

# SYSTEMIC RACISM PORTRAYED IN JEWELL PARKER RHODES' GHOST BOYS

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# SYSTEMIC RACISM PORTRAYED IN JEWELL PARKER RHODES' *GHOST BOYS*

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## ABSTRACT

The study analyses Systemic Racism in Jewel Parker Rhodes' *Ghost Boys*. The objectives of this study are to describe the types of systemic racism reflected in the novel and the character's response against systemic racism. This study uses systemic racism theory by Joe R. Feagin. Since the study deals with life phenomenon, the approach applied is sociological approach. In addition, this study applies descriptive qualitative method because the data are in the form of words and the data analysis is presented descriptively. The analysis of this study shows that there are four types of systemic racism that can be found in the novel i.e. systemic racism in the form of police violence, criminal justice system, education, and economy. In the novel, the act of racism occurs in the forms of prejudice, stereotype, racial bias, and segregation. The prejudice and racial bias result in violation done by the police against the black. The stereotype against the black affects the criminal justice system in deciding trial against the black. The forms of segregation reflected in the novel are segregation in school and in housing. Segregation in school occur in the form of separation of school between black children and white children. Segregation in housing occur in the form of separation of neighborhoods between the black and the white. The characters in the novel response the systemic racism differently. Most of the black people oppose systemic racism while in the side of white people, some are against racism and the other stand for systemic racism.

**Keywords:** systemic racism, prejudice, stereotype, segregation

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## INTRODUCTION

Racism is one of the worst social problems that still exists to this day in every part of the world. Racism can be defined as the mistreatment of a group of people based on race and skin color. Racism is a theory claiming superiority attached to a race or ethnic group, which would give some people the right to dominate or even eliminate others, considered inferior, or based on value judgments regarding racial differences (www.unesco.org, accessed on October 27nd 2022). This condition occurs in the United States. The United States is a country that consists of many ethnic groups so the culture there is very varied. With the differences, a conflict between races such as racism has long been rooted in the US since hundreds of years ago and is still rooted to this day (www.nea.org, accessed on October 30nd 2022).

There are several types of racism, one of the types is systemic racism. Systemic racism refers to white people's long-standing racist behavior toward black people. White Americans have benefited enormously from systematic racism. It has been going on since the seventeenth century and continues to this day.

Racism is widely implemented in literary works, such as a novel. Many authors, especially African-American or black writers take racism as the main subject of their works. One of them is "Ghost Boys". In this study, the writer will be discussing Jewell Parker Rhodes' novel "Ghost Boys". The novel tells about 12 years old black boy named Jerome Rogers, who grew up in a poor neighborhood in Chicago. He has been shot by a police officer. After his death, he becomes a ghost. The novel shows the flashback of the moments before Jerome's death and while he is becoming a ghost. Previously, Jerome receive a toy gun from his new friend Carlos. The gun is a toy. Carlos give it to Jerome, then Jerome go out of school and played with the gun. When a police officer, Officer Moore, sees him playing around with a gun, he shoot him straight away. After becoming a ghost, he meets other ghost boys, such as Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin, who lose their lives because of racial violence. In the aftermath, he sees that from the preliminary hearing for his death, the officer does not get a penalty because there is not enough evidence to detain him. The novel is interesting to analyze because of the unique depiction of the characters that changes into a ghost and sees the conditions that happen around him after his death, he finds out that he becomes a victim of systemic racism such as police violence that causes him death.

This study focuses to systemic racism practices in the novel. The first is how is systemic racism portrayed in *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes. And the last is how do the characters respond to systemic racism in *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes. This study aims to: 1) Describe the systemic racism portrayed in Jewell

Parker Rhodes' *Ghost Boys*; 2) Describe the response of the characters against systemic racism in Jewell Parker Rhodes' *Ghost Boys*.

## Racism

Racism has many forms and can occur in many places. This includes prejudice, discrimination, or hatred because of their skin color, ethnicity, or origin of nationality. Racism is a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along human lines that have been generated and reproduced politically, culturally, and economically for millennia by the institutions of the "capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world system" (Grosfoguel, 2011: 214).

## Systemic Racism

Systemic racism is a form of racism that is widespread throughout the entire system, law, written, or unwritten policy. A racist policy is any act that produces racial inequalities between racial groups. The policies involved are the laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations, and written and unwritten guidelines that govern people. Systemic racism is also a practice that has taken root in society and government, in that it preserves the widespread unfair treatment of colored people. Systemic racism involves the entire system and almost all systems. For example, politics, law, economy, health care, schools/education, and criminal justice systems, including structures that support the system.

## Systemic Racism in Police Violence

Police violence is the way the police violate people's human rights. This could involve unjustified executions, torture, or the indiscriminate deployment of riot control measures during protests. The police violence in U.S. history is terrible. Over the years more than half of all African-Americans were killed by white officers (Feagin, 2014: 156). Police are regularly involved in a bloodless murders of black men and women from the 1870s to the 1960s. In recent decades, police abuse and violence have continued, and have been openly opposed by black Americans.

## Systemic Racism in Criminal Justice System

Racism in the criminal justice system refers to the racism that occurs within a network of public and private organizations that are designed to handle criminal suspects and offenders, and this becomes one of the biggest problems in the United States. Minorities, particularly Blacks and Hispanics, have faced harsher penalties for

crimes that their White counterparts committed. Racial profiling and other practices have led to systematic racism in the criminal justice system (Balko, 2006: 18).

### **Systemic Racism in Education**

Systemic racism in education has a painful and lengthy history of racial segregation in the U.S. However, pervasive housing segregation is one of the factors contributing to the persistence of racial disparity and segregation in education (Feagin, 2014:192). White and higher-income parents weigh neighborhood and school options differently than the minority of lower-income parents who typically weigh school based on where they live. White and higher-income parents use race and class-based assumptions to assess the wishes of the school (Krysan, 2002: 680). White people can be more free to choose which school they want for their children, while black people do not feel that freedom.

### **Systemic Racism in Economy**

Racism in economics is the long-term disparity in economic welfare among people depending on their skin tone, gender, or ethnic affiliations. Inequality and poverty are connected to this racism. Black households, for instance, continue to have much lower average household incomes than white households. The level of income disparity has been high for many years. A white family has significantly more wealth than a black family does. This is because black families are denied access to housing and other social resources because of discrimination.

### **METHOD**

In this research, the writer uses descriptive qualitative method as the methodology that corresponds to this study. Qualitative research aims to deeply understand human behavior and the reasons for its behavior. The qualitative research method is appropriate for this study because the study deals with human behavior based on descriptive data such as written words or verbal expressions of people and observed behaviors which is systemic racism reflected in Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Ghost Boys*. The approach applied in this study is sociological approach because the topic systemic racism deals with social phenomenon. The theory applies is systemic racism theory by Joe. R. Feagin. The data of this study are words, phrases, and sentences from Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Ghost Boys* that are related systemic racism. The writer collects the data through several steps; 1) Reads the novel repeatedly to understand the contents of the story; 2) After reading the entire contents of the novel, the researcher begins to identify parts that reflect systemic racism in police violence,



criminal justice, education, and economy as well as the character's response against systemic racism in the novel; 3) classifies the data and information in the notes.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the analysis of systemic racism portrayed in *Ghost Boys*. The analysis is divided into five parts. The first sub-chapter discusses systemic racism in the form of police violence. The second part describes systemic racism in the criminal justice system. The third describes systemic racism in education. The fourth describes the systemic racism in economy. The fifth describes the response of the main characters against systemic racism.

### Systemic Racism in Police Violence

The first type of racism to be analyzed is systemic racism in police violence. Police violence involves unjustified executions, torture, or the indiscriminate deployment of riot control measures during protests. In the novel, the main character, Jerome Rogers, seems to match this type of systemic racism. Jerome Rogers is a 12-year-old black boy who was a victim of a police shooting.

Jerome, who is playing with his gun, is suddenly approached by a police car that comes towards him and tries to chase him. The police officer looks so rushed when he sees Jerome playing with a gun. Jerome attempts to escape, but he is shot in the back by the police and falls with blood pouring around him. The police officer felt threatened so they shot guns at Jerome. It refers to prejudice. Prejudice is the negative feeling that comes up and always refers to a group of people. Black people in general, especially men are often considered aggressive and criminal. Police are more likely to see black men as a threat that justifies the act. Because of that, the policemen decide to shoot Jerome without checking first. Inappropriate use of force or power possibility leads the police officer's make a decision to act aggressively toward black people who are influenced by race.

### Systemic Racism in Criminal Justice System

The second type of racism to be analyzed is systemic racism in the criminal justice system. Criminal justice system is a law enforcement system, involving police, lawyers, and courts, in prosecuting, defending, or punishing those who are suspected as criminals. Systemic racism in the criminal justice system is deep roots in American

history and criminal policy. Black people in the U.S. often become special targets of police, punishment, and confinement.

In the novel, this type of racism appears in Jerome's court who has died from being shot by a police officer. Officer Moore testified that he is afraid of Jerome because he is carrying a gun. Officer Moore is surprised that Jerome is carrying a gun and it scares him. But in fact, Jerome never pointed the gun at Officer Moore. This is a form of prejudice because Officer Moore is afraid of Jerome by the fact that he is a black man and he is carrying a gun.

Officer Moore states that Jerome is a big man, hulking and scary. Officer Moore considers Jerome a big man, while Jerome himself is a child. It is a form of stereotype. White people mostly thought that black people, especially men, are dangerous. Prejudice is also included in the definition of racial bias. Racial bias is prejudice, experience, and thought that allows people to act and think with prejudice. Officer Moore's shooting is also a form of racial bias. Officer Moore, who has always prejudiced that Jerome is a dangerous man, causes him to shoot Jerome in an unconscious state and continued to deny that he is a racist.

### **Systemic Racism in Education**

The third type of systemic racism is systemic racism in education. Systemic racism in education is also prevalent in the U.S. A frequent example is segregation. Many schools are predominantly white and many are predominantly black. In the novel, systemic racism in education emerges when Jerome goes to Sarah's school, the daughter of Officer Moore who shot him. Jerome found a very significant difference between his school and Sarah's school.

It can be concluded that systemic racism in education is school segregation. School segregation requires students of different races to go to different schools. The indicator of segregation in school includes school facilities. Jerome describes Sarah's school as being very different from his. Sarah's school has many good and complete facilities. Another difference is students who go to school. Sarah's school is dominated by white students like Sarah, while Jerome's school is dominated by black and Hispanic students. School choice can also be influenced by residential segregation. White students' parents who have higher incomes like Sarah's father who works as a police officer prefer to choose nicer schools. While black students' parents who have a lower income can not choose the school freely as white parents do. Black parents prefer to choose the school which is close to their house.

## **Systemic Racism in Economy**

The last type of systemic racism is systemic racism in economy. Systemic racism in economy is discrimination or economic inequality that occurs based on skin color, gender, or race. Economic discrimination also includes differences in housing and wages. In the novel, this type of systemic racism occurs between both black and white families, represented by Officer Moore's family and Jerome's family.

Officer Moore, Sarah's father, is still paid even though he does not work. On the other hand, Jerome's father, Pop, is not paid when he is not working. This is a form of discrimination for wages or salaries. Economic discrimination and domination of African Americans by white people through institutionalized arrangements such as job distribution, discriminatory pay, hostile work climate, and home buying (Feagin, 2006: 43).

The other form of systemic racism in economy is housing segregation. Separation of residences between blacks and whites has differences based on a clean living environment or a dirty and poor environment. The white live in a nicer environment than the black. Jerome lives in a poor living environment with a poor family, causing black families to also live in an inadequate environment. Significant and ongoing racial disparities in wealth and financial well-being, notably between black and white households, are a result of systemic racism in the U.S. housing system.

## **The Black Response Against Systemic Racism**

Many black people are victims of systemic racism. Because black people have often been victims of acts of racism, most black people give an unfavorable response as a form of protest against the acts of racism they have experienced. Pop, Jerome's father expressed his feelings of anger for his son's death. He feels that he is treated unfairly because Officer Moore is still free while his son has been killed. Jerome's family feels very angry and sad because of this injustice act. Black people have no justice and peace because of the police brutality action happens repeatedly that causes so many victims of black people. In this case, especially for black boy or men.

Another response by black people is the protest action held during Jerome's trial. They carried banners that read "No justice no peace" as a form of their disapproval of the incident that happened to Jerome. They defend Jerome and sympathize with his death, the protest action purpose is not reached because the



judge's final decision stated that Officer Moore is released because there is insufficient evidence to convict him.

### **The White Response Against Systemic Racism**

White people have a different response to systemic racism. There are those who are against systemic racism and there are those who support systemic racism.

Many white people support systemic racism. Some do not like Sarah because of her father's behavior. There are also those who like her because they think what her father has done is a heroic and courageous act. This shows that differences of opinion also occur among white people, some support and some do not support. White people who do not support Sarah are angry at her father, Officer Moore. They think that Sarah is bad because of her father's racism act toward Jerome. They share the same thought as black people who are against this inequality act.

Sarah, Officer Moore's daughter, as a form of empathy, she creates a website that contains the names of black children who become racism victims. Sarah wants the story of black children who are tragically killed to be known by many people and become a lesson for the future so that similar incidents do not happen again. Officer Moore also feels guilty for his behavior that killed Jerome. Even though he is released and not given a penalty, he is not happy. Officer Moore is also willing to help Sarah in her website creation project, as a form of guilt and also a desire to help so that in the future no more victims fall due to this systemic racism in terms of prejudice and bad stereotypes against black people.

### **CONCLUSION**

Racism is an unfair act based on racial differences. One form of racism is systemic racism. Systemic racism is racism that is embedded in everyday life in society and involves authorized institutions in implementing racist policies in various fields, such as education<sup>25</sup>, health, the criminal justice system, law, and the economy. Systemic racism has a long history in the U.S. Systemic racism in the U.S has taken root in society and also the government has the power to make regulations that are detrimental or racist to other races. In this case, black people are more disadvantaged.

Systemic racism that occurs in police violence is a form of police brutality that acts arbitrarily against black people. The forms of systemic racism in terms of criminal justice systems in the novel are prejudice,

stereotypes, and racial bias. In the novel, the prejudice and stereotypes are directed against black people by white people. These prejudices and stereotypes are represented by the treatment of the white police against black children who are often seen as dangerous men and looks like a criminal. Meanwhile, racial bias is a prejudice and a thought that underlies a person to act based on prejudice. In the novel, racial bias is demonstrated by the brutal shootings by white police officers against black children on the basis of prejudice and bad stereotypes against black people. The form of systemic racism from education and economy is segregation. The form of segregation in the novel includes the separation of education and housing for white and black.

Regarding the systemic racism both black people and white people have a different responses. In the novel, black people strongly oppose this act of systemic racism. The response given are in the forms of protests and civil rights movements that are carried out to obtain justice and equality. Meanwhile, from the white people side, there are those who support this act of

racism and those who do not support. Those who oppose this act of racism bravely create a movement for victims of racism to prevent repeated acts of racism against black people.

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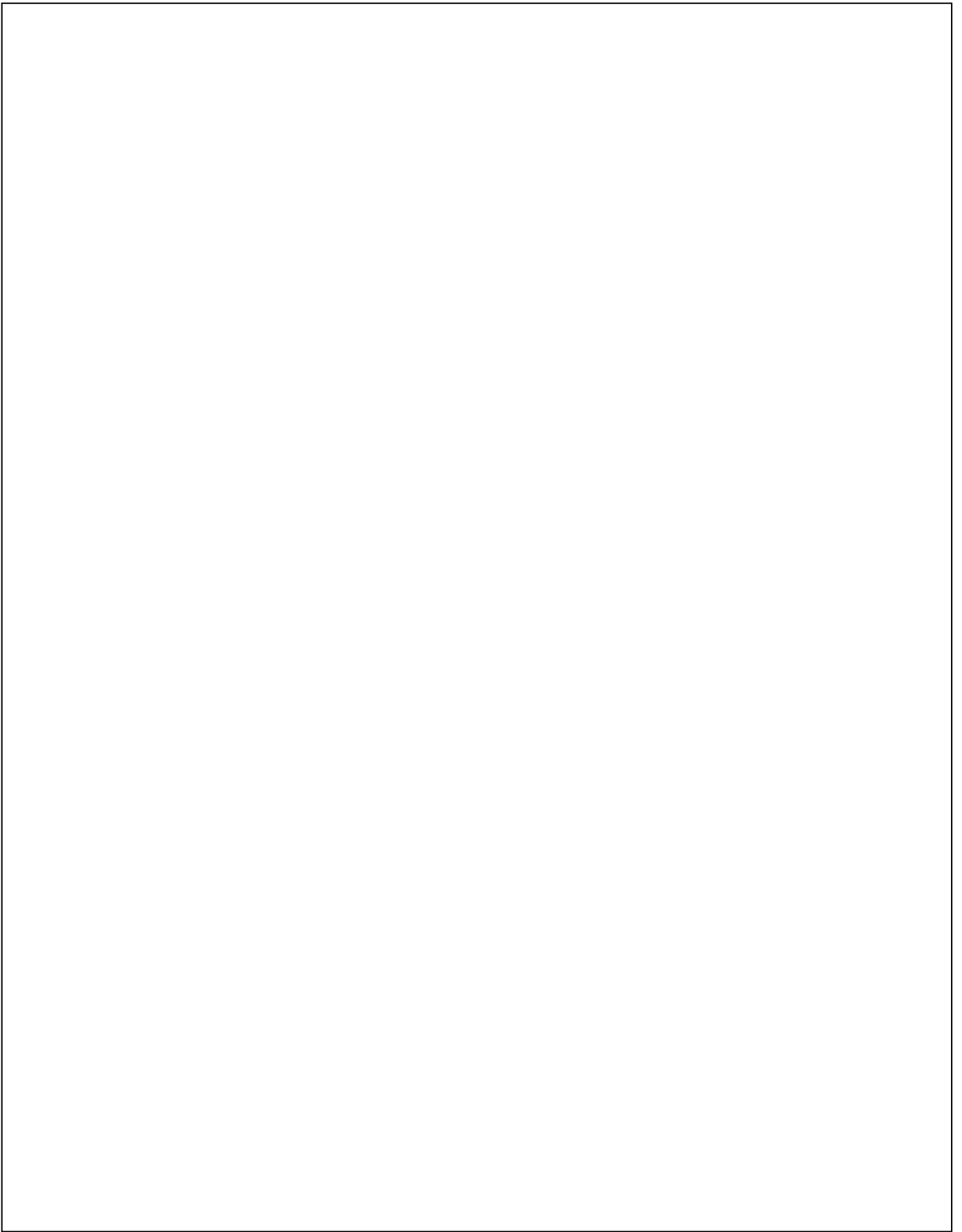
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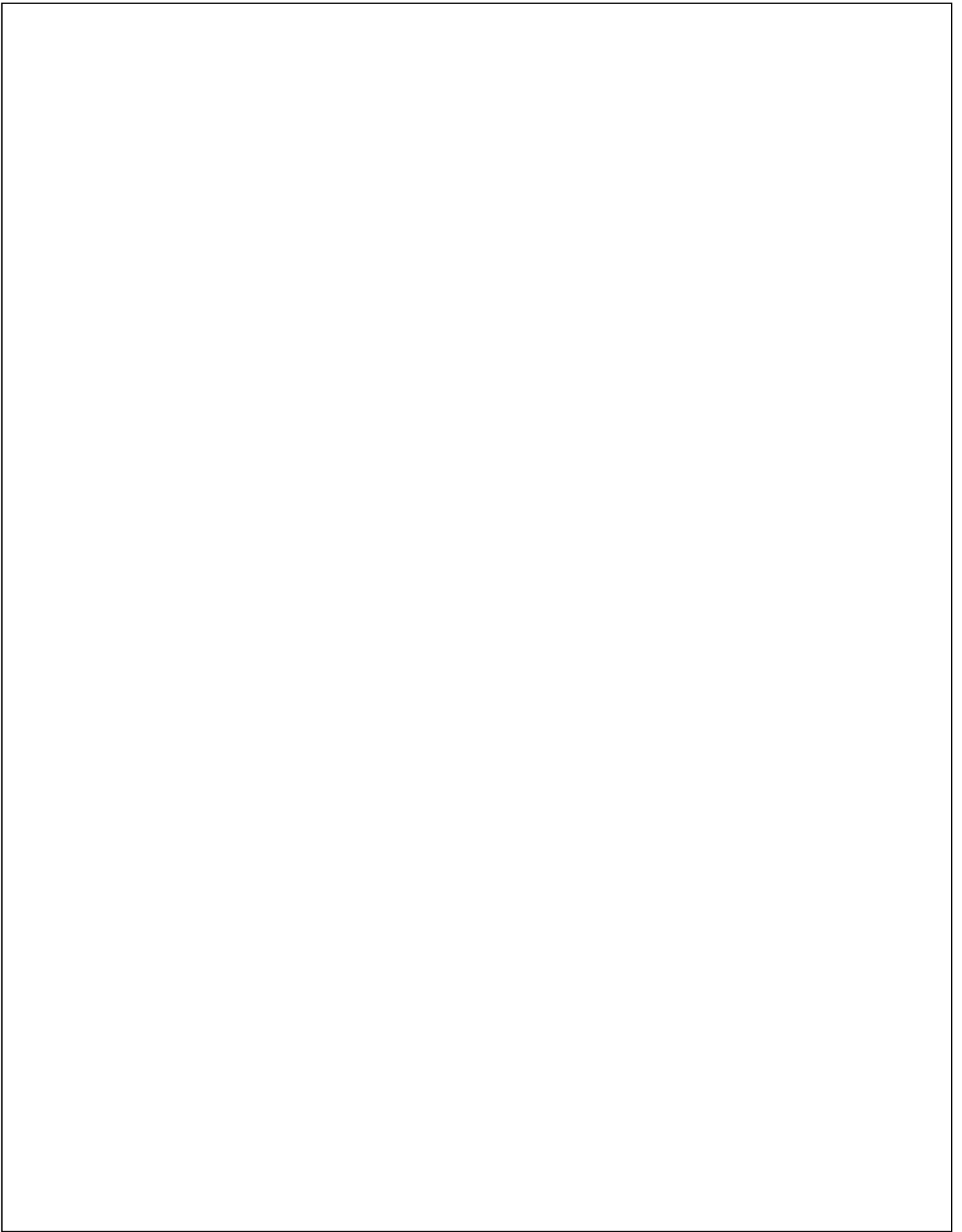
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