thing. There’s a very loud contingent there that does not like me and does not want me to represent them. And now, it’s just. Not being straight. Having a boyfriend. Having a gay sex scandal with a European prince. I don’t know anymore.” He loves Texas—he believes in Texas. But he doesn’t know if Texas still loves him. (393-394)



Alex's words echo those written by journalist Frank Bruni in 2017, in the context of LGBTQ+ rights and the prevalent attitude in Texas towards the same: "All my life I've loved Texas: those big skies, big steaks and big attitudes... But Texas doesn't love me back. Certainly its lawmakers don't, and lately they've been hellbent on showing that" (Bruni 2017). Bruni goes on to pinpoint judicial differences across the country regarding LGBTQ+ rights, and studies from the same year have noted that despite some improvement in conditions, Texas remains one of the more homophobic states in the country (Mallory et al. 2017). The novel does not lay much stress on Alex's Latinx heritage, but it finds a place in his list of reasons why 'Texas' might not accept him. Not only does Texas in particular have a history of anti-Mexican racism (Fermoso 2019), Trump's immigration policies and his reliance on white supremacist nationalism for support has also led to the Latinx population of America facing "heightened experiences of racism" (Canizales and Vallejo 2021). Ultimately in the alternate-universe America of *Red, White & Royal Blue*, the South shows acceptance, but the counterfactual element in a sense undercuts the overall point McQuiston is making about the "underexplored narrative" of the South. The presence of a completely fictional president, whose identity in many ways is the opposite of the real elected president, is a constant reminder of the wish-fulfilling tendency of the narrative, therefore also undermining any attempts at representing a different view of the South outside the alternate history framework. The Claremont family's fear of Southern judgment remains closer to statistical data than the optimism of the ending, and even though the Texan population is of course more heterogeneous than popular narratives indicate, the representative majority still is red, despite margins drawing closer (Texas Secretary of State n.d.).

In the previously quoted interview, McQuiston comments, "I didn't intend it to be a response to Trump; I expected the election to go a different way," but then later goes on to admit that ultimately the novel does become a response to the 2016 election: "Suddenly, it had to serve a bigger purpose. I wanted an antidote to all the negativity and what feels terrible about politics in this country." However, this "antidote" is the novel's version of a dream America, which despite allegorizing a haven of modern liberal values, is one that would in reality still be rejected or critiqued by a significant part of the population. In an address made weeks prior to the election, Alex redefines the "American dream," fitting his own narrative within it: "I was young and full of hope, and you let me embody the American dream: that a boy who grew up speaking two languages, whose family was blended and beautiful and enduring, could make a home for himself in the White House" (373). Matthias Maass distinguishes between conservative and liberal versions of the ambiguous and slippery American Dream, claiming: "From the liberal perspective, the American Dream was never meant to be so centered on economic opportunity and free enterprise, but rather on a particularly American way of life," going on to suggest that post the 1970s and the Civil Rights



Movement, the American Dream was becoming more “accessible to all individuals across all ethnicities” (Maass 2012). Dividing the history of the American Dream into six eras, Lawrence Samuel too claims that by the 21st century, “[a]lthough race obviously remained a contentious issue, there was little doubt that the country had made great strides in accepting its inherent pluralism over the past generation, having a direct effect on the DNA of the American Dream” (Samuel 2012, 176). But Samuel warns that the American Dream has never quite followed “a straight line,” and the American Dream has not only been ever-changing but also polysemous at all times (176).

In the Trump administration that came after both Maass and Samuel’s analyses, the pluralistic American Dream of immigrant success has been called into question: “[Trump’s] discourses allege that the American Dream is dead as a consequence of the problems immigrants bring to the United States. The United States is constructed as a nation that was once great when there were fewer immigrants. In other words, the United States was great when it was comprised primarily of Whites” (Ngo 2017). Alex’s definition of the Dream is, on the contrary, one specifically of multicultural harmony and immigrant success, where he not only includes people of color in the American Dream as Maass and Samuel discuss, but also defines the Dream on the very basis of the “blended” nature of his heritage. McQuiston’s narrative allows this Dream to reach quite a high level of fulfillment by the end of the narrative, with the success of Alex’s family in the election process yet again, that allows his mother, President Claremont, to remain in her position for a second term. Alex’s identity as bisexual too is incorporated within this image of diversity, this victory seeming as if America herself has granted permission for his relationship with Henry, prompting Alex to think: “[Henry]’s family. He’s part of it all now, headlines and oil paintings and pages in the Library of Congress, etched right alongside” (415).

“Love is indomitable. America has always believed this,” claimed Alex in his speech, summing up the kind of America that both novels hope for and to some extent believe in (373). At the core of both books is this idea of the freedom-loving democratic America which ought to be a place for “indomitable” love. While the real political atmosphere may be threatening to such love, the novels engage in ‘counter-storytelling,’ a method understood in critical race theory as the stories by and about the minority communities to counter dominant stereotypes (Solórzano and Yosso 2002), that has been identified within multicultural young adult literature as a form that empowers teens from minority communities “not by denying the hardship and prejudice that many of them face but by showing that, despite the disadvantages that correlate with their skin color, culture, and/or social class, they can overcome the constraints placed on them by the dominant culture” (Hughes-Hassell 2013, 217). But like a lot of other romance novels that have attempted to juggle the romantic plot line and social commentary, these two novels face a conflict between the imperative



optimism of romance fiction and the frustrating pessimism of social critique that does not provide much room for a happy ending. The America in both novels is filled with anxieties regarding diversity, and for the happy ending to be brought around, one novel must issue reminders of “next time,” while the other has to move on to a recognizably different universe. And yet, what both novels hold on to is the belief that there is, in the very real United States, a reason for hope – that the narrow defeats and diversity within both electors and contesting candidates will one day lead to the United States that the novelists dream about, so that the happy ending that is guaranteed for the romance plot is also possible for the nation itself.

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