

## Whose War?

Symbolic Economies in Conversations about Conflict in Mildred Taylor's *The Road to Memphis* and Cynthia Voigt's *The Runner*

**Y**oung adult literature presents economic issues and themes in a number of ways, yet many critics and readers focus on the surface content, with questions of socioeconomic injustice at the forefront. Less common is an exploration of the ways in which economic ideas shape texts linguistically, working to reinforce or subvert the overt ideologies put forward by authors, narrators, and characters. It is important for students of all ages to question the ways in which texts are constructed and the ideologies they present. In a time of continuing economic uncertainty and inequality, it is also vital that students and teachers of the arts are aware of concepts from the sometimes inscrutable science of economics. I contend that the concept of the symbolic economy is underused in literary criticism related to children's and young adult literature, and so here I present a sample analysis of the underpinning economic logic in conversations about conflict in two young adult texts—Mildred D. Taylor's *The Road to Memphis* (1990) and Cynthia Voigt's *The Runner* (1985). In doing so, I also hope to offer new and interesting critical tools for classroom practice and further research.

Both Mildred Taylor's *The Road to Memphis*, set in 1941 and published in 1990, and Cynthia Voigt's *The Runner*, set in 1967 and published in 1985, are young adult novels from the United States. They have certain themes in common, presenting the anxieties of young people while their countries wage war and the difficulties faced by characters trying to come to terms with the history of race and racial conflict in

the United States. Both novels present the types of uncertainty and struggles with self and society that are emblematic of young adult fiction, pinioning these representations to key events in US history.

The conversations that characters have regarding the conflicts they face provide them with a means of exchanging ideas with others and making deals on their own terms. In Taylor's novel, the legacies of World War I and the Great Depression are key factors in the characters' relationships with society, as is the anticipation of the war to come. For Voigt, the Vietnam War recalls a multitude of conflicts and occupations, as well as casting a long shadow elsewhere in Voigt's Tillerman Cycle series. In both series, war features as an intergenerational problem that brings into question the balance of rights and responsibilities and of risk and reward, while simultaneously highlighting conflict at home.

While these somewhat older texts are less likely to appear in present-day curricula, they are, I believe, unjustly neglected and still have much to teach us. As Michelle Martin (2017) writes, "[I]f you counted up *all* of the scholarship that has been written about, say, African American children's and YA literature, it would likely not equal the amount of scholarship that has been published just on *Little Women*" (p. 102). There is certainly room for more scholarship on Mildred Taylor, arguably one of the most important African American children's authors of the twentieth century, and Cynthia Voigt, a white author whose works often deal with the theme of racism and the social and economic exclusion it entails.

## Economic Criticism

Economics is the “study of choice among limited resources” (Ainslie, 2007, p. 11). At its core, it is a study of human agency, of the choices we make and why and how we make them. Choice is a key concept in both mainstream economic thinking and alternative accounts, such as Marxism, feminist economics, and postcolonial economics, which often focus on conditions that affect the extent to which agents may act freely. Economics is also “concerned with . . . the production, exchange, distribution, and consumption of commodities” (Hausman, 2013). It deals with goods and services, along with factors such as work, money, and time, and the exchange of these, encompassing a range of day-to-day activities that are also represented in fiction.

Yet economics as a discipline is in crisis, increasingly abstract and separate from the concerns of everyday life. In *How Much Is Enough?*, Robert and Edward Skidelsky (2012) write of their intention “to revive the old idea of economics as a *moral science*; a science of human beings in communities, not of interacting robots” (p. 6, emphasis in original). It seems to me that young adult literature is particularly well placed to speak back to economics, providing as it does diverse explorations of character interactions, drawing attention to the moral and ethical frameworks that underpin them. Combining elements from both subjects could help young people to develop critical skills needed to understand and critique economic ideas and the stories we tell about ourselves.

Economic criticism is the study of literature through an economic lens; both economists and literary critics have engaged with this approach. There are various surveys of core economic principles that draw on examples from literature; see, for example, Milica and Aleksandra Bookman’s (2009) *Economics in Film and Fiction*, intended to be used in introductory economics courses. Here, fictional texts are used to illustrate core economic principles in a way that is both fun and thought provoking. For instance, the section on banking asks students to consider the opportunity costs, or the benefits or profits that must be given up to acquire something else, incurred by using a magical bank (Gringotts) rather than a commercial bank (p. 176). There are also a number of literary studies that focus on economic themes, such as *The Great Recession in Fiction, Film, and Television* (Boyle

& Mrozowski, 2013), *Crunch Lit* (Shaw, 2015), and *Economic Investigations in Twentieth-Century Detective Fiction* (Zi-Ling, 2015).

Many texts for young readers, including Taylor’s and Voigt’s, center discussions about money, family finance, labor, property, and so on. However, economic criticism can also work on a symbolic, metaphorical level: “[S]uch criticism usually begins by analyzing the actions and interactions of the characters—their exchanges, debts, purchases, losses, gifts, etc.” (Osteen & Woodmansee, 1999, p. 36). What do characters gain, lose, or trade? What do they choose, and what are the limits to their choices? In what ways do they incur costs and debts? Rather than focusing on representations of money, the following text analysis explores other themes—war and racism—to show how economic ideas can be read symbolically into character interactions on any topic.

In addition to providing a vocabulary with which to analyze texts, the economic criticism approach also helps distinguish between surface and concealed ideologies. Peter Hollindale (1992) writes that “the conscious surface ideology and the passive ideology of a novel are [sometimes] at odds with each other, and ‘official’ ideas contradicted by unconscious assumptions” (p. 31). An example of contradicting ideologies can be found in a text that is central and foundational both for economics and children’s literature, Daniel Defoe’s (1719/2012) *Robinson Crusoe*, described as “a major progenitor of later children’s literature” by Margery Hourihan (1997, p. 58) and seen by Maria Nikolajeva (2002) as the basic template for texts like Cynthia Voigt’s (1981) *Homecoming* and Felice Holman’s (1974) *Slake’s Limbo* (p. 82, p. 110).

For economists, the character of Robinson Crusoe serves as a fundamental metaphor for the rational agent making choices, freed from messy social context on his desert island (Browne & Quinn, 1999, p. 134). Yet this is not how economic decisions are made by real agents or, indeed, by most fictional characters, enmeshed as they are in their context. Critics further point out that Crusoe is a typical economic agent only insofar as women, non-Europeans, people of color, the working classes, and children are excluded from this agency. Looking at the different ways in which agency is represented in fiction helps students to understand that economics has traditionally relied on a one-dimensional view. This kind of cross-curricular work can therefore help students develop the skills required

to identify and evaluate the ideologies underlying different disciplines.

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tensions, presenting conflict between the American ideal of the autonomous individual and the more complex relationships that characterize the singular life of a young adult character. In *Memphis* and *The Runner*, this conflict plays out against the backdrop of the threat of military conflict abroad and the toxic environment created by white supremacy at home. These themes provide the context for exchanges of information, ideas, and promises in conversations between characters. By looking at the transactional nature of these conversations, what is given and what is taken, we can see

more clearly the social attitudes presented.

### **"Fighting for nothing": Cassie and Mort in *The Road to Memphis***

Mildred Taylor's *The Road to Memphis* picks up the story of the Logans, an African American family living in segregation-era Mississippi whom most readers first encounter in Taylor's seminal novel, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976). The year is 1941, and toward the end of the novel, the characters hear of the Japanese army's attack on Pearl Harbor, an event that draws the United States into World War II. Cassie, the narrator and protagonist, finds herself in Memphis at the end of a difficult and dangerous journey. Having left the safety and comfort provided by adult members of her family in the earlier Logan books, Cassie now experiences firsthand the violence, humiliation, and institutionalization of Deep South racism in a way that feels starkly different and much more personal.

Shortly after hearing the news about the attacks on Pearl Harbor, Cassie finds herself in an argument with Mort, a journalist employed at a black newspa-

per office, about the anticipated involvement of the United States in World War II (pp. 229–232). Particularly striking in this scene is the language of "us" and "them," which slips between denoting an inclusive and shared national identity on the one hand and a racial identity on the other. Mort uses phrases like, "we'll . . . be at war," "our country," "we have to go fight" (p. 231). Cassie, on the other hand, is not invested in this idea of shared Americanness, instead positioning the war as a concern of white people; she says, "they're in a war" and talks about "that other war they had" when referring to World War I (p. 232).

James Underhill (2011), in a study of the rhetoric used by totalitarian states, comments on the "extent [to which] pronouns define our relations in spatial metaphors of inclusion, exclusion, proximity and distance" (p. 115). Amanda Greenwell's (2017) recent reading of Jessie Jackson's *Call Me Charley* (1945) similarly analyzes pronoun use in terms of inclusion and exclusion in the context of segregation in the United States (p. 102, p. 109). In *Memphis*, Cassie's use of "us" and "them" clearly creates space between her community and the nation as a whole, undoubtedly as a response to the barriers to shared American identity that have been placed in her way by white supremacy. It is only toward the end of the novel, after a reconciliation with Jeremy Simms (one of the series' few sympathetic white characters) and a growing awareness of her brothers' impending conscription, that Cassie begins to talk about the Japanese army as having attacked "us" (p. 288).

Closely connected to this picture of "us" and "them" presented by Cassie with regards to the war and the question of who should fight are the ideas of possession and responsibility. She mentions a series of things that are "theirs": restrooms, cafés, hotels, and hospitals. Possessive pronouns are used to imply differential levels of ownership or investment in a number of settings and, by extension, investment in American citizenship and identity. For Cassie, this sense of ownership extends to the war itself; it belongs to, and is the responsibility of, the white people. She therefore views the choice or obligation to fight in terms of possible future benefits: "[I]f we win, are we going to be able to . . . go to *their* hospitals?" (p. 231, emphasis in original).

This is in some ways an economic question: Why should there be equal exposure to risk when there isn't any likelihood of equal reward or even basic

rights? Is there a deal whereby society will change in recognition of the role played by black people in the war effort? In response to Cassie's insistent line of questioning, Mort can only offer "maybe not" as a response, in stark contrast to the repeated refrain of "Maybe one day" offered by Cassie's father throughout the earlier books in the series. Mort sees no basis on which the exchange proposed by Cassie could be guaranteed. Cassie's "if" questions are not purely theoretical, as her friend Clarence has just been turned away from a white-only hospital despite being seriously ill and wearing his military uniform. Notwithstanding Clarence's participation in the war economy as a soldier, he is barred from equal access to health-care (see Hardstaff, 2018). The patterns of give and take implied in Clarence's relationship with the United States are severely imbalanced. While elsewhere in the novel, black characters express enthusiasm about the economic possibilities opening up due to the war, Cassie's view is shaped by Clarence's experience.

Even when there is no external war to fight, being a black soldier carries severe risks for Taylor's characters. In *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (1981), secondary character Russell joins the army, stating that he has chosen this path because it is "better than starving" (p. 7), an analysis that condemns the paucity of economic possibilities in the land of opportunity. Furthermore, older characters worry that Russell's army uniform will be seen as inflammatory to "mean white folks" (p. 7), and he is eventually humiliated on the steps of the Jackson courthouse in a union-breaking scene that acts as a tableau of Depression-era Deep South concerns. Thus, Cassie's conversation with Mort in *Memphis* recalls the unjust treatment of black soldiers elsewhere in Taylor's series.

The mention of World War I, a war in which two of Cassie's uncles were killed while a third was injured, draws attention to an older, unpaid debt. In her conversation with Mort, Cassie talks about her Uncle Hammer and what she has learned from him about the previous war. She tells us that Hammer "[s]aid the white folks got free in Europe, but things stayed just the same over here for us" (p. 232). But as she points out, not only did things not improve after the last war, they got worse; Cassie refers here to the lynching of black soldiers, while earlier books in the series deal with the economic fallout of the Great Depression both for black sharecroppers and for landowners like Cassie's family. Now Cassie's generation is being

called upon to do the same again, to engage in a one-sided deal that may benefit Europeans but brings no reward to the people Cassie is close to. As she says, "I just don't believe in fighting for nothing" (p. 231).

That both World War I and the ideology of Nazism feature heavily in this conversation is also significant in terms of bringing the reader's attention to the idea of war on multiple fronts, both at home and abroad, but also in both the past and future. Mort cites Hitler's ideas about race as incentive enough for black Americans to go and fight, but as far as Cassie is concerned, the same ideas shape her own country's practices and attitudes. Not only is the balance of risk and reward deeply unfair, but the incentive to fight presented by Mort is fundamentally paradoxical. For Mort, signing up is likely to be compulsory but also desirable, both to protect the United States and to combat the white supremacy of the Nazis. But in Cassie's view, the obligation to fight is an entirely coercive one, with no scope for free choice and no meaningful incentives on offer.

In economic terms, Cassie is engaging in a cost-benefit analysis that clearly exposes Mort's more idealistic and perhaps more journalistic ideas about the war. Moreover, Cassie is arguing like the lawyer she hopes to become, making the best use of the information and experience she has. In World War I, her uncles paid with their lives and their family received nothing in return; in the run-up to this new war, her friend Clarence has become a soldier and yet cannot access emergency medical treatment. The system of exchange, of rights and responsibilities, between the United States government and its black citizens is rigged and broken. How can her brothers be expected to sign up for the same deal?

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## **“Not your war”: Bullet and Tamer in *The Runner***

Like Taylor’s Logan novels, Cynthia Voigt’s novel *The Runner* is part of a family series, acting as a prequel to the Tillerman stories. Readers of the other novels already know that *The Runner*’s main character, Bullet, dies while fighting in Vietnam. This novel deals with Bullet’s final year at school before he drops out and joins the army. Many of the conversations that take place between characters in *The Runner* relate to the Vietnam War, as classmates express their anxieties about the draft and question the point of the war; the other main strand of discussion comes from the recent

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desegregation of Bullet’s school. For example, Bullet’s friend Tommy refers to this latter conflict as “the real war” (p. 187). Bullet himself is a white character who is racist, individualistic, and dismissive of the tendency of his peers to blame circumstances for their misfortune. He is also a gifted athlete.

Athletics are one of the few activities at the school that have been formally desegregated, and it is in this context that Bullet gets to know his running partner Tamer Shipp, a black character who has been active in trying to break down some of the existing racial barriers at

the school. Toward the end of the novel, Bullet makes a deal with Tamer (pp. 211–213). The exchange proposed by Bullet is that he will run in the relay race for an important competition if Tamer promises to keep out of the Vietnam War. On the face of it, this seems like a good deal, but there is something troubling about the way Bullet gives his orders. He tells Tamer, “Have another kid. Stay in school. Be a teacher. Get religion, whatever it takes. That one’s not your war” (p. 212). The exchange sets up a false equivalency, whereby running as part of a team is seen as a conces-

sion that is equal to Tamer making significant life decisions in order to avoid the draft. Bullet’s obligation to run is a bond that will last only a few hours, while Tamer’s side of the deal, in effect Tamer’s debt to Bullet, is long-term and ongoing. So Bullet “pays” with a few hours of his life to exert control over the rest of Tamer’s. For a character so preoccupied with choice and its costs (earlier when talking to Tommy, Bullet reflects that his classmates “didn’t like what the choices cost them” [p. 187]), he apparently has no qualms about making demands on Tamer. Admittedly, this is a somewhat unforgiving reading; we could conversely read Bullet’s request as advice, as a gift to a friend rather than a debt to be paid. We learn in a later book in the series, *Come a Stranger* (1986), that Tamer has done what Bullet told him and has even named one of his children after him.

Then there is the question of ownership of the war. When Bullet says, “That one’s not your war,” Tamer asks if he has a patent on it, explicitly drawing the reader’s attention to the multiple meanings of the words “your war,” making this scene reminiscent of Cassie’s conversation with Mort in *The Road to Memphis*. While Bullet intends the phrase to mean “priority” or “preoccupation” or “obligation” (in other words, “your problem, not mine”), Tamer’s remark repositions it in terms of exclusive ownership.

The phrase “that one” clearly marks out multiple battlefields, and this is a recurring theme throughout the novel, as conflicts mentioned include the American Civil War, World War II, and even the Roman occupation of Britain. As in *Memphis*, parallels are made between Nazism and American white supremacy (Greenwell [2017] also notes similar allusions in *Call Me Charley* [p. 109]). When he finds out his employer Patrice is of mixed heritage, Bullet is confronted with the logical consequences of his feelings about black people. Patrice says, “When the Germans came, then my blood mattered . . . . And to be sent to a camp—I could not have withstood that, I think. Had I thought about it, about you, I would not have thought you felt like that” (p. 147). Bullet’s history with Patrice—their shared workspace, joint labor, and meals together—signifies a choice made not from having access to perfect information, as economic choices are typically characterized, but rather a choice made through repeated actions and exchanges. The revelation of Patrice’s Caribbean ancestry cannot undo what has already been done: “He knew Patrice, he’d worked

with him, eaten with him, he respected him” (p. 146). These past choices, Bullet realizes, can be repeated in the future through his partnership with Tamer.

In addition to these historical touchstones is Tamer’s reference to the legacy of American slavery in his conversation with Bullet, raising questions of unresolved conflicts and unpaid debts stretching back through time and continuing to influence the present. But Bullet’s phrasing, “your war”, immediately focuses attention on an either/or conceptualization of conflict in this instance, referring to Vietnam on the one hand and the ongoing fight against racism on the other hand. By implication, then, the Vietnam War belongs to Bullet, while struggles for racial equality at home belong to Tamer. Bullet seems to abdicate any responsibility for the domestic future of the United States, shrugging off the burden of ownership of that war. In much the same way, Bullet has the opportunity to stay at home and avoid the draft by working on his family farm but finds that taking ownership of his family’s property represents a debt to his father that he refuses.

When Bullet starts to present his deal, Tamer says, “You don’t make deals” (p. 212). Even engaging in the exchange in the first place is out of character for Bullet and is presented as a one-off event. Bullet’s agreement to join the race is costly, but the consequences of not making the deal seem almost trivial as far as Bullet’s role is concerned. What would it matter if he didn’t run in the race at all? This is the kind of speculative question that Voigt explicitly sets up throughout the novel as a whole, which, like Taylor’s novel, is punctuated with questions and conditionals that elude easy answers. In this case, it seems that what Tamer gains from the deal might be more significant than it first appears. For Bullet to join a desegregated relay race represents a rare concession of his responsibility to other people and ultimately his responsibility to his country and society as a whole. It is this kind of concession that Cassie seeks, too, though she finds few are prepared to offer it.

## Conclusion and Implications for Practice

In the analysis above, I have focused on the symbolic economies created by exchanges between characters, looking at issues such as ownership, cost, and risk. The extracts paired above both focus on the costs of war and racism. A whole-novel comparison could look

at other shared topics from the novels using the same approach, topics such as interracial friendship, career choices, and violent/nonviolent resistance. I hope to have shown that economic criticism can be usefully deployed in readings of young adult texts, particularly those that explore multiple inequalities, both of economics and “ache-o-nomics,” in the words of Virginia Hamilton’s integration school story, *A White Romance* (1987, p. 14).

The readings offered here reveal ideological tensions around the idea of agency. While both writers value freedom of choice, the choices, opportunities, and obligations discussed by characters in *Memphis* and *The Runner* are embedded in the context of conflicts both at home and abroad. Agency, then, is not here shown as the straightforward acting out of preferences assumed by traditional economics. Rather, Taylor and Voigt depict choice and action as collaborative endeavors subject to the scrutiny and intervention of others, situated in time and space.

Yet while Bullet, who is defeatist, prejudiced, and isolated, reflects that “you didn’t choose the time you were born in” (p. 197), Cassie maintains instead her family’s sense of agency and urgency, their ethic of interconnectedness, and their hope for the future: “We prayed for the days ahead. We prayed for all those we loved” (p. 283). As a philosophical question that is fundamental to many disciplines, students may be prompted to consider their own ideas about choices, what they cost, and how freely they are made.

More recently published texts, even those retreading the same historical contexts as Taylor and Voigt, may well be more familiar and accessible for students. They also arise from different contexts: Taylor and Voigt are writing during the dawn of our current neoliberal era, looking back to *de jure* segregation that preceded a persistent *de facto* segregation. Now, 30 years later, racial inequality in access to

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essential services and resources continues, as does the growth in economic inequality kick-started by Reaganomics; see, for example, Naomi Lesley's *Fictions of Integration* (2017) on unequal schooling and how this has been represented in young adult fiction. In this final section, I consider examples of contemporary American novels from different genres that reflect this troubling trend by revisiting historical segregation and/or focusing on social and economic exclusion; I will also briefly outline some economic themes that could complement classroom discussions.

***The Hunger Games, Suzanne Collins (2008), Dystopia***

*The Hunger Games* was published at the start of the current financial crisis, a global crisis that has led to increased uncertainty, inequality, and political destabilization, issues also covered in depth in the novel and its sequels. These texts may be particularly useful for students thinking about different ways of organizing society and the economy: command economies, capitalism, socialism, globalization, and so on.

Collins emphasizes both the power of individuals to bring about change and limits to their agency. The language of cost and choice is prominent throughout the series

and applies to interpersonal relationships as much as wider socioeconomic concerns (see Flynn & Hardstaff, 2017). Students could consider the opportunity costs weighed by Katniss and other characters as they think through different possible actions and outcomes.

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***Brown Girl Dreaming, Jacqueline Woodson (2014), Memoir in Verse***

The opening poem of Woodson's autobiographical verse novel, *Brown Girl Dreaming*, traces a family history from slavery to the Civil Rights era, concluding, "The stories of South Carolina already run like rivers through my veins" (p. 2). Krystal Howard (2017) has noted Woodson's emulation of Langston Hughes here

in using "the metaphor of the river and its connection to the body" (p. 335). The most prominent economic metaphor of *Brown Girl Dreaming* is that of circulation; Woodson focuses on the movement of stories, people, rivers, and blood. She touches on lineage and movements in history, culture, and nature; the marching of soldiers and protesters; and movement through time and space.

At the core of Woodson's memoir is the act of remembering, which is represented as a type of collaborative labor dependent on "other people's bad memory" (Woodson, p. 18). The idea of witnessing and remembering as acts that require work speak to "the cultural labor performed by the confessional mode" (Howard, p. 338). Students could consider the different types of work both represented and realized by Woodson's memoir.

***Lies We Tell Ourselves, Robin Talley (2014), Historical Realism***

Talley's novel is set in 1959 and tells the story of one black girl and one white girl attending a newly integrated school. In economics, agents are assumed to have perfect information on which to base their choices, an assumption clearly brought into question by this novel, which is based around a series of lies. Sources of false information include the lies the child characters tell themselves and each other, the lies told by both black and white adults, and the dramatic irony created by having two narrators. Journalism adds another layer of distortion; as with *The Hunger Games*, choices are made under conditions of media scrutiny. Potential questions for students might include: What is the effect of the characters' conflicting beliefs? Are their beliefs the same by the end of the novel? What do you make of the interaction between "true" and "false" information in the fight to end school segregation?

***Furthermore, Tahereh Mafi (2016), Fantasy***

This middle-grade novel is set in a world where magic acts as raw material, finished product, and currency alike. Alkestrand and Owen (in press) write of the protagonist Alice:

Alice is unwilling to use her own magic and unable to access extra magic outside of her abilities because her family has very little money . . . . In a society that gives the most social value to those who can use the most magic, Alice is perceived as without any social value at all.

Alice's dreams of "one day, someday" relate not only to completing her quest but also to gaining additional purchasing power (p. 63), in contrast to Taylor and Woodson's emphasis on "one day, someday" as the dawning of a more just society. Students could compare ideas of value in *Furthermore* and other texts, as well as consider different types of currency used in fantasy worlds.

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