Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature

Critical Literacy Teaching Series: Challenging Authors and Genre

Volume 4

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This series explores in separate volumes major authors and genres through a critical literacy lens that seeks to offer students opportunities as readers and writers to embrace and act upon their own empowerment. Each volume will challenge authors (along with examining authors that are themselves challenging) and genres as well as challenging norms and assumptions associated with those authors' works and genres themselves. Further, each volume will confront teachers, students, and scholars by exploring all texts as politically charged mediums of communication. The work of critical educators and scholars will guide each volume, including concerns about silenced voices and texts, marginalized people and perspectives, and normalized ways of being and teaching that ultimately dehumanize students and educators.

Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature

Challenging Genres

Antero Garcia
Fort Collins, CO, USA

SENSE PUBLISHERS
ROTTERDAM/BOSTON/TAIPEI

A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-94-6209-396-6 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-94-6209-397-3 (hardback)
ISBN: 978-94-6209-398-0 (e-book)

Published by: Sense Publishers,
P.O. Box 21858,
3001 AW Rotterdam,
The Netherlands
https://www.sensepublishers.com/

Printed on acid-free paper

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"But where do you learn the answers?" Violet asked, pointing to the piles of paper underneath the table. "Where does all this information come from?"

"Libraries, mostly," Olivia said, wiping her eyes. "If you want people to think you're a fortune-teller, you have to answer their questions, and the answer to nearly every question is written down someplace. It just might take a while to find. It's taken me a long time to gather my archival library, and I still don't have all of the answers I've been looking for."

—*The Carnivorous Carnival*, Book Nine in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*
(Lemony Snicket, 2002, p. 152)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I dedicate this book to the memory of my father, Jose “Joey” Angel Garcia. His enthusiasm for word and story gave my childhood a creative buoyancy. He instilled in me the right to dream and laugh and question.

Similarly, I want to recognize the most influential English teacher I have ever had: my mother. No Christmas or birthday passed without her giving me a book to dive into.

In addition, this book would not have been possible without the guidance and expertise of my former students–both in Los Angeles and in Fort Collins. Collectively, they impressed upon me the importance of books on the lives of today’s youth.

Finally, I could not have completed this book without the patience, knowledge, and love of the greatest librarian I know. Thank you, Ally.

PREFACE

YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE COMES OF AGE

The Blurring of Genre in Popular Entertainment

It happened to comic books and graphic novels over a long period of time—from the 1930s-1940s into the twenty-first century—but the final boost needed for the superhero universe to go mainstream and even gain respect was film technology (Thomas, 2010). When Spider-Man, the X-Men, Superman, and Batman seemed to come to life in ways that weren't cheesy or campy (think the 1960s Batman series for television), comic books and graphic novels eased into popular media as texts not just for children, or just for nerdy boys.

As this volume catalogs, Young Adult (YA) literature has a rich history, but the genre has too often been marginalized and even demonized. For YA, the turning point was the somewhat unexpected popularity of YA novels among teens and adults, notably the popularity of the *Twilight* series and then *The Hunger Games* trilogy.

However, Connors (Thomas, 2013) recognizes that YA novels still face considerable efforts to discount the works as merely genre fiction:

> Critics occasionally deride speculative fiction—an umbrella term used to refer to a range of genres, including science fiction (SF), fantasy, utopian and dystopian fiction—as genre fiction with the result being that they dismiss it as a form of superficial entertainment. The cultural expectations that have historically accompanied young adult literature—namely, that it must perform a didactic function—coupled with its status as a commodity, subject it to additional stigmas and mischaracterizations. Indeed, as Daniels (2006) argues, there remain critics in both secondary and higher education who insist that young adult literature does not warrant serious "attention because it doesn't offer enough substance to be included within the traditional literary canon" (p. 78). One might assume, then, that young adult dystopian fiction represents the low-person on the literary totem pole. (p. 146)

Texts can often struggle under the some times contradictory weights of popularity and artistic merit, but YA works have increasingly been embraced by adult readers, adult movie goers, educators, and literary critics. Part of the reason for these gains for YA literature is likely how these works speak to the greater human condition, and not just to the specific teen experience.

Below, then, is a brief look at how Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy, as both YA and SF, has resonated with debates about public education in the U.S.

THE EDUCATION GAMES: REFORM AS DOUBLESPEAK[1]

Although we currently live in a world informed by George Orwell's (1983) dystopian unmasking-as-novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we seem unable to acknowledge that the Ministry of Peace is actually waging war. In our current education reform debate, educators must come to terms with Orwell's (2003) recognition of the essential nature of political speech:

> I have not here been considering the literary use of language, but merely language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought. Stuart Chase and others have come near to claiming that all abstract words are meaningless, and have used this as a pretext for advocating a kind of political quietism. Since you don't know what Fascism is, how can you struggle against Fascism? One need not swallow such absurdities as this, but one ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end. If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself. *Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind* [emphasis added]. One cannot change this all in a moment, but one can at least change one's own habits, and from time to time one can even, if one jeers loudly enough, send some worn-out and useless phrase...into the dustbin where it belongs.

In 2012, The U.S. Department of Education is the Ministry of Peace, and from the USDOE, we are facing doublespeak that thinly masks the de-professionalizing of teachers and the dismantling of public education—all in the name of reform under the banner of "hope and change."

"One Need Not Swallow Such Absurdities as This"

One consequence of calling for educators to be apolitical (Thomas, 2012, February 24) is that the education reform debate remains in the hands of the inexpert and that reform is allowed to maintain and perpetuate the status quo. Here, however, I want to call for educators to expose and reject the doublespeak driving the education agenda under President Obama and personified by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (Thomas, 2011) by addressing four key areas of that debate: (1) high-stakes standardized testing, (2) Common Core State Standards (CCSS), (3) expertise in education, and (4) claims based on ends-justify-means logic.

High-stakes Standardized Tests

The doublespeak around high-stakes standardized testing is one of the most powerful weapons used today by Duncan. The Obama administration has produced mountains of evidence that claiming to reject and decrease testing is a cloak for the inevitability of more testing and more corrosive accountability for teachers. But that debate is masking a deeper problem with confronting high-stakes standardized tests: Many educators are quick to reject the high-stakes element while adding that standardized testing is being misused. And here is where educators are failing the debate.

The high-stakes problem is the secondary problem with standardized testing. Yes, high-stakes create inexcusable outcomes related to testing: teaching to the test, reducing all course content to what-is-tested-is-what-is-taught, reducing teacher quality to test scores, reducing student learning to test scores, and cheating. But rejecting or even calling for removing the high-stakes ignores that standardized tests are flawed themselves. *Standardized tests remain primarily linked to the race, social class, and gender of students; standardized tests label and sort children overwhelmingly based on the coincidence of those children's homes*.

The standardized testing debate is the cigarette debate, not the alcohol debate. Alcohol can be consumed safely and even with health benefits; thus, the alcohol debate is about the use of alcohol, not alcohol itself. Cigarettes are another story; there is no healthy consumption of cigarettes so that debate is about the inherent danger of tobacco.

Educators must expose the double-speak calling for less testing while increasing the testing and the stakes for students and teachers, but we must not allow that charge to trump the need to identify standardized testing as cancerous, to state clearly there is no safe level of standardized testing.

Common Core State Standards

Few moments of double-speak can top Duncan's recent comment about the CCSS: "The idea that the Common Core standards are nationally-imposed is a conspiracy theory in search of a conspiracy. The Common Core academic standards were both developed and adopted by the states, and they have widespread bipartisan support" (Statement by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, 2012).

Among a few others (Krashen, 2012), Susan Ohanian and Stephen Krashen have spoken against the CCSS movement. But as with the high-stakes standardized tests debate, many educators have rushed to seek how best to implement CCSS without considering the first-level question: Why do we need national standards when the evidence shows that *multiple* standards movements have failed repeatedly in the past? (Thomas, 2012, February 13).

The current dystopian-novel-du-jour is *The Hunger Games*. Like Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, this young adult sc-fi novel offers insight into defiance

against compliance to power. Before they are plunged into the Hunger Games (a horrifying reality TV show), the two main characters, Katniss and Peeta, confront their ethical dilemma:

> "No, when the time comes, I'm sure I'll kill just like everybody else. I can't go down without a fight. Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to...to show the Capitol they don't own me. That I'm more than just a piece in their Games," says Peeta.
>
> "But you're not," I [Katniss] say[s]. "None of us are. That's how the Games work." (Collins, 2008, p. 142)

One of the most relevant messages of Collins's novel is that Katniss comes to understand Peeta's critical nature, embracing that her agency is about rising above the Hunger Games, not simply winning the Games as they are dictated for her.

For educators and professional organizations to justify supporting CCSS by demanding a place at the table, they are relinquishing the essential question about whether or not that table should exist.

And this is where educators sit with the CCSS: To implement the CCSS is for the Capitol to own us, to reject CCSS for our own professional autonomy is to be more than just a piece in their Games.

Expertise in Education

The Los Angeles Times has now been followed by *The New York Times* as pawns in the USDOE's games designed to label, rank, and dehumanize teachers the way our education system has treated children for decades. Again, the pattern is disturbing since publishing VAM (value added methods) related data on teachers creates a debate about the publishing of the data and ignores first-level issues. But in this case, another problem concerns *who* has the expertise to frame these debates.

As the backlash mounted against the NYT's publishing teacher rankings, Bill Gates inexplicably rejected publishing VAM-data, and quickly all over Twitter and in blogs, educators began citing Gates's criticism. And here is the problem.

Gates is inexpert about education (Thomas, 2011, March 3); he has no credibility whether his claims are flawed (most of the time) or accurate (although only on the surface since we must ask why he makes these claims). Thus, if educators wish to claim our rightful place as the experts on education, we must not embrace the inexpert, ever. (And this overlaps with the testing dilemma; we must also stop referring to test data when it serves our purposes just as we reject test data when they are harmful.)

Doublespeak as a weapon of the political and cultural elite depends on masking the value of expertise. To expose that to sunshine requires that the expert remain steadfast in honoring who determines our discourse and where we acknowledge credibility and judiciousness.

The Ends-Justify-the-Means Logic

The ugliest and seemingly most enduring double-speak surrounds the rise of support for Teach for America (TFA) and Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charters schools (Thomas, 2011, October 23)—both of which promote themselves as addressing social justice and the plight of poverty. These claims often go unchallenged because both TFA and KIPP keep the debate on the metrics (the ends) and not the "no excuses" ideology (the means).

As long as TFA and KIPP keep the argument about whether or not their approaches raise test scores or graduation rates, we fail to examine the essential flaws in each: TFA creating leaders at the expense of children and schools trapped in poverty, and KIPP (and many charters) implementing "no excuses" practices that are re-segregating schools and perpetuating classist and racist stereotypes.

And this may capture the overarching issue with all of the four points I have addressed here: The ends do not justify the means.

As Orwell has warned, however, politicians craft their words regardless of political party to mask the means with the ends—"to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."

It is now ours as educators to expose the double-speak of the education reform movement while also taking great care not to fall prey to the allure of that strategy ourselves.

About two-thirds into the narrative of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss is forced to confront the earlier discussion between her and Peeta because she has come to love one of her competitors, Rue:

> "It's the Capitol I hate, for doing this to all of us....Then I remember Peeta's words on the roof....And for the first time, I understand what he means.
>
> "I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can't own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I." (Collins, 2008, pp. 235–236)

Universal public education and the autonomy and professionalism of teachers in America are worth this same sentiment, and it is past time for our voices to be heard and our actions to matter.

SEPARATE, UNEQUAL...AND DISTRACTED[2]

When research, history, and allegory all converge to tell us the same story, we must pause to ask why we have ignored the message for so long and why are we likely to continue missing the essential thing before us.

The New York Times and *Education Week* reveal two important lessons in both the message they present and the distinct difference in their framing of that message:

"Black Students Face More Discipline, Data Suggests [sic]" headlines the NYT's article with the lead: "Black students, especially boys, face much harsher discipline in public schools than other students, according to new data from the Department of Education" (Lewin, 2012).

And *EdWeek* announces "Civil Rights Data Show Retention Disparities," opening with:

> New nationwide data collected by the U.S. Department of Education's civil rights office reveal stark racial and ethnic disparities in student retentions, with black and Hispanic students far more likely than white students to repeat a grade, especially in elementary and middle school. (Adams, Robelen, & Shah, 2012)

One has to wonder if this is truly news in the sense that this research is revealing something we don't already know—because we should already know this fact: America's public schools and prisons are stark images of the fact of racial, gender, and socioeconomic inequity in our society (Thomas, 2011, December 22)—inequity that is both perpetuated by and necessary for the ruling elite to maintain their artificial status as that elite.

The research, coming from the U.S. Department of Education, and the media coverage are not evidence we are confronting that reality or that we will address it any time soon. The research and the media coverage are proof we'll spend energy on the research and the coverage in order to mask the racism lingering corrosively in our free state while continuing to blame the students who fail for their failure and the prisoners for their transgressions.

X-Men and The Hunger Games: Allegory as Unmasking

Science fiction allows an artist to pose worlds that appears to be "other worlds" (Atwood, 2011) in order for the readers to come to see our own existence more clearly.

In the most recent film version of Marvel Comics superhero team, *X-Men: First Class*, the powerful allegory of this comic book universe portrays the isolation felt by the mutants—one by one they begin to discover each other and share a common sentiment: "I thought I was the only one."

These mutants feel not only isolation, but also shame—shame for their looks, those things that are not their choices, not within their direct power to control. While this newest film installment reveals the coming together of the mutants, this narrative ends with the inevitable division of the mutants into factions: Professor X's assimilationists and Magneto's radicals.

It takes only a little imagination to see this allegory in the historical factionalism that rose along with the Civil Rights movement between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

In whose interest is this in-fighting?

Although written as young adult literature, *The Hunger Games* trilogy is beginning to spread into mainstream popular consciousness. The savage reality show that pits

children against children to the death gives the first book in the series its title, but as with the research on racial inequity in our schools, I fear we fail to look at either the purpose of these Hunger Games in that other world of the novel or how it speaks to us now.

In *Catching Fire*, Katniss Everdeen, the narrator, confronts directly that her country, Panem, has created stability by factionalizing the people into Districts, ruled by the Capitol.

Panem exists because of the competition among the Districts, daily for resources and once a year personified by two lottery losers, children from each district.

In this second book, Katniss learns something horrifying but true when the winners of the most recent Games, Katniss and Peeta, visit District 11—home of Katniss's friend killed in the Games, Rue: During the celebration, the people of District 11 repeat Katniss's act of rebellion:

> What happens next is not an accident. It is too well executed to be spontaneous, because it happens in complete unison. Every person in the crowd presses the three middle fingers of their left hand against their lips and extends them to me. It's our sign from District 12, the last good-bye I gave Rue in the arena. (Collins, 2009, p. 61)

Then as Katniss and Peeta are rushed from the stage, they witness Peacekeepers executing people in the District 11 crowd. As President Snow has warned Katniss about the possibility of uprisings:

> "But they'll follow if the course of things doesn't change. And uprisings have been known to lead to revolution....Do you have any idea what that would mean? How many people would die? What conditions those left would have to face? Whatever problems anyone may have with the Capitol, believe me when I say that if it released its grip on the districts for even a short time, the entire system would collapse." (Colllins, 2009, p. 21)

What maintains the stability of Panem? Competition, division, and *fear*.

What threatens the stability of Panem and the inequity it maintains? Solidarity, compassion, cooperation, and rebellion.

Separate, Unequal...and Distracted

U.S. public education has always been and remains, again like our prisons, a map of who Americans are and what we are willing to tolerate.

Children of color and children speaking home languages other than English are disproportionately likely to be punished and expelled (especially the boys), disproportionately likely to be retained to suffer the same grade again, disproportionately likely to be in the lowest level classes with the highest student-teacher ratios (while affluent and white children sit in advanced classes with low student-teacher ratios) in order to prepare them for state testing, and

disproportionately likely to be taught by un- and under-certified teachers with the least experience.

And many of these patterns are distinct in pre-kindergarten (Thomas, 2012, February 11).

We don't really need any more research, or history lessons, or SF allegory, or comic books brought to the silver screen.

We need to see the world that our children live in and recognize themselves (just ask an African American young man), and then look in the mirror ourselves.

Why do those in power remain committed to testing children in order to label, sort, and punish them?

Who does the labeling, sorting, and punishing benefit? And what are the reasons behind these facts, the disproportionate inequity in our schools and in our prisons?

We only need each minute of every day to confront what the recent data from the USDOE reveal, but it is always worth noting that this sentiment is often ignored despite its value:

> ...I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free. (Debs, 1918)

How and why?

Eugene V. Debs is marginalized as a socialist, a communist so no one listens to the solidarity of his words. Because this sentiment is dangerous for the Capitol.

If we persist in being shocked by the research or enamored by the exciting story of Katniss, we will remain divided and conquered.

Katniss in *Catching Fire* responds to the president with: "It [Panem] must be very fragile, if a handful of berries can bring it down." To which the president replies, "It is fragile, but not in the way that you suppose" (Collins, 2009, p. 22).

The fragility is masked by the 99% as separate, unequal, and distracted—fighting among ourselves in fear of what we might lose otherwise.

It is time to suppose otherwise.

•

Garcia's chapters that follow offer a challenge to YA literature as an examination of a genre that is itself challenging. The problems, questions, and tensions Garcia explores are intended to inform and confront a wide range of audiences interested in YA—fans, scholars, and teachers. Ultimately, this volume along with others in the series seeks to add momentum to the wider discussion and debates about what constitutes "text," "genre," "medium," and "mode"—as well as why any of those questions matter.

P. L. Thomas
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June 2013

NOTES

[1] Thomas, P. L. (2012, February 27). The education games: Reform as double-speak. *Daily Kos*. http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/02/27/1068659/-The-Education-Games-Reform-as-Double-Speak

[2] Thomas, P. L. (2012, March 6). Separate, unequal...and distracted. *Daily Kos*. Retrieved from http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/03/06/1071600/-Separate-Unequal-and-Distracted

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INTRODUCTION

READING UNEASE

Just Who, Exactly, Is Young Adult Literature Made For?

I first felt the feeling of unease during one of those bright and elusive moments of engaged silence in my 11th grade classroom. Those few times I would cling to as a new teacher when the entire overcrowded classroom, including myself, decided to delve into a book and take part in school promoted "silent sustained reading." In retrospect, I probably should have savored this moment. Here I was, a new teacher usually spending my time feeling out of my depths and the class was actually focused. But then something caught my eye. The smiling white face with even whiter teeth on the cover a student's copy of *Gossip Girl* seemed curiously out-of-sync with the all black and brown faces of the students I worked with in South Central Los Angeles. One student was hooked on book five of the Harry Potter series–this was before the final volumes of the series were published. All around me I saw, for a fleeting moment, my students immersed in the *products* that were marketed for them. The deliberate depictions of fun and affluence on the covers of these books often looked nothing like the lived experiences of my students. A quick scan of authors' names and I made an assumption that most of the students were reading works by white authors.

Reading the immersion of my students around the room that day did not fill me with the kind of pride I would previously get when the class was mutually engaged. Instead, I read the classroom with concern and unease. In some ways, these feelings actually mirrored many of my students' attitudes toward to reading; I suspect that the resistance many of my students initially met reading in my classroom with was a response to the ways they were required to read about *someone else's* culture in the young adult books they were offered. In the print-rich classroom environment I strived for, the lives, experiences, and challenges unique to the diverse and questioning students in my classroom were largely left unprinted and unacknowledged.

• • •

I grew up in a print-rich household. The son of two educators, I learned books were kind of a big deal growing up. I remember polishing off *The Hobbit* early on in elementary school and by middle school being caught in whirlwind of Crichtons and Grishams and the fantasy of Piers Anthony and the flurry of comic books pulled from my local shop near-weekly. It was actually the required reading in my high school English classes that pulled me more fully into the realm of YA literature: *The Outsiders* and *The House on Mango Street* and Holden Caulfield and Gene from *A Separate Peace*

were my guides into a world of literature that was written specifically for people my age. As a multiracial young man, I discovered my reading choices reflected diversity of characters. From early on I dove into Neruda and jazz biographies; books were a space of possibilities that reflected realities and lived experiences both similar and very different from my own. To be clear, if I wanted, I had the resources (and a patient mother that would drive me to a library or bookstore) to read about people and cultural practices I understood. These were largely not young adult books, though.

That morning, back in my classroom with my 11th graders, as an overwhelmed new teacher, was different from my childhood experiences. That morning served as a wake-up call for me: what exactly were my students reading? Perhaps more importantly, what kinds of lessons were they taking with them from these books.

WHAT'S THIS ALL ABOUT?

This is a book that sets out to better illustrate what is being explored, defined, and conveyed in young adult literature today. In my own concern about how one of the fastest growing genres of books (even in this digital age) is impacting student identity, I have set out to identify some of the biggest challenges educators face with regard to young adult literature. Along the way I also hope to identify how to turn even problematic aspects of books into powerful opportunities for learning and engagement. This book is for educators, librarians, and others that may work closely with young people. Further, if you're interested in how the young adult literature section of your local library or bookstore is redefining society today, keep reading.

In an essay discussing race and positionality as a white male, William Ayers (1997) writes:

> But race is unspeakable. "We don't talk that way." I'll say. We don't talk at all. And in silence a lens of distorted images, fears, misunderstandings, and cool calculatedness slips neatly into place. (p. 131)

Throughout this book, I prod and poke at the spaces of young adult literature that I feel are not under enough scrutiny. *Why* are certain characters typically white? Or heterosexual? Or able-bodied? And when they're not how do these books tokenize, appropriate, or make up the cultures of others? It may seem like I am unfairly picking on cherry-picked books here. However, the focus here is with voicing and revealing the "lens of distorted images, fears, [and] misunderstandings" that emerge in young adult literature. As the genre of YA continues to complexify in today's global economy, a discussion of what is and is not being represented within these books needs to take place for educators and librarians.

As much as this book is written as a resource for educators, I also want to note what this book is not. What this book *isn't,* is an annotated bibliography of YA books for the classroom. Other publications dedicated solely to the purpose of reader's

advisory are available. Likewise, I do not offer a comprehensive, decade-by-decade history of YA. Noted YA scholar Michael Cart's work, such as 2010's *Young Adult Literature from Romance to Realism* functions as a powerful background in this regard. Instead, I offer enough background to provide salient examples for readers to reconsider the challenges and pedagogical opportunities to be found within the genre. Additionally, this is not purely an instructional guide: though significant lesson ideas, discussion questions, and curricular ideas are shared in each chapter, this book does not seek to be used as a planning guide for teachers.

In particular, I hope to suggest the reading of this book as a provocation: it is a challenge to the status quo acceptance of how YA has crept into mainstream popular culture. Beyond the picket-fence boundaries of yester-year, the genre today presents a capitalistic force that needs to be confronted, challenged, and revealed within classrooms and out-of-school learning spaces like libraries.

A GENRE IN MOTION

In recent years, the role that young adult fiction plays in particular strands of adult society has shifted significantly. More than a pastime for the demographic for which it is named, young adult fiction drives cultural engagement for a large portion of literate America. Additionally, as more young adult authors work toward bleak and post-apocalyptic world-building, the novels that are consumed profitably by the book-buying audience are acting as a zeitgeist of the current climate in America, politically, civically, and culturally. Recent best selling series like the *Hunger Games, Uglies, Chaos Walking*, and the *Maze Runner* are not necessarily exceptional in that they point to a radically different and violent future. The ways dystopian novels function for teens is discussed in Chapter Three.

As numerous young adult texts are transformed into lucrative Hollywood franchises, the potential of young adult literature to guide hegemonic understanding of society increases exponentially. Depicting traditional, rags-to-riches visions of success in wizardly schools, being rescued as damsels in undead distress, and the meek inheriting the "colonies" of *The Hunger Games* are ways to placate American audiences and ensure a lack of criticality is fostered in both text and adaptation.

At the same time that these novels point to a post-apocalyptic collapse of society, the form of these texts drives young people and the middle-class and affluent book-buying audience toward further understandings of consumption and commodity. A look at how capitalism affects publishing models and the books our students are reading continues in the next chapter.

Indeed, unlike almost any other sector of the entertainment world, the shift in book buying seems to move away from the kinds of DIY-practices that are enabled by what Jenkins (2008) calls a "convergence culture" (p. 2). While record sales have declined rapidly as a result of file sharing and film companies take extraneous measures to attempt to thwart pirating of commercial material, book sales have shown

sharp increases in recent years (Goodnow, 2007). In particular, these increases often point to the fact that YA sells not simply to a youth market but speaks to the interests of myriad generations of American youth. These sales, however, are not necessarily fostering communities of readers in the same way that book clubs and local libraries might; they funnel interest toward specific serialized texts. Independent booksellers and publishers are facing increasing challenges in this context. The corporate systematic closures of Borders bookstores, for instance speaks to the ways that spending habits of book buyers has shifted.

What does this mean in our classrooms? Well, for one thing, the ways that young people encounter and interact with young adult literature is significantly different. The likelihood that these texts will speak to heteronormative, white protagonists is substantially increased; in a recent article two authors claimed that publishers would not print their YA books unless they "straightened" gay characters (Flood, 2011). Additionally, other publishers are blatantly attempting to incorporate product-placement within their texts.

Violence, misogyny, and exploitive sex are rampant in some texts. A controversial recent article from the *Wall Street Journal*, "Darkness Too Visible" condemned the genre and its popularity particularly because of these recurring tropes in a genre aimed at maturing youth (Gurdon, 2011). And while the article itself is problematic, the depictions in many YA texts of graphic imagery are often read by students without opportunities for critical discussion or classroom community support. While I am a strong proponent of life-long reading, these changes in how books are authored, published, and consumed speak to fundamental changes in how young people are reading and understanding their role in the world around them.

As books are serialized by mainstream publishers, YA literature is–in general–forcing readers to consume books in ways that orient them towards hegemony, encourage their consumption of specific forms of publishing, and–ultimately–redefine what it means to be a reader in the 21st Century.

There are, of course, several positive changes in the ways that the YA genre is changing. While corporate book publishers largely have a strong grasp on the market of popular books, several authors have developed strong followings that critique various aspects of hegemonic definitions of identity. Similarly, several authors and fan communities have utilized the affordances of digital media to foster activism as a form of fandom. Popular novelist, John Green, for example, leverages digital media to engage directly with fans, share ideas with them and bridge this relationship into a civic-focused online community called Don't Forget to Be Awesome (DFTBA). Green's work and that of groups like the Harry Potter Alliance will be discussed at length in Chapter Six.

Throughout this book, I offer a critical examination of the role that the young adult book genre plays in fomenting public opinion, cultural understandings of race, class, and power, and ways to engage in American civic life. To this end, I begin this book with a general introduction about what is considered "young adult literature" and how this definition has shifted in recent years.

TROUBLING QUESTIONS: WHAT IS YA AND WHAT DOES IT DO?

What do I mean by Young Adult literature? The definitions of young adult (YA) literature tend to revolve, unsurprisingly, around the name itself. These are genre books that–at first–tended to be written about and for adolescents. That's partly it. However, even this definition and the assumptions of what counts as YA need to be parsed more critically. In particular, this book is concerned with who YA is directed at.

The Young Adult genre is a staunchly American tradition. Though there has been a long tradition of books for children, Cart (2010) argues that the first book deliberately marketed for young adults was Maureen Daly's only novel, *Seventeenth Summer* (1942). Cart explains:

> The merchandising of and to "the juvenile" had begun in the late 1930s, coincident with the emergence of the new youth culture. The movement picked up steam in the 1940s as marketers realized that these kids–whom they called, variously, teens, teensters, and finally (in 1941) teenagers–were "an attractive new market in the making" (Palladino 1996, 52). That market wouldn't fully ripen until post-World War II prosperity put money into the kids' own pockets, money that had previously gone to support the entire family. (p. 11)

It is important to recognize the commercial origins of YA literature. A market emerged around new American wealth and teens were catered to in ways that U.S. Society had not previously. This commercial beginning parallels other emerging publishing genres including comics and graphic novels (Thomas, 2010).

More specific than simply *teenagers*, a large portion of YA is focused on the interest of white, affluent teenagers. It depicts the culture and life choices of America's affluent even in controversial texts that are seen as challenging, provocative, difficult. What's more, in *depicting* a specific set of cultural practices, YA–in general–*defines and reinforces* these practices over time. Let's explore the implications of this a bit more closely: for the black and Latino students I spent the majority of my teaching career working with, it means that the high-interest YA that my bookshelves were filled with often did not reflect my students' life experiences. It negated them.

Of course there are numerous popular YA authors that help bridge a multicultural scope within the genre. The names are a mantra for many teachers and librarians because this handful of authors are the easy *go to* writers when looking for youth of color: The Walter Dean Myers and the Gary Sotos and the Sherman Alexies and Sandra Cisneros and Sharon Drapers. This multicultural canon is discussed at length in Chapter Two. These are authors that write important texts that need to be read and recognized. However, think about what it means that the writers of and about youth of color that are validated by the publishing industry can be easily listed in a single sentence. There is a clear gap in name recognition of multicultural writers and all the rest of 'em.

Through reading YA literature, nuanced definitions of what it means to be a teenager in western society are reified. Youth culture is in part constructed through

the ways society reads, interprets and reflects the books of young adult literature. And if authors of color are not at the heart of this effort, troubling implications about whom has power in defining culture are at work in our classrooms and libraries today.

Several questions follow from this broad look at how YA produces culture. For one, *who* is constructing this culture? Authors of these books come to mind, but they are only a small part of what Thompson (2010) calls the "value chain" that goes into producing a book. Implicit here is the next question: for whom is this culture constructed? As a consumer of YA texts long after my formative adolescent years, I am reasonably convinced that the stories in YA novels are not written with me in mind. However, the language, the actions, and depictions of *normalcy* within the novels all exert force on me, guiding me to understand what youth behavior looks like and what are *normal* feelings. Of course, I don't always agree with these depictions of youth. They do not always align with my own experiences when I was a young adult.

All of this leads us to another question: if YA books are directed toward building culture for the readers that encounter them, exactly *whose* culture are we talking about? However, the audience (intended and actual) of YA literature is contested; there is not a defined age group that is specified within YA. The sharp rise in popularity of YA books amongst adults is a topic that will be significantly discussed later in this book.

ON THE BOOK INDUSTRY

John Thompson's 2010 book exploring the nature of book publishing is fittingly titled *Merchants of Culture.* Apropos of the preceding questions about the role of YA, it is interesting to see the growth of YA within the history of how books have been consumed. As Thompson's book described an "industry in transition" YA is only one faucet of how book distribution and cultural consumption is taking place.

Looking at the 20th century of book sales, Thompson (2010) describes books as an "elite" market through the late '60s. Though books influenced culture, they were not consumed regularly by most middle and working class families. However, the '70s and '80s were the rise of the mall bookstores that helped usher in book buying practices for the masses. The B. Daltons and Waldenbooks that proliferated in malls made buying books, easy, affordable and something that was visible and accepted. I would add that–as someone who grew up during this era–these were stores that became safe havens to seek refuge during marathon mall-shopping trips. As I grew out of the toy stores of my youth, I found I could wander the bookstores of malls and find things of interest. These public, commercial spaces, helped guide lessons of identity as I perused the shifting covers from month to month.

By the 1990s, a new form of commercial book selling space emerged: the big bookstores. Barnes and Noble and Borders helped redefine the shopping space even further. Instead of merely wandering, these spaces encouraged lounging and engaging in these spaces. The local big bookstore had comfortable seats and maybe

even a Starbucks. Hey, grab a seat, dive in, maybe buy something while you're at it. It's not a surprise that many libraries today are shifting to a bookstore model of organization: these were stores that offered the resources of libraries without the whispering and no-food policies that I was met with in my school library spaces.

By the late '90s, book selling started moving online. As I write this, the buying of books online is a regular, common practice, though it may have sounded outlandish just 15 or 20 years ago. Further, that books can be bought *digitally* and that such a notion can feel *normal* is also something that would be alien not long ago.

Throughout all of these shifts within a relatively short period of time, waves of opening and closing emerged: the big bookstores signaled a death knell for the Waldenbooks for the most part. Likewise, online markets are largely overcoming the big bookstore model of the '90s. And more importantly, consumers are reading and buying different books in different ways. Though waiting for books to be printed in paperback used to make the most economic sense, the undercutting of retailers like Amazon make hardcover books much more cost effective. As mall bookstores, according to Thompson, relied on the sale of paperback books and word-of-mouth backlisted, non-current titles, today's market is much more focused on recent publications.

So where does YA fit into all of this change? In general the Young Adult genre really came to fruition during the quickly spreading popularizing book industry of the '70s and beyond. As the rise of mall bookstores came and went, so too did the kinds of books marketed to teens. Today the YA section is flush with hardback books, marked at lower costs than hardcover adult works. These are books that replicate adult books in both form and size. The lengths of these books often equal if not surpass typical adult novels, even if the word count may be less. Increased font size and widened margins stretch shorter YA novels into 300 and 400 page books.

Through all of these changes an interesting trend emerges: YA is not a back-list genre. As the Harry Potter and Twilight crazes came and went, the interests in these books in my classroom subsided. *New* books are the lingua franca of YA. Though there are enduring classics that teachers cling to, if a book isn't new–as signaled by timely design and marketing–its moment has already passed. I would argue this is a major reason for the serialization of books in the post-Potter era of YA. Authors need to stay relevant in an era of many options for young people.

ARCHETYPES AND TROPES

As I stated earlier, this book is not a census of YA titles. It looks broadly at the ways young adult novels tend to depict the world in very similar ways. While each chapter of this book will focus on a handful of published books, these are shared to elucidate my arguments about how YA texts help reify cultural assumptions and viewpoints about power and representation; for example, one chapter focuses on how YA novels reinforce gender stereotypes. The texts I've chosen are books I've seen my students regularly engage with, books I see most prominently featured in

brick and mortar bookstores, and books that I noted on bestseller lists. As such, this is a book that is focused on the contemporary young adult novels that are easily accessible to the students in our schools and libraries today. Throughout this book I look at some historical antecedents to contemporary works and also explore YA novels that have continued to find an audience decades after they were first published (e.g. *Go Ask Alice*, *The Outsiders*, and *The Chocolate War*). However, though a book like John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It better be worth the trip* (1969) is a historically significant YA novel–it is regarded as one of the first teen books to feature a homosexual protagonist (Cart and Jenkins, 2004); it is not a book that is widely read or most representative of LGBTQI topics in YA.

This populist approach to books in the YA genre is understandably problematic. However, I am attempting, here, to look closely at whose voices are most represented within the genre and how such voices contribute to young people's understanding of the world around them. Yes, there are numerous books that cater to challenging dominant ideologies and some of these will be shared as examples and corollaries throughout this text. However, for the most part, these books are often difficult books to acquire for teachers and young people. More importantly, in *challenging* the YA genre as this book's title suggests, I am not seeking to guide educators and readers to solely read alternatives. Instead, through reading and exploring best selling titles through various literary lenses, I am hoping to guide readers to feelings of empowerment regardless of the text before them.

As a former high school teacher that constantly attempted to stay current with the available YA texts for my students, I admire the work that librarians do, staying on top of the latest publications in a now flooded YA marketplace. These herculean efforts by librarians are synthesized in periodicals like the *School Library Journal*. If you are looking for non-critical resources that detail the abundant YA titles available, I encourage you to look at this title. Even better, I'd encourage you to become friends with the local teen librarian and ask lots and lots of questions. I will not be trying to share an objective representation of YA titles. Instead, I reject the notion of an objectivity when reading or selecting the publications for a book such as this.

However the books I've selected throughout this book for analysis are representative of the kinds of recurring archetypes and tropes that I've seen most common in my reading of YA during my formative (and awkward) adolescent years and the decade I have spent working in the classroom and with preservice English educators.

Archetypes and tropes help illuminate the blueprint inherent in many YA texts. The familiarity of stock characters and plot devices make these spaces familiar even as they differ somewhat from book to book. Further, familiarity of the books within YA subgenres such as dystopian and paranormal novels (described in Chapters Three and Five) help readers navigate the stories while also engraining the messages the books provide about living and acting within the *real* world. Bakhtin's (1981) exploration of discourses finds polyphonic voices echoing across novels. The heteroglossia of texts reveals a rich cacophony of ideas and experiences in the words our students encounter.

A BOOK ABOUT THEORY

In each chapter of this book, key critical theoretical lenses are used to analyze a component of YA literature.

- In Chapter One we look at Marxist critiques of capitalism.
- In Chapter Two we engage YA novels through action and reflection known as Critical Race Theory.
- Chapter Three utilizes Post-Colonial Theory and Post-Structuralism to look at popular books like *Gossip Girl*.
- A feminist lens and application of queer theory help explore gender and sexuality construction in YA in Chapter Four.
- Chapter Five revolves around educating with YA through the use of critical pedagogy.
- Chapter Six explore how technology shifts YA literature in a participatory culture.

Asserting the role of critical literary theory in English classrooms, Appleman (2000) begins her book, *Critical Encounters in High School English* by describing what is gained by this approach. She writes that "the direct teaching of literary theory in secondary English classes will better prepare adolescent readers to respond reflectively and analytically to literary texts, both 'canonical' and multicultural" (p. 2). She extends this shortly after by noting the transformative ways theory can expand learning beyond the literary page: "contemporary literary theory provides a useful way for all students to read and interpret not only literary texts but their lives– both in and out of school" (p. 2).

This book also takes a theory-driven approach to understanding the nature of books adolescents are frequently exposed to. However, while Appleman's (2000) text tends to focus on literary theories or on literary applications of theories such as feminism and Marxism, this work looks to extend these even more deliberately. When discussing feminist readings of a text like *Gossip Girl*, for instance, this book offers such analysis as a launching point for larger inquiry into social critique. As literature can act as a doorway toward larger reflections on sociocultural practices, the intention here and in the classes I taught while working with teens in South Central Los Angeles was to use theory as a transformative process. As such, a theory such as Critical Race Theory (discussed in Chapter Two) challenges existing assumptions of race and its intersectionality with other forms of marginalization. Not typically a theory for reading and interpreting literary texts, the central tenets of this theory help offer blueprints for action. Theory, in this book, strives to be something to act upon and to incite practice and social transformation.

This is not purely an intellectual exercise. Instead, in wielding these various lenses as a means of parsing the complicated, layered challenges of YA, I offer strategies for discussing books with young people. Each chapter is rooted in key questions to apply to a secondary classroom practice.

Though this book focuses on utilizing theory as a means of unpacking, problematizing, and expanding on YA novels, it is important to recognize that this is a text that is focused on teachers, librarians, and teacher educators. The shifting vocational nature of the teaching labor force is pushing teachers to be seen less as intellectual contributors and more as curriculum distributors. However, as a former high school teacher and current teacher educator, I write this book with the sense of continued hope in teachers as intellectuals. I see educators and individuals who are working directly with young people as experts that need to contribute to and be challenged by educational and literacy theories. That being said, I see theory–understanding it, responding to it, building it anew–as an essential gateway that can hold back or provide a sense of empowerment for educators and students. Teaching *with* theory not simply *about* theory is an important resource for educators to better reflect and challenge the lived experiences and expectations of young adults today.

Critical theorist Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) describes theory as a "set of knowledges" (p. xxv). In looking at the role of theory in relation to women of color, Anzaldúa describes the importance of direct interaction with theory for disenfranchised individuals broadly:

> Some of these knowledges have been kept from us—entry into some professions and academia denied us. Because we are not allowed to enter discourse, because we are often disqualified and excluded from it, because what passes for theory these days is forbidden territory for us, it is vital that we occupy theorizing space, that we not allow white men and women solely to occupy it. By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space. (p. xxv)

I would argue that Anzaldúa's framework of working from and occupying a "theorizing space" is a necessary stance with which to approach YA literature in both classrooms and library spaces. Intellectualizing the reading experience for young people is an actionable process of social transformation and one that is collaborative. As I describe below, my work on this book was done in collaboration and solidarity with the students I've worked with as an educator.

A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

In Chapter Six, I will look at the ways digital tools have shifted cultural assumptions about production and consumption of young adult texts. In doing so, I will explore the online writing and social community, *Figment*. It is one of several online spaces focused on young people writing, sharing, and discussing young adult literature. And though the site and the way it helps challenge traditional understandings of the YA genre are discussed in that chapter, it is important to acknowledge, here, *Figment*'s implicit contribution to this book. In early 2012, I was preparing to teach my first Adolescent Literature course at Colorado State University. I felt that, though I was an avid YA reader, I would prefer to have the book selections in the course

guided by the appreciation and enthusiasm of actual adolescents engaged in reading adolescents' literature. I posted on *Figment* asking for book suggestions for the class. The numerous responses I received over a month-long period varied widely from advice on what books *not* to teach to suggestions of activities I should include to well-argued rationales for certain books to be taught. Though I augmented the student recommendations with slightly older books (*The Chocolate War*, *The Pigman*, and *Go Ask Alice*) I felt helped illustrate classical YA tropes, the syllabus for my first Adolescents' Literature class reflected the selections and voices of passionate YA reading teenagers. These books aside, immersing myself within this select group's textual choices helped me identify trends, outliers, and various ways the YA genre is in a state of flux. The books most discussed throughout my inquiry into the YA genre are reflective of the books that *Figment* members selected. The digital fingerprints of young people's personal reading recommendations helped shape and gather the analysis in this book.

In a class I teach for future teachers, "Teaching Reading," my students read Donalyn Miller's *The Book Whisperer* (2009). The flood of books she describes handing out to her students sweeps away some of my students with enthusiasm and terrifies others. "I don't have the time to read enough books to make recommendations to my students," my students comment (not to mention questioning the cost of building a classroom library as a new teacher). Over my years as a teacher, I've made it a habit to read *lots* of YA books. I'll admit it's a fun genre to dive into (though getting glares when reading a book like *Gossip Girl* in public is always interesting). However, while I may have numerous ideas of books to point my students to, youth recommendations, in my eyes, always trump what a crotchety adult is going to say. If I can get students to recommend books to each other or get other teen-recommendations from sites like *Figment* it goes a long way toward building strong readers over time.

A NOTE ON CONTRADICTION AND PASSION

Before ending this introduction, I want to note that, while the chapters of this book point to myriad YA texts, there is a plethora of YA books that are not addressed that may run counter to the thesis of each chapter. To be clear, there are, indeed, numerous YA books that challenge typical conceptions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and power. Readers may feel the examples shared here are not inclusive of these. However, as I stated earlier, my goal in this book is not to provide a sweeping look at every instantiation of every YA topic, but to look at general trends prevalent in twenty-first century YA as a marketed genre.

I want to recognize that the statements in this book are often generalized in ways that can be seen as problematic: for every statement I make decrying portrayals of race, class, gender, and sexuality in popular YA, I am sure that avid readers can quickly point to exceptions. Of course their are *some* powerful and honest depictions of gay teenagers in YA. And of course their are powerful representations of youth of color in YA that do not simply depict an urban ghetto. There are even sensitive and

empowering paranormal male and female heartthrobs out there! When appropriate, I attempt to share the counter-narratives to problematic and stereotypical politics of representation. However, when I focus much of a chapter on a single, problematic text, I don't do this to pinpoint one single book's shortcomings but as a depiction of continuing trends in Young Adult literature.

Finally, I also need to make clear that I write this book from a place of reserved love for the genre. Reading drew me into my constant orbit around bookstores (and the subsequent toll my passion for reading has had on my wallet). While the majority of the text that follows often looks critically at the current state of young adult literature I do so not as a despised take-down of books that 'kids are reading these days' but because this is a genre that is important to me as an avid reader, an educator of young people, and a participant in the society that is being shaped by and through youth readings of these texts.

CHAPTER 1

CAPITALISM, HOLLYWOOD, AND ADULT APPROPRIATION OF YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

The Harry Potter Effect

In November 2010, my then girlfriend now wife and I–while in Orlando for the annual conference of the National Council of Teachers of English–spent an evening in a packed IMAX movie theater and watched the penultimate film adaptation of the Harry Potter film series. The movie was dark and unsatisfying in that its complete narrative would not yet be released for some months. Walking out of the theater both noting the deviations and notable absences in translation from page to screen, my partner and I agreed to head back to the hotel early: we had a big day tomorrow. We had tickets to Hogwarts. Admission cost $88 each (Universal Studios, 2010).

The next day was spent primarily in lines. The Wizarding World of Harry Potter in Orlando lived up to the expectations of theme park spectacle. Hours were spent in lines. We waited to journey with Harry, Hermione and Ron through the castle that they and their millions of fans called home for more than a decade. We waited to try frozen butterbeer melting under the hot autumn sun ($10). We waited to take pictures in front of the Hogwarts Express and its cheerfully patient conductor. We waited in line to get into the gift shop. Actually, let me restate that: we waited nearly an hour to get into a shop to buy merchandise while in a park that we already paid to get into. And then, noticing that a separate store, Zonko's Joke Shop, sold one-of-a-kind products akin to the gags that Ron's older twin brothers (and fan favorites) Fred and George Weasley create in the books, we waited in line for a gift shop again. The day was a fitting tribute to the capitalistic machine that has pushed Harry Potter and an army of similarly franchise-focused texts into the laps and minds of teenagers and adults alike.

Harry Potter as a book franchise has sold more than 400 million copies globally. Subsequently (and sometimes concurrently depending on book and movie release dates), the eight film adaptations of the seven J.K. Rowling novels earned more than $7.7 billion in worldwide box office sales, making it the highest grossing franchise of all time (Box Office Mojo, 2013). The astronomical success of the Harry Potter franchise is unlike any book that has since followed in its publishing footsteps. *The Twilight* films have broken numerous box office records, but the sustained book, movie, and product sales of Harry Potter have yet to be surpassed. For myriad children growing up around the world during the years that the Rowling series was released, Harry Potter is beacon of exactly why we can fall in love with books. Though his world was mysterious and rife with danger and wonder, it was also

a humanizing world of pathos, anger, and learning to accept the world for what it is. From numerous critical lenses, there are valuable lessons to delve into with young people in the pages of the seven Potter novels. Harry Potter is much more than simply "the boy who lived." For many readers he is a vibrant symbol of the power of young adult literature. At the same time, the boy who lived also became the apotheosis of capitalism.

CAPITALISM

Consumption is perhaps the only way of perceived living within schools today. From how youth are marketed to in their own social circles such as the clothes they wear or the music they listen to or the phones they display to friends, to the marketing of youth culture in the content students are given in classrooms: state-bought standardized tests, billionaire publishers' textbooks and–of course–the literature they read, young people's choices in schools are limited to what marketers and mass media producers deign for them to purchase. As such, the reason young adult literature is so widely recognized in today's classrooms, movie theaters, and airport bookstores is, in large part, because of its dominance in western markets. That is, the sheer number of YA books sold around the globe funnel interest and awareness into classrooms, guide filmmaking decisions, and shift which book titles are featured for passersby to entice sales. At the heart of YA prominence is the central role of capitalism in guiding sales and profit.

As much of this chapter contends with the relationship between YA and western capitalism, a brief description of what I mean by capitalism follows. In general, I am building and relying on a Marxist understanding of labor, surplus, and class structures within this definition. That being said, for a more in-depth description of Marx's influence on schools and markets, I encourage readers to look at Paula Allman's *On Marx* (2007) and Marx's *Selected Writings* edited by David McLellan (2000).

The problem with the way capitalism drives society is that it doesn't leave young people with a lot of options. In a very basic sense, capitalism is a socioeconomic system that allows individual businesses or corporations to profit from the products they produce or the services they provide. This takes place in a *free market* system where government intervention does not take place. One of the main critiques of capitalist systems is that profit falls on the backs of a laboring, working class. Laborers depend on business owners for a living wage salary and businesses profit by maintaining a surplus between what is paid to laborers and the value their products receive within a market. While workers may feel like they are not being paid enough, there are few alternatives in the reality of free markets today: scant job opportunities and high unemployment mean that the power owners maintain in providing salaries allows them to dictate wages. From a Marxist perspective, capitalism drives large societal stratification between a minority class that maintains surplus and a majority of society that works as laborers.

For young people, free markets compete for their interests and money. Whoever creates a product that is of interest to young people will, in theory, receive money (and profit) for the services they provide. However, when very few publishers largely control the majority of the YA market, the choices made available to young people are limiting. If bookstores only display the prominent titles being released, it is difficult for young people to truly find the books that speak to them; instead they must bend to meet the garroting options of a modern capitalist market. This form of push marketing offers consumers little opportunity for exploration, personal inquiry, or choice in the book buying market.

From a theoretical stance, capitalism can be read and interpreted and is something that can be discussed and explored with young people in varied contexts. However, it is important to stress that capitalism is much more than a theoretical construct: since a world of profit, surplus, debt, and labor drive the actions and structures schools prepare children for, looking at how these structures play out in the books youth read is necessary. For example, because books and–to be more specific–young adult books cater to a specific market, surplus and labor are built around youth consumption of books. Though interest driven, this effort to profit on youth is how traditional capitalist markets thrive. Like summer blockbuster films yielding hundreds of millions of dollars in a matter of days, the proliferation of profit in the book market depends on content that is high-interest and marketing strategies that coerce a demographic to pay for a specific author's work.

Though we will later explore how young adult books are being produced and consumed, at times, differently in a digital age, this chapter focuses on how book consumption has evolved today. No longer are popular sales framed around specific plot-lines but around brands that may be based on authors, story tropes or cover design. The reading of books begins long before the spine of the latest YA title is cracked; glancing at the colors, placement of images, titles, pull-quotes, and authors clue readers in quickly as to whether they are the correct market for any given book. Like the movie posters that will now invariably follow the bestselling books–*City of Bones*, *I Am Number Four*, *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, *Twilight*–books are designed to engage a capitalist market and thrive based on marketing specific forms of youth interest.

Blockbuster films aren't a new thing. Neither are books that become the latest book-buying craze. The popularity of Harry Potter—at least in terms of book sales–has dampened since the final movie concluded the saga. Ostensibly, fewer children are currently reading Harry Potter books today than in the past. And while Chapter Six will look at how digital tools have helped proliferate adventures and ways to engage with the world of Hogwarts, the book and film series of Harry Potter have largely come and gone. So why is this anything worth educators considering? A couple of things have fundamentally changed in how books are marketed and the relationship between youth and non-youth pop culture as a result of Harry Potter. It is the way the monumental success of these books impacts popular culture across age lines that is so striking in the 21st century. Harry Potter, in particular has helped

propel youth culture as a key part of mainstream culture. It has also helped make the constantly promoted notion of life-long reading for young people a concurrent call for life long consumption and shapes the capitalistic practices of youth.

ON CO-OPTING YOUTH CULTURE

It snuck up on all of us. At least I'd like to think so. On July 7, 2000, I met my mother at a local Barnes and Noble in east San Diego County at 11 at night. The place was packed. It was packed with *kids*. Not the teenagers I would work with as a teacher a few years down the road, but like *kid* kids. My mom, a middle school teacher at the time, smiled as the youngsters that would come up saying hello to "Mrs. Garcia" shyly got back into line, awaiting the release of the fourth book in the Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. I'd browsed the books displayed, but neither my own interest nor professional responsibility called for me to dive into the Harry Potter books. These were, I assumed, still books for kids and about kids. Many Potter fans will point to the way the books increase in plot, linguistic, and emotional complexity as the stories unfold, essentially growing into the kinds of books maturing readers would appreciate. Over time, Harry Potter's foibles became the fodder of a teenage audience less interested in troll boogers and more interested in the responsibilities of individuals, the labor rights of elves, and accepting loss and responsibility. In this gradual shift over the course of the seven books, J.K. Rowling helped sneak a strand of youth culture into mainstream acceptance. It was kind of cute in the early 2000s seeing my friends reading Harry Potter. Around the time the first Twilight film came out, you probably noticed other adults unabashedly enthralled with the comings and goings of the Cullens. This wasn't always the case.

While nostalgia may have driven some YA reading selections for adults, I am arguing that it was largely the transitional nature of the prose and content in J.K. Rowling's books that helped turn young adult literature into something that even adults openly embrace. In fact, the J.K. Rowling series is typically filed in the Juvenile Fiction section of public libraries based on the age of the protagonist in the book (at least at the start of the series). The mixture of narratives that were being written for an aging, teen audience and a budding film franchise helped Potter become a beacon for young adult literature being accepted by a mainstream and adult audience.

Fast forward more than a decade later, and the results of this work are staggering. A 2012 market research report, "Understanding the Children's Book Consumer in the Digital Age" (Bowker Market Research) found that the majority of YA consumers are 18 years or older. Though some of this demographic may be purchasing YA titles for friends, siblings, and children, the report clarifies that 78 percent of this demographic are typically buying these books for their own reading. Again, in isolation, this statistic can be lead toward incorrect inference about book buyers: one could assume that book readers that only recently became adults or hit their 20s are continuing to draw on their youthful interests and reading the YA books that they grew up with. This isn't the case. The Bowker report indicates that the biggest

group of adults buying YA books in the 21st century are between the ages of 30 and 44. This demographic accounts for nearly 30 percent of all YA book buying, which is staggering. For a genre that–at least in name–claims to be for and about young adults, that much of its primary audience is older has significant ramifications on the future of the genre. The graphic depictions of sex and violence in blockbuster titles such as *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* (a book that the report notes makes up a large percentage of the adult readership) are often pointed to as reasons why *young adult* titles aren't necessarily suitable for a teenage readership (Gurdon, 2011).

If adults are the primary buyers of young adult novels, it is likely that publishers are going to focus on the needs and interests of this demographic. Which begs an important question: what happens to a genre as it slowly focuses on a paying clientele that its name belies? As a relatively recent trend, the shifts in YA literature are such that it isn't clear if the focus on post-apocalyptic or paranormal settings–for example– are responses to an adult readership, a teenage one, or a cultural emphasis on the bleak, the dead, the escapist setting of something and somewhere else. What is clear is that the YA genre is now being openly read by adults in far greater numbers than ever before. With this relatively new audience, authors and publishers need to make different decisions about the kinds of content they publish and how it is marketed. Though this may not dramatically shift what these books look like or how they depict teenage struggles, they shift the priorities for publishers. Teenagers cease to be the sole clientele to please in a post-Potter YA marketplace. The whims, trends, and interests of adults now act as a factor to be considered in publishing decisions. The mass popularity of the first three Harry Potter books in the late 1990s led to the New York Times adding a Children's Best Seller List to its weekly statistics on book sales in the U.S. (Smith, 2000). This addition was done just prior to the fourth installment in the Harry Potter series being released and in direct response to the fact that the first Harry Potter books spent more than 79 weeks on the adult bestseller lists.

All of this leads to an important and problematic question based on contemporary trends: what happens when youth culture becomes mainstream culture? As some of the biggest films being released are based on youth-oriented comic books and novels, the populist climate in western culture is driven more and more today by young adult literature. Though the historical precedent of YA as a genre comes from a place of writing to and expressing the feelings of teens, today's YA books are driven by the potential of profit that is not tied to specific age brackets. A lucrative book with a film option and sequel being demanded can function as important incentives to publishers and authors. Books for youth are now predominantly driven by market demand and not youth needs or responsive to them.

What does this mean for our classrooms? For educators, the discussion of market consequences of changes in the YA genre are tricky: it is not entirely clear where such discussions should fit. Even within the free-reading environments of classrooms such as those Donalyn Miller (2009) describes in *The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child*, the content of writing and discussion is on individual's relationships with texts. While I think meaningful discussions

of the role of capitalism and surplus are necessary at all grade levels, educators can feel pressed for the space of such discussions in the shifting landscape of education reform. However, guiding metacognitive discussion of how certain books are marketed to boys or girls, for example, can be a powerful entry point for analyzing symbolism, imagery, and authoritorial intent. Instead of shying away from discussions of marketing and youth, it is important for educators to be able to face capitalism head on within classrooms and align these discussions to the standards and evaluatory requirements teachers may be facing in their given school context.

I AM NUMBER FOUR: A CASE STUDY IN YA CAPITALISM

Let's look at an example of how capitalism shapes YA today.

Over the next few pages, I will be discussing 2010's *I am Number Four*, the first in the Lorien Legacies books written by Pittacus Lore. Published in the summer of 2010 with each of the titles in the Lorien Legacies series arriving promptly each following summer, the book series was touted as a featured publication on Amazon's Best Books of the Month list, sold enough copies to be listed as number one on the New York Times children's bestseller's list for seven straight weeks. Only seven months after the book's release it was followed by a Hollywood film adaptation. If you're wondering, the rights to the film were acquired in June of 2009, more than a year before the general public could even purchase the book (Rich, 2009).

At first glance, *I am Number Four* looks and reads like a typical YA novel. A paranormal presence (aliens!), a high school love story, and villains that could possibly lead to the end of civilization as we know it. The usual. For all intents and purposes, there is nothing significantly outstanding about the book's premise, generic prose, or typical cliff-hanger ending that entices readers to pick up the next book and the next book. It is a fast-paced and intensely readable book, made thick (like many other YA books) partly by its wide margins and larger than *adult* book font.

The book *is* different, however. It is different because it is one of the best examples of the ways capitalism and adult, profit-driven decisions affect the reader's experience.

Let's take the book's paratext first. Described by Genette (1997), "the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public" (p. 1). Paratext includes a book's design, its pagination, table of contents, headers, and all of the book *stuff* that makes a book function as a reading experience. Genette explains,

> text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations…they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of the verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its 'reception' and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book. (p. 1)

With this in mind, *I Am Number Four's* paratext helps market the book and convey its value for an enthusiastic youth-driven market. The book's cover and title work as a teaser of the content and general cliff-hanging style of writing that runs throughout the book: above the title, the following is embossed: "THREE ARE DEAD," and then the title: *I Am Number Four*. The intrigue of the title, the ominous explosive colors and smoky hues invite readers into the book. Likewise, if the edition being examined is a cover featuring the film adaptation, a pensive and rugged white boy looks confidently from the book. It's an image that suggests the handsome desirability of a young, white man to female readers and the aggressive confidence of masculinity for male readers.

Before cracking the book open, there is an additional paratextual feature on the outside of the book that draws potential buyers' attention. On the edge of the book, printed across the pages are the words "Lorien Legacies" in a futuristic, blocky font. The printed text effectively makes the book double-spined, with text on two spines, creating ads branding four of the book's six sides. No matter if the book is placed on a bookshelf correctly or not, its branding is readily seen. As a teacher, this additional branding was a minor nuisance–I typically wrote my name on my class library books in this location and it had been intruded upon as a clever marketing strategy.

Flipping through the pages of the book, cryptic rune-like symbols (perhaps indicating meaning from the planet of Lorien) are interspersed throughout the book and at the beginning of chapters. The later editions of the book (as well as the sequels that followed) included additional pages following the narrative's conclusion with content from spinoff text's like *I Am Number Four: The Lost Files*. In fact, the book's design is littered with access to additional content. A QR code and a text message number on the back of the book direct readers to online material. Likewise, a URL (www.iamnumberfourfans.com) and the final page of the book serves as an additional advertisement to go online and engage with Lorien Legacies-related content. Nearly every feature of the book's design is geared toward increasing reader consumption. It is not enough to simply read *I Am Number Four*. The first novel functions as a prolonged advertisement (including a cliffhanger ending) for buying into the book's sequel, the spin-off texts, the film adaptation, and other Lorien Legacies paraphernalia.

At over 400 pages and larger print, the book looks hefty. Like the plot of the book falling in line with traditional YA, the book's size and design signal to readers the book as a commendable title within the YA genre. This, too, is likely a trend that followed the lengthy *Harry Potter* books that slowly extended their length beyond 200 and 300 page lengths, bursting into longer, "adult" length books.

The net effect of all of these paratextual features is a highly desirable book. The inviting title, the unique printing on the page edges, the free bonus material, and the visibility of the book's movie tie-in all compel potential readers to pick up and *want* to purchase *I am Number Four*. All of these feature do little to push the narrative forward. The cryptic symbols are never explained. The QR code leads to pages that essentially function as advertisements for additional installments in the book's series. All of these paratextual features identify a target audience and directly market to it.

Even the purported authorship of the book functions as a marketing feature. The book's author, Lore, is described on the book's jacket as "Lorien's ruling Elder. He has been on Earth for the last twelve years, preparing for the war that will decide Earth's fate. His whereabouts are unknown." Instead of the typical author headshot, a silhouette of a figure, genderless and shot on asphalt on what looks like a sunny day, is pictured next to the bio. For potential readers, this bio–something typically disregarded as superfluous information for many readers–functions as a source of intrigue also inviting browsers to purchase the book.

In an online interview, Lore writes,

> I have always taken great care to conceal my identity. I change my appearance regularly. I do not speak or correspond with many people. No one has ever suspected me of being what I am, which is an alien military leader with superpowers. If anyone ever does, it will be a bad day for me. (Amazon, 2010)

The ruse of this alien author is continued within the paratextual disclaimer the preludes the text: "The events in this book are real. Names and places have been changed to protect the Lorien Six, who remain in hiding. Take this as your first warning. Other civilizations do exist. Some of them seek to destroy you." In terms of world-building and creating reader enthusiasm, the antics of the book's publisher in playing with the identity of the author and the fiction that these events are *real* help immerse youth in the rich setting of Paradise, OH and the tenuous grasp on the ledge of safety that the Loriens hold. And while common sense helps guide readers to understand the fiction they are presented with in the author biography, the implied faux-documentary flavor of the book allows readers to feel strongly connected to the book's actions. Unfortunately, because of the lack of depth within the book, little pathos is developed between reader, narrator, or protagonist. The premise of false-realism collapses under even cursory scrutiny.

However, assuming that alien life has not yet got the YA book market cornered, the biography begs the question: who, exactly, wrote *I am Number Four*.

A QUESTION OF AUTHORSHIP

Figuring out who wrote the Lorien Legacies books (of which *I am Number Four* is the first), like nearly all YA titles today, is a much more complicated project than simply figuring out who owns the nom de plume of Pittacus Lore. To put it directly, the question of authorship of YA novels is not a simple one. Particularly when looking at how books like *I am Number Four* are marketed, the content that consumers received is never just created by one author. How readers foster relationships with their books is something that is intentionally crafted and honed in books through design, marketing, and online engagement. A successful book franchise will foster a relationship with its book buying audience over years. With such high value placed on reader engagement, the editorial decisions of YA books are anything but singular. A book, is a product. It is produced. In addition to a book's writer (or writers),

designers and editors and artists and copy-editors and a litany of other employed individuals have a say in the content and presentation of the books that are marketed to young adults.

The paratextual features I've described within the *I Am Number Four* book all contribute greatly to a reader's interest and engagement with a book. The spine's "Lorien Legacies" text, the biography of Lore, and the disclaimer that indicates the events within the story are real all function as important authoritorial decisions. A reader's knowledge of the content of *I Am Number Four* is bolstered by all of the content on the outside of the book and in the pages immediately preceding when the story actually begins. In this sense, a novel includes all of the paratextual material that precedes the words of the novel and that are interwoven throughout. The layout and design within the novel, for instance, are additional components that impact a reader's interpretation. It becomes quickly apparent that here, a small army of designers, artists, editors, writers, PR agents, web designers, programmers, and typesetters have all helped contribute to how a book like *I Am Number Four* is interpreted.

For any book, this careful inquiry into a book's editorial and design decisions is one that leads to a rather difficult question: who is the author of this book? For teachers: the role of authorship plays into ways to teach and discuss these books with students. Reader Response Theory becomes a more complicated venture: Who *else* is intentionally brought into discussion when looking more critically at the collective process of authoring, designing, editing, publishing, reviewing a work? As so much of the experience of consuming *I Am Number Four* is contingent on the design, advertising, and paratextual features, it is important for readers to recognize that the role of the author needs to be understood as a collaborative endeavor involving a large team of marketing strategists. Even titles with a prominent "name" as an author, such as the YA series by James Patterson, *A Maximum Ride*, are largely a conglomeration of branding, strategic marketing, and formulaic storytelling.

In the case of *I am Number Four*, it is actually helpful for the book that an actual human author is shrouded beneath a fiction and a team of designers. The writing and character development within the book is bland. The main character's name is all but irrelevant. Vacillating between his numerical identity as number four of the nine Lori children in hiding on earth and his temporary, fake identity as "John Smith." The protagonist of *I am Number Four*, like his name is a shell of caricature youth angst and heroism. Likewise, the girl that functions as the love interest within the book, Sarah, also offers strikingly little in terms of depth. She is described as pretty and the reader gets a sketch of profundity: she used to be cheerleader and dated the high school quarterback, but that's all changed: she likes photography now. Deep.

In the beginning of the book, Four makes it clear that his purpose on earth is to survive long enough to develop his "legacies" in order to defeat the Mogodorian nemesis that obliterated his home planet; Four's sole purpose is perseverance and resilience on behalf of a fallen race. And while Four's actions when acting as "John" demonstrate the occasional baffling decisions of adolescent (human) teens, often the

decisions made by Four throughout the book make little sense: postponing checking-in with the father figure, Henry, who trains and guides Four, for instance, takes a backseat to a home-cooked meal with Sarah's family. Blatant displays of strength and dexterity continually place Four's cover into jeopardy. It is difficult to discern what kinds of motives drive many of these actions. In looking for a rationale, there are two main points to keep in mind. First, many of these strange plot decisions seem "cool": superhuman strength, explosions, and a lengthy reconnaissance mission to rescue Henry are all parts of the book that read quickly and could be easily translated onto the screen in impressive fashion. Secondly, in digging into the intent behind the creation of *I Am Number Four*, sensical character decisions are secondary to the underlying goal of creating a book that will sell in abundance.

If the book's plot, style, and flat characters all seem a bit formulaic, it is because they largely are. Intentionally so.

I Am Number Four is an experiment in production. It was overseen and co-authored by James Frey, who came to infamous notoriety in 2006 when online journal *The Smoking Gun* pointed out that his Oprah-approved memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, featured factual inaccuracies (2006). While I do not try to make a direct comparison between these fabrications and the kinds of practices he employs in publishing the *I Am Number Four* texts, Frey's view of publishing, authorship, and capturing the public's interest is noteworthy. Before a word of *I am Number Four* was written, Frey was already identifying trends in YA and fomenting strategies to capture the zeitgeist of YA interest. Creating his own publishing house, Full Fathom Press, Frey took his cues in producing *I Am Number Four* from the factory-like assemblage of modern artists.

Warhol's assembly-line approach to art production and Damien Hirst's complex hierarchy of staff members involved in his work have defined a mode of art production that finds these acclaimed artists much more in the role of director than necessarily hand-sculpting or painting a masterpiece. Dictating ideas and seeing them become instantiated to his exact expectations, Hirst's artwork is known for the controversy that often supersedes it. For example, there is his work titled "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living" (1991) which consists of a dead shark placed in a tank of formaldehyde. That doesn't suit your fancy? How about "Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything" (1996), which is a series of glass cases each featuring cross-sections of a butchered cow? These complex, perverse works were envisioned by Hirst and actualized by myriad employees. It is this model that Frey has copied and inserted into the Young Adult book market.

To begin with, Frey looked at the trends of the early part of the 21st century in YA book sales. Wizards and vampires were big. Rowling's Harry Potter and Meyer's Bella Swan had ushered in a plethora of knock-off titles that cashed in on the ravenous book-buying interest in the spell-slinging and the undead. Frey, attempting to jump ahead of the curve guessed the next trend would be … aliens.. He quickly culled together the components for a YA novel focused on aliens that would be user

friendly for readers weaned on the bolt-scarred wizard and the clumsily stubborn vampire lover. *I am Number Four*'s basic components are boilerplate YA:

- a protagonist that feels out of place
- a protagonist with special powers
- a giant, globe-threatening villain
- a heterosexual love interest.

On the back of the book, Michael Bay, the director of the *Transformers* series and other explosion-filled blockbusters, writes, "Number Four is a hero for this generation."

To pull off this book, Frey looked for eager writers to dive into generating text for the books. It is important to note that I use the word "generate" deliberately: there is little to indicate individual authors in the hybrid writing, marketing, and production process of Full Fathom Five's lucrative process. As noted in a profile of the company, writers received minimal compensation for the text they generated:

> In exchange for delivering a finished book within a set number of months, the writer would receive $250 (some contracts allowed for another $250 upon completion), along with a percentage of all revenue generated by the project, including television, film, and merchandise rights—30 percent if the idea was originally Frey's, 40 percent if it was originally the writer's… The writer would not have approval over his or her publicity, pictures, or biographical materials. There was a $50,000 penalty if the writer publicly admitted to working with Full Fathom Five without permission. (Mozes, 2010)

As problematic as these figures may be for writers, the publishing model clearly worked. Before the books were ever in print, a bidding war between Hollywood's top producers including J. J. Abrams, Steven Spielberg, and Michael Bay ensued. The enthusiasm then "sparked publishing interest, and HarperCollins won the book rights. Together, Frey and [co-author Jobie] Hughes signed a four-book deal. Rights to *I Am Number Four* have since been sold in 44 countries, and, at last count, has been translated into 21 languages" (Mozes, 2010).

In and of themselves, these developments are not a problem. Frey identified the ways the market system for YA functions for books and films and succeeded within the expectations of this market. However, the problem is that, when drawing upon standard stereotypes and formulaic narrative development, dangerous implications for readers arise throughout the book. In a lead up to a tense confrontation between Four and high school bully, Mark, the ex-boyfriend of Sarah effectively enlists his football teammates in kidnapping Sarah to confront her about their breakup. Though the scene allows readers to see Four jump in to save the day, demonstrate some unnatural strength, and highlight his unrelenting devotion to a girl he has known for a handful of weeks, the confrontation is also terrifying when explored critically.

The school bully, a character that Sarah shows mercy for by telling Four not to harm him, verges on behavior that is leading to rape. Though his actions are condemnable,

they are not the focus here and are largely discarded. The authoritorial team behind the book use emotional and sexualized violence against women not to make a statement about these behaviors and not to elicit terror or rancor in readers but merely because they are the easiest means of propelling a story forward. And what about the inevitable redemption of Mark by the novel's conclusion? Because he aids Four in the final pages of the book are we, as readers, to assume that the lesson is that misogynistic violence against women is forgivable? Rape as water under the bridge? Because these flat characters act out not because of rationale, human behavior but because they function as part of a marketable plot, readers are subjected to actions that not only do not make sense but imply behaviors that are deplorable. If young adults are gleaning adult ways of being from this book, they are learning that mistreatment of women, though it is wrong–and might result in getting beat up by an alien–is forgivable and an understandable means of trying to get the attention of a lady.

I AM POSTMODERN

It helps to look at the post-modern interpretation of the Full Fathom Five process of production for *I Am Number Four*. Troublingly, it is also helpful to look at the ways this post-modernist approach is largely left out of the view of readers. It is a subterfuge played on a broad demographic of teens and readers of teen-marketed literature. A main component of postmodernism is the concept of deconstruction. Leggo (1998) discusses using this lens in teaching poetry in high school settings. He frames deconstruction as "a practice of reading that begins with the assumption that meaning is a textual construction" (p. 187). He expands this by noting that deconstruction "aims to make meaning from a text by focusing on how the text works rhetorically, and how a text is connected to other texts as well as the historical, cultural, social, and political contexts in which texts are written, read, published, reviewed, rewarded, and distributed" (p. 187).

Appleman (2000) suggests that many English educators shy away from deconstructionist readings of texts because it is seen as an impenetrable and dense theory. I'd add that foundational work in this area such as Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* are complex and dizzyingly difficult texts and probably not a place to send young readers in search of utilizing postmodern approaches to literature for transformative purposes. That being said, when acknowledging that deconstruction is a means of assembling new meaning and *owning* that meaning from an individual perspective, postmodernism can help liberate existing power dynamics within texts. Leggo (1998) explains the potent opportunities of utilizing this theory within the classroom stating:

> readers, especially young readers in classrooms, do not have to be unnerved by self-deprecating fears that their responses to a poem are wrong. Instead of right and wrong answers, deconstruction encourages plural responses. Instead of a hidden meaning that must be revealed, the poetic text is a site where the

> reader's imagination, experience, understanding, and emotions come into play in unique performances. (pp.187–188)

Like Leggo, Appleman's approach to utilizing deconstruction in the English classroom emphasizes the ways this theory can help make sense of a "bewildering and confusing world" (p. 103). And while her approach, as that of much of deconstructionist readings, focuses on the texts presented to readers, I would argue that the process of creation can be seen as a deconstructionist act.

Going back to the factory models of art production for Warhol and Hirst, these processes reveal that art is not simply individuals channeling genius through pain and canvas (or tanks and dead sharks in the case of Hirst). Instead the work that is presented to audiences is assembled along a long line of input and feedback from others. The factory model is *everywhere* in mass media production; Warhol and Hirst simply make this process transparent by revealing the power dynamics of art creation. They intentionally point to the marketing of products as part of their art. In doing so these artists reflect the process back on the spectator/consumer of the art. When we buy a print or (if we're exceptionally wealthy) an original of a Warhol soup can painting, we are acknowledging our duplicity or even appreciation of this process. A Warhol soup can is an ironic endorsement of the capitalist structures that created it. The process, viewing and cultural acquisition of these works helps viewers *de*-construct the binary relationships between creator/consumer and the capitalism implied in consumption of any work. This is *not* the intent of Full Fathom Five. However, a reading of this deconstructionist process can help empower readers when engaging with these texts. Frey's Full Fathom Five, at least in the ways he talks about his company, is up to the same theoretical conceptualizations of art production. The product's process is an art form in this vision. Discussing the production process of *I Am Number Four*, Mozes (2010) notes that Frey

> encouraged me to start imagining product placement—"think Happy Meals"—because merchandise is where you make money in these deals. He mentioned the Mogadorian swords in *I Am Number Four*, which were described with unusual specificity. "We added that after Spielberg told us he needed stuff to sell."

However, that process isn't revealed to readers and online information is relatively scant (much of the information about Frey's model is derived from a singular and widely circulated article). This brings us back to Hirst and his stuffed shark and dead cows. For Hirst's work, critics tend to grapple with the question: Yes, but is it art? And, in seeing this artistic model being enacted in the publishing world, we must question the conglomeration of writing and design and marketing and product placement is still literature.

Specifically, is *I Am Number Four* literature? Is it a postmodern attack on youth consumption or a savvy exploitation of how young people buy books today? I would argue that it doesn't matter so much. If we can empower young people to be critical of and understand the mechanisms of publishing at work, this is a step toward critical conscious building. However, more problematically, if this is what counts as

young adult literature today, it is a powerful statement on how a production machine governs the psyches and interests of millions of young people today. While Full Fathom Five can be interpreted as an elaborate, shaky form of performance art, it is one that is executed at the expense of millions of dollars spent by teens.

If we are to unhinge capitalistic grasps on reading choices I would argue for a pragmatic approach to doing so. Instead of simply resisting the lack of freedom in the YA market, part of this resistance comes in the ways young people interact with and understand the text before them. For a book like *I Am Number Four* understanding the duplicitous authoritorial relationship and pushing beyond it is a necessary step forward.

LIFE-LONG READING AS LIFE-LONG CONSUMING

Full Fathom Five and the Lorien Legacies are exemplary of how effectively books are products marketed specifically for young adults and mass consumption. Every component of *I Am Number Four*, from its formulaic plot and dull character development to the book's physical design and online presence, are established for the sole purpose of selling more books.

To recognize the fact that there is a *market* for this specific kind of literature is to also recognize another seemingly obvious but very problematic fact: YA readers are being marketed to. This may sounds like a simple restatement, but the reversion is telling: it illuminates how the YA book market operates. It is not that an author haphazardly finds an audience because he or she has written a book that happens to be aligned with a young person's interests. Instead, what we find, is that books are carefully marketed to specific demographics: fast-paced and paranormal novels featuring romance in the case of *I Am Number Four*; dystopian thrillers with themes of adults suppressing youth agency in the case of *Divergent*, *Legend*, and *The Maze Runner*; high school drama over guys and popularity in *Gossip Girl*; books about athletes for boys. In varying contexts, many of these titles are explored elsewhere in this book.

It is important to recognize that contemporary novels do not get sorted into these popular genres: they are written for the specific markets that young people are sorted into. This isn't something new. Young people are marketed to with regard to the clothes they wear, the foods they eat, the phones they accessorize, and any number of other youth cultural components. What *is* different, however, is that the shifts in YA production mean that the machinations of capitalism are seeping into the academic lives of young people more and more. The choices they make with regard to the books they feel they should read are guided by deliberate commercial decisions well beyond the purview of youth agency.

And here is where I struggle with the marketing. As an English teacher, one of the main goals in my classroom was to instill a sense of passion in my students. I wanted my most resistant readers to, by the end of the school year, fall in love with books and reading. I am confident that I was not alone in having this goal be the centerpiece

of my classroom and my annual syllabi. I was striving to create lifelong readers by hook or by crook. However, lifelong reading is dependent on a steady stream of books always being at the ready. Simply put, to be a lifelong reader also means to commit to being a lifelong consumer.

In an urban community like my high school in South Central Los Angeles, this was even more apparent: the nearest public library closed a year after I began teaching. Two years later, due to remodeling and lack of funding to actually finish remodeling the high school library was closed for an entire academic year. Effectively, the school and surrounding community had cut off my students from access to books. With no bookstores or libraries nearby, the only regular location for students to get books was my own self-funded, classroom library. For better or worse, I regularly spent thousands of dollars annually to provide up-to-date, high-interest books for the students in my classroom and the former students that would funnel back to my shelves of books during lunch and after school. But what happened after that? Though social media has helped me stay in touch with students and occasionally help students with resumes, college applications, and homework, it hasn't helped me lend them books in any kind of sustainable way. With few reading options outside of school, what happened to my non-college bound students after they left the school? Books are a luxury in the urban spaces of large cities like Los Angeles. What's more, they are *difficult* luxuries to acquire. If libraries are not an option, how are students expected to gain access to books other than by spending money on them?

The more problematic component to this question is: what happens to youth literacy when a child cannot afford to buy books? If I wasn't able to provide books for my students and essentially cover their cost of consumption, would they still be able to read? Or is the market of YA shutting students of financial hardship out of lifelong reading?

Young adult book culture is one that hinges on privilege. It requires skill, interest, access, and resources to participate as a passionate and avid book consumer. For many of the teens I've worked with, these are simply not skills urban schools have fostered: they are not seen as quantified in any meaningful way on standardized tests. Of course, there is a litany of research on how passionate reading leads to academic success; Stephen Krashen's *The Power of Reading* (2004), for instance, focuses on academic growth based on getting high interest books in young people's hands. However, investing time, resources, and teacher knowledge in high interest literature in urban spaces is a difficult sell in the continuing epoch of reform. If lifelong reading is also an implicit endorsement of lifelong spending and consuming, it is difficult to imagine that the ways public schools advocate for the development of readers in urban space is anything other than lip service. How concerned should our education system be about allowing market forces to dictate the reading habits of children today?

All of this brings us back to the improbable figure of Damien Hirst, his dead shark, and the recurring question: but is it art? The subjective question is one that's explored in documentaries like *My Kid Could Paint That* (Bar-Lev, 2007) and in

books about the fluctuating art industry like *The $12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art* (Thompson, 2010). In seeing this model being enacted in the publishing world, the question is if the conglomeration of writing and design and marketing and product placement can be suitably considered literature. In terms of the art world, Warhol's factory model which Hirst's productions can be seen as based upon, ushered in a new art movement. Pop art is a genre that embraces or reflects the mass production of twentieth century mass production and proliferation of media. There's a reason that Warhol's Cambell's soup can is such an iconic image: it was screen printed in the factory ceaselessly.

The overall effect of pop art is of mild, ironic amusement and of somewhat cold detachment. This is art that isn't meant to build an emotional connection. It is art that is largely winking at its viewers as if they are in on an elaborate joke. And maybe they are. Irony, cleverness and detachment are powerful and necessary components of a robust art landscape. They are less necessary feelings when we are talking about the intentions and efforts within the book publishing industry aimed at children. The problem is how this affects young adults when this art model is displaced on the publishing industry. As Frey constructs lackluster book series through Full Fathom Five, one could argue that the "art" involved here is the way Frey manipulates the writing and publishing chain of the twenty-first century to perhaps parody the YA market. His YA book is merely a Campbell's Soup Can-like reflection of the market. If Frey is winking at anyone, it's a very select few. The problem is that this is art done at the expense of young readers. While marketing and capitalism are driving the way Frey produces his work, it ultimately most directly influences the reading experiences of the individuals that pick up Pittacus Lore's novel.

More problematically, if this is what counts as young adult literature today, it is a powerful statement on how a production machine governs the psyches and interests of millions of young people.

Frey's interpretation of the pop art factory is flawed. While the indifferent coolness of inverting media and marketing in the art world as conscious reflection and critique was a key component of pop art, Frey's interpretation is basically one of driving up profit in whatever ways are most accessible. For instance, not enough to simply market and publish a successful book, Frey also negotiated a film option for the work. He imagined the many spin-off texts that have since been published and even envisioned the product and toy marketing that could possibly come about as a result of the book's success.

Let's step back for a second: we essentially have a book functioning as a tool for mass marketing of products. *I am Number Four* is not merely a poorly written book. It is a capitalist gateway. The design and deliberate production related to the book strongly suggest that readers even remotely interested in Lore's tale buy all related books, buy a copy of the film (and its soundtrack, of course), and if there are any other products related to the work currently available then buy them too. Whereas Warhol and the artists he influenced attempt to negotiate the fine line between capitalist greed and artistic critique, Frey's Full Fathom Five disregards any of the

artistic tenets of the model he adapts and whole-hog dives into the process of selling and marketing. There is no nuance here, only advertising and tepid content.

Full Fathom Five represent a true danger to the future of the YA genre. The heavy marketing and lack of quality products means that the quality of reading experiences for young people are diminished. When meeting the latest trends in literature with quickly churned out texts becomes the premise for publishing, the readers are the ones that are going to miss out. This is not to say that marketability is unimportant. On the contrary, I realize that publishers want their books to make money (and lots of it). However, this can be done in ways that still encourage a diversity of styles, narratives, and authors producing work.

And as problematic as Full Fathom Five's business strategy appears, it is important to recognize a basic fact about YA: this publisher's business practices are ones that *every publisher*, to an extent, engage in. The formulaic YA novels that flood today's market are anything but original. These publishers define a market audience and push books toward these readers. It doesn't matter if a reader may be interested in stories about horse riding and steampunk, the options that are published are the options young readers encounter. Granted, the YA genre is more abundant than ever. However, the same politics of representation severely limit the kinds of books available to readers today. Instead, these publishers reinforce hackneyed storytelling techniques with salacious details about hair, makeup, clothing brands, and ideological values. The fancy covers of these books cater to a mainly white and mainly upper-middle class, heteronormative audience. These books scream the violence and sex that make readers pick them up. The problem with publishers marketing toward a specified market is the loss of diversity and voice that accompanies this decision. When Full Fathom Five or Scholastic or Harper publish a book with this assumed audience, they essentially castigate the hundreds of students I've worked closely with in South Central Los Angeles.

When I have discussed book publishing with my college students, members of the class often point out that it is the publishers that make the decisions of what young people have access too. Likewise, they point out that authors need to make money – they need to write something that people will pay money for. At least within the current free market society we are immersed in. They are, of course, absolutely right, the books that are bought are largely bought because they are popular. Whether this popularity is due to complex marketing, the merit and ingenuity of authors, or other factors such as cultural trends within the book-buying world is beyond the point. In all likelihood, publishers (at least of the kinds of widely popular young adult literature that this book focuses on) will only publish books that will make them money. Other niches within the publishing industry may operate under different kinds of rules. For a more focused look at the market for academic book publishers, for example, see Thompson's *Books in the Digital Age* (2005).

Another key tension that arose from my classes when discussing publishing is the *feeling* or intent or *passion* of the writers. For example, upon hearing about the ways that *I Am Number Four* was produced many of my students recoiled from the book.

That the production of the text does not match their image of the impassioned writer slaving away at producing the book felt disingenuous to my students. In contrast, looking at the deliberate ways author John Green attempted to share his writing process with his readers (as discussed in Chapter Six), my students approved of the "love of the craft" of writing that Green demonstrates. "It's tricky," one student said during our discussion. She pointed out that, on the one hand Green and Frey are both focused on a similar goal: selling lots of books. However, on the other hand, their efforts in doing so and the implied sense of meaning behind the book creation process appears to differ in ways that make young people embrace Green's approach and recoil from Frey's. But is one *better* than another? Should the *intentions* of either act as deterrents from approaching a book?

As educators, part of our task is to illuminate pathways for young people to participate in larger civic life. Doing so, however, is about more than simply equipping kids with literacies that encourage making an income to sustain themselves. It also means being able to act upon the world in ways that can be personally and socially transformative. With this being recognized, it is not enough to get a student passionate about a book that was produced purely for profit; a book that—when exploring the labor forces that produced it like low wages—contributes little to the betterment of anyone but its top producers. Part of the critical civic lessons we can instill as educators are to build understanding of these processes of consumption even when they are tailored for teens.

SERIALIZATION

Another major component of YA literature that is more focused on profit and limits the experiences of readers is the YA model of serialization. An overwhelming number of the popular texts at the time that I'm writing this are ongoing series. Let's take *I am Number Four* again: The first in (at least) a four book series not counting the spin off, supplemental texts, *I am Number Four* and its three other currently published sequels all end on significant cliffhangers. Instead of getting a sense of resolution at the end of a 300+ page reading excursion, the readers that eagerly plunked down $17.99 dollars to engage with this book are compelled to wait and buy the next in the long series of books.

In fact, looking at Amazon's literature blog *Omnivoracious*, 13 of the 20 best teen books of 2012 are part of an ongoing series (Wilson, 2012). The blog points to the books curated, to an extent, by Amazon, one of the fastest growing book retailers. The list is also not that far off from other year end lists. This makes sense: if you are one of the major sellers of teen literature your list of "best" books probably relates closely with market trends for book readership.

Serialization is nothing new, obviously. Dickens and Dumas were masters at the form of serializing a story over time. Comic books today rely on readers feeling compelled to pick up the next issue of a series each month. However, what's different about serialization in YA texts is that this is done in ways that places profit before

satisfaction. As readers seeking resolution, endings of books feel pushed less toward completing narrative arcs than toward helping ensure readers will be strung along for another profitable journey. The final pages of books like *I am Number Four, Divergent,* and *The Maze Runner* all position the books as entry points which readers have already invested time and money. James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* started with a strong narrative in a somewhat hackneyed post-apocalyptic world, only to have the trilogy conclude with few questions answered and little sense of resolution. Discussing the book with students and other readers, the general consensus seemed to be that Dashner had no idea how his books would end and tried to tie haphazard pieces together as best as possible.

– Ditto Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy.
– Ditto Scott Westerfield's *The Uglies* series.
– Ditto Cassandra Clare's The Mortal Instruments.
– Ditto Patrick Ness' Chaos Walking Trilogy.
– And of course, ditto *I Am Number Four* and the rest of the Lorien Legacies.

It would be one thing if the end of YA book series actually seemed to be moving toward some sort of conclusion. However, even reaching the ending of these series feels like there was never a clear roadmap for the narratives to begin with. *The Maze Runner*'s conclusion, *The Death Cure* felt like few plot points were resolved. A prequel, *The Kill Order*, was published shortly after the trilogy's conclusion, but it, too, did little to answer questions. A review on Amazon is appropriately titled, "Prequel to what?" (the reviewer's name is listed as "not happy").

And though sequels and connected tales are a large component of adult genre fiction like mystery and horror series, the rapid proliferation of sequels and sprawling series seemed to take off once the profits of the Harry Potter series became clear. However, whereas J.K. Rowling's book series seems to have always been intended to be a seven-book story arc (Lussier, 2010), the books in more recent series seem to be half-cooked attempts at gaining readers and profit. In fact, of the many YA book series I've read that have been published since Harry Potter completed his final duel with Voldermort, I cannot think of one series that did not seriously disappoint me with its diminished quality over time.

Though YA sequels were published in the past, the narratives did not rely on readers completing an entire series in order to gain resolution. Robert Cormier's *The Return to the Chocolate War* and Paul Zindel's three *Pigman* texts functioned as strong individual narratives that reflected consistent world views and thoughtful character development. For readers that appreciated and were immersed in the world of these books, these authors offer the opportunity to revisit beloved characters and ideas once more. The difference in the post-Potter publishing market, however, is that this sense of readers' agency is nowhere to be found. In some sense, if a reader wants to resolve a storyline they are left with little choice but to continue to consume the texts provided by serialized authors. And when the concluding pages of these books are read and the ending of the book is disappointing, what message

are YA publishers leave readers left with? In terms of dignity for their readers and responsibility for crafting texts, YA readers are left with dismal options.

In 2007, YA Author Neil Shusterman wrote a compelling dystopian YA novel. In it, he provided readers with provocative questions about human rights, the current pro-life and pro-choice abortion debate, and the role of religion within one's individual agency. He relied on familiar archetypes and played with point of view throughout the novel to craft a book that read quickly and gave readers a strong depth in their understanding of the nuances of the novel's futuristic society. *Unwind*–the story about kids whose parents have opted for them to be medically torn apart and for their remains to be used by others–is a thrilling novel that many of my students have appreciated and shared via word-of-mouth. And best of all (in my opinion), the book was a stand-alone novel. There is only one problem: as a result of the book's success, Shusterman has revisited the world he crafted in *Unwind* and has now crafted the book as the first in a trilogy.

To be clear, this is different from the choices authors like Cormier and Zindel made. Whereas these books were invitations to extend a narrative if a reader wanted to make the literary trek back to Trinity school or *The Pigman*'s Franklin High School, Shusterman's decision indicates to readers that *Unwind* is an incomplete text without consumption of its follow-up novels. Sure enough, though the sequel, *UnWholly* adds interesting dynamics to the ethical questions established in *Unwind* the book ends on a steep cliffhanger with resolution dependent on Shusterman's ability to imaginatively provide a fulfilling end to a trilogy that was never meant to be. The jury's still out on this one: at the time that I wrote this book, the third in the *Unwind* trilogy, *UnSouled*, was not yet published.

In 2012, videogame fans created a digital outcry over the shoddy ending of a series millions had invested in. *Mass Effect 3* was released with the over promise of its developers that the conclusion of the massively popular game would provide answers and satisfying resolution for characters. Based on the opinions of many of its players, it failed. *Really failed*. Fans created a Facebook group called "Demand A Better Ending to Mass Effect 3" with over 60,000 members. In the description of the group's page and echoed by fans in reviews across the Internet, the main argument of these gamers is: "This is a horribly unfulfilling ending to what should have been the masterpiece of the trilogy. We need to show Bioware that we are unhappy with the way they handled this. Fans of the Mass Effect trilogy have put far too much time, effort, and money into the game to be abandoned with such a fate." Mass Effect players wanted the series to have a satisfying ending. After spending countless fulfilling (and sometimes frustrating) hours mashing buttons in front of a television screen, these fans have connected with and expect resolution for the characters they've guided through numerous encounters with peril. As fan complaints gained significant media coverage, the game's executive producer, Casey Hudson responded to concerns: "We have reprioritized our post-launch development efforts to provide the fans who want more closure with even more context and clarity to the ending of the game, in a way that will feel more personalized for each player" (Newman, 2012).

Though we'll explore the potential of organizing and fan communities in Chapter Six, the statement here explores how content producers may or may not consider content consumers when creating products for consumption. In many ways, the complaints of the Mass Effect audience voice essentially the same frustrations you read from readers of YA books in online reviews such as Goodreads and Amazon. However, with hundreds of millions of dollars funneled toward a lucrative gaming series, fans are actively moved toward action. However, the frustrations that authors would leave their plots "abandoned to such a fate" to quote the Mass Effect organization is felt throughout online reviews. Look at a few examples:

On *Insurgent*, Veronica Roth's sequel to *Divergent*:

> It took me 12 days to finish this book. *12 days*. That's probably the longest time I've ever taken to finish a book. I loved Divergent, don't get me wrong. I thought that it was one of the most exciting books I've read all year, and I was soooooooo excited for this book, but now it's like... I'm just, I don't even know. My hopes were pretty much crushed. (fяσzєη, 2012)

And

> GOD! I hate it when authors make you wait for the sequel. I know it's not really their fault that readers are so excited for the next book. But still...I hope the long wait would be worth it! I mean stop making sequels that are not good! Sequels are supposed to be better than the book that they followed and not the other way around!!! Make us wait but satisfy us too!!! (Carstairs, 2012)

Likewise a review on Amazon of *The Death Cure* clearly identifies plot holes within the text. This author is knowledgeable of the world and likely a fan of the previous works. Further, the reviewer's name, "katniss" is an obvious nod to her or his fandom of similarly published YA titles. Titled "Don't Read this Book" the reviewer goes into depth of her or his thesis regarding disappointment with Dashner's book:

> Ok so this was one of the most disappointing endings to any series i've ever read. First of all their were so many plot holes you couldn't tell what was happening half the time. Also in the second book....Brenda. I mean, who really gives a crap about her? She is really only their to fill in plot holes and make the book longer so they can charge you more for it. In the last book she is only their to complete the "love story" part of the book. When Teresa died in the last book, i just about lost it. How could Dashner just kill her like that? And Thomas didnt really care at all about it. I mean I know he is mad at her and all,but just forgive her. She was just doing what she thought would save his life, and he seemed so heartless about it.Then their was the way they talked. If you had everything in your mind erased except your name, you wouldn't be able to talk. The author seams to think that somhow the never forget how to talk.A lot of the review's that say the book was good, say that it is perfectly clear how the flare started. People who say this, please tell me…………HOW THE HE** DID

> IT? l?!!!!?!?!!???!The author never ever ever ever ever ever ever says how it did, and is probably never going to. They also never explain why WICKED hd to go through all that sh** to find a cure for the flare. Why couldn't thay just study people's brains to figure it out.The book was a really big disappointment, and most fans of the series will think so too. But i guess if you just finished the second one, and wnt an ending, read the last book. (even if the author did a poor jod with it). (katniss, 2012)

I quote at length the entirety of this review as the author makes clear several of the reasons serialization functions problematically within many popular YA series. In many ways it feels like a lazy avenue for publishing: authors can begin with a strong idea and not necessarily completely furnish the details of resolution. Further, it allows writers to extend salient tropes of YA genres. As katniss points out, there is the "'love story' part of the book" and the longer narrative because the publisher "can charge you more" for each new volume. However, despite these many arguments, what is striking is the resignment at the end that, even though the book is "a really big disappointment," readers should purchase this book if they want an ending. This is a capitalist lesson: the producers that are empowered to decide what content is released can put out shoddy content when they have essentially cornered a market through serialization. As popular a series as *The Maze Runner* franchise may have been it does not drive sales figures akin to *Mass Effect 3*. Serialization removes components of youth choice or freedom within avenues of reading. If a student has committed to the first and second volume of a series it is likely that he or she will then, too, invest time and dollars in a lackluster ending.

A HOGWARTS OF ONE'S OWN

Discussing "the Harry Potter effect" on YA with my college students, one student described how the book prodded into her interpretation of the world around her. When she turned ten, she described how disappointed she was not to receive a formal invitation to enroll at Hogwarts. She wasn't chosen by the wizards that be for the honor to follow in Harry & Co.'s footsteps. As she shared this sense of rejection, several of my student's classmates nodded their heads; they too had felt the bitter taste of rejection. I'll admit I was surprised to see so many of my students share the sentiment. These were students that grew up with Harry Potter aging parallel to them: the challenges and feelings described in Rowling's books spoke to my students in ways so meaningful they felt or thought or hoped the books moved beyond the realm of fiction. And–though my students did not get their Hogwarts invitations– the books have come to life. The world of capitalism has made Potter's adventures nearly tangible in the eight hugely profitable films. Likewise, Universal Studio's Wizarding World of Harry Potter has made the books a physical reality: if you are willing to pay for a ticket and wait in the dauntingly long lines, you too can have a wand specially picked out for you at Ollivander's Wand Shop, enjoy a chilly cup

of frozen butterbeer, and embark on a tour-turned adventure, “Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey.”

The relationship between passionate reading and money–consumerism and profit–is clearly problematic. The Harry Potter effect is one that brings youth’s hunger for stories and entertainment directly into the eye of lifelong capitalism. It is a model that is so hugely successful it is copied ad naseum by publishers and authors. And as we’ll see in the next chapter, the marketing decisions often limit audiences in ways that leave youth of color feeling like outsiders.

CHAPTER 2

MORE THAN MANGO STREET

Race, Multiculturalism and YA

It was midway through the school year when I was talking with my good friend Travis, the ninth-grade teacher down the hall. He was describing a troubling discussion that occurred in his classroom recently. In preparing students to understand the cultural context of Elie Wiesel's Holocaust memoir *Night*, Travis posed a theoretical scenario to his class:

> *Imagine for a moment that all of a sudden, tomorrow, all of the white people in the country are gathered up and hauled away.*

Before he could continue with the hypothetical narrative a student raised his hand: "But if all of the white people are gone, who's going to be around to do science and invent things?"

At that moment, any lesson specifically tied to contextualizing Wiesel's narrative was largely discarded for a more prescient, in-the-moment discussion about how urban youth of color could get to a fundamental feeling that they are not qualified to invent things.

Though it has been several years since Travis told me about the event, then recently taking place in his classroom, it is a scenario I reflect upon regularly. It *upsets* me at a fundamental level. Somewhere along the way, this student and his peers interpreted a message that they–as students of color–do not invent things. It wasn't a message internalized once, but one reified in the lessons in schools, treatment by teachers, portrayals in popular media, and any number of other formal and informal schooling mechanisms these students encountered by the time they got to ninth grade.

Travis's anecdote helped remind me, at the time, of the real-world repercussions of stereotypes. Even within a school of nearly all Black and Latino students, the racial assumptions regarding intellect and capability run deep. I have wondered, in the years since first hearing Travis recount the incident, what kind of role literature played in shaping these students' expectations. Further, I wonder if literature can help reshape the assumptions of today's urban youth. Can teachers guide students toward book choices that ultimately empower students and their sense of self?

Though the number of multicultural books is steadily increasing each year, there remains a striking lack of diversity within the YA genre. This chapter looks critically at what kinds of books are offered with regards to multiculturalism. First, this chapter examines how racial stereotypes in YA literature begin with the design and covers of books, conveying a racialized audience for books. Next, I look at

the role of canonical YA authors like Walter Dean Meyers and Sandra Cisneros in fostering a limited, multicultural understanding of racial America. Finally, focusing on Sherman Alexie's *Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* as a case study, I look at radical counter-narratives that offer opportunities for readers to explore the nuances of racial identity and its meaning within varied and diverse communities. In doing so, I spend part of this chapter offering a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens for educators and students to share. More so than the other theories explored throughout this book, I see Critical Race Theory as an "actionable" theory; in my own classrooms introducing elements of Critical Race Theory to my students has been an empowering experience. The tenets here (and emphasized throughout this chapter) are focused on complexifying issues of race and offering outlets for youth voice to "speak back" to dominant ideologies. While this lens is applied here to Alexie's novel, the strategies described are encouraged to challenge and explore most texts taught in standards-aligned classrooms.

STEREOTYPES ON COVERS

As discussed in the previous chapter, a book caters to its marketed audience long before someone breaks the spine and begins digesting the prose between its covers. Instead, the way books are designed plays an important role in how consumers know if a book is for and about them. This is particularly clear when it comes to conveying race within books. This is so striking primarily because, often, the race of characters isn't mentioned in books. Hegemonic assumptions of who books are about, largely, leaves readers to assume a protagonist's race. However, when a book's cover offers a photo or drawing of the character, questions of race are taken out of the author's hands.

At the high school where I taught and now at the university I am working at, I will occasionally snap a photo of recent acquisitions of young adult novels (my department has a small library dedicated to YA texts for our students to use for their courses). Placing a haphazard collection of these books together often tells a striking story about intended, racialized audiences. On a Wednesday in March, 2013, I took the photo on the next page of several recently acquired books in the library.

To clarify, I took this photo of books I grabbed indiscriminately from the pile of books awaiting proper organization within our library, omitting two books that didn't have people featured on them. Looking at these pictures, what kinds of discussions could they provide? The covers speak broadly to the ways books are marketed to niche audiences and perpetuate assumptions about youth interest, gender, and race. Amongst these books, it appears that they are marketed primarily toward teenage girls. But what markers denote this for me? There are textual clues: *Anatomy of a Single Girl* and *Lemonade Mouth Pucker's Up* both seem like titles that are *girly* for lack of a better term. There are image-based clues: all five of the books prominently feature women on the covers. However, it is important to recognize that these clues (and the design choices to include them) limit what girlhood means. In defining a book as marketed for females the publishers prescribe what readers should assume

Figure 1. Recent YA Acquisitions.

as normalized, gendered behavior. Further discussions of feminism and masculinity are discussed in the next chapter. Here, however, let's look at more specific features of who these girls on the covers are.

Now that we've gotten gender already noted as a point of convergence for these books, the next most apparent thing I notice is that *all* of these women are white. Even in the case of a doll, the flesh-toned skin is white. I am, thus, immediately reminded of Peggy Mcintosh's (1988) classic list of "daily effects of white privilege" (p.5) from her white paper, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies" (often excerpted as "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack"). Of her list of nearly fifty different ways she experiences daily effects of white privilege, Mcintosh writes (#26): "I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of my race" (p. 7). I would add to this list that being able to read formative books about people of my race as a teenager is a salient form of unacknowledged white privilege.

Looking at these books and taking cursory glances at featured books in libraries and bookstores, I believe that a YA audience is largely racialized as white. That is, though not all readers may necessarily *be* white, they are assumed to be interested in consuming books for and about white experiences in schools. In an article on the lack

of African American males in YA, Michael Corbin (2008) describes urban youth as suffering from "what amounts to a literary invisibility." One way problematic racial stereotypes proliferate is through the ways authors describe the characters in their texts. Though people of color may be represented as characters in books, they often do not take center stage within these narratives. Such decisions are important to highlight for readers when considering how YA books create stereotypes.

John Green's *Looking For Alaska* (2005), for example tries to flip racial stereotypes through humor. During an attempted prank at the book's central boarding school, the role of hacking into the school's computer network is mentioned. Takumi, notably the only Asian American character in the book, says, "I hope you didn't bring the Asian kid along thinking he's a computer genius. Because I am not" (Green, 2005, p. 103).

As one of the early books read in my course on adolescents' literature, students appreciated that Green's depiction of race in this exchange felt "different" from other books they've read. Generally, I would challenge these students to think more clearly what they meant by this. The fact that Green is acknowledging race and the presence of stereotypes at all comes as a refreshing surprise for these students. However, while the exchange is humorous in how it points to expectations based on race, the book also points to how even teacher-beloved titles like *Looking for Alaska* resort to tokenism when discussing race within a text. Aside from clearly pointing out that Takumi is Asian there is no discussion of *other* races within the book. Essentially, all of the other characters are assumed to be white—otherwise it would not be mentioned. There is, in addition Lara who is a Romanian student with an alluring accent. Her skin color isn't noted. Her otherness—an aloofness to some American cultural practices and an accent that ultimately fuels the sex drive of protagonist Pudge—is not reflected in race. Her difference–spoken and not reflected in skin color–is sensual and unique. Though speaking of representations of African American characters, Corbin's analysis is key here as well. He states that when black youth–and I would add youth of color at large–appear in YA fiction "they are often merely objects of voyeuristic fascination, exotic others, tokens in the obeisance paid to an attenuated multiculturalism: *Here, students, read about the young negroes in their habitat*" (Corbin, 2008).

This calling out of racial identity for non-white characters is one of the main ways readers may perceive characters of color as not being central to the identity of authors and readers of YA texts. We live and read in a racialized society today that is significantly more complex than the discussions of race and racism in canonical works previously expressed. As noted by Jane Fleming in a 2012 *New York Times* article, "Kids do have a different kind of connection when they see a character that looks like them or they experience a plot or a theme that relates to something they've experienced in their lives" (Rich, 2012). Yes, there is continuing debate about the use of the "n-word" in a classic novel like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Lancto, 2003). However, racialized descriptions today tend to stray away from the explicitly racist. Instead the issue of racial depiction within these texts is one that calls out races that are not white. When a character is Latino or Black or Asian or

(gasp) multiracial, these are noteworthy attributes that define these characters in ways white characters are not.

These racialized descriptions can be subtle. So subtle, in fact, that readers may tend to overlook racial signals when describing characters. Online surprise and resistance to the ways characters were depicted as black in the film adaptation of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, for example, illustrated the tenuousness of racial descriptions that are not out and out explicit with racial markers like "black." In the novel, Collins described the secondary characters Rue and Thresh in descriptions that clearly signaled they were non-white. In the first instance that protagonist Katniss sees Rue she describes her as "a twelve-year-old girl from District 11. She has dark brown skin and eyes, but other than that's she's very like Prim [Katniss's sister] in size and demeanor" (Collins, 2008, p. 45) She later notes that Thresh has "the same dark skin as Rue" (p. 126). Based on what little descriptions are provided here, it is difficult to argue that these characters are white. Of course it is also worth noting that, while Collins includes people of color amongst her cast of characters, they play secondary roles (as usual). Further, these descriptions help emphasize how descriptions of whiteness are typically unnecessary in these books. Characters are presumed white unless readers are giving physical descriptions that contrast this fact.

Despite these clear depictions of non-white characters, when previews for the film adaptation of the book were released, a large number of online comments expressed surprise and even disappointment of the racial depictions of these characters. An online article (Holmes, 2012) from *The New Yorker* quotes several tweets about the film:

- "I was pumped about the Hunger Games. Until I learned that a black girl was playing Rue," wrote @JohnnyKnoxIV.
- "Why is Rue a little black girl?" @FrankeeFresh demanded to know. (she appended her tweet with the hashtag admonishment #sticktothebookDUDE.)

What happened? Are Collins' readers indicative of lackadaisical reading of YA? Though a clear response to the outcry of the casting decisions was quickly developed, the initial response suggests troubling patterns of assumptions of YA readers. Clearly, myriad people read *The Hunger Games*, scanned the descriptions of Rue and Thresh quoted above and *still* saw these characters as white.

Again, I think the notion of white privilege cannot be overstated here. White privilege is being able to read books and assume characters are the same race as you *even when the book may contradict this belief*. Further, white privilege allows white moviegoers to see characters represented as of their own race. This, too, echoes Mcintosh's litany of daily effects of privilege: "I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented" (1988, p. 129).

ACKNOWLEDGING PRIVILEGE, RESPONDING TO PRIVILEGE

Let's return briefly to John Green's tangential and playful look at Asian American stereotypes in *Looking for Alaska.* Though, the example of Takumi in *Looking for*

Alaska discussed above is problematic, I want to recognize ways that John Green also pushes others to think about issues of racial representation and stereotyping. Green addressed concerns about the politics of representation within his novels. In a blog post, Green (2012) wrote at length about the fact that his books reflect dominant, privileged identities:

> …it is true that my books tend to be focused on Middle Class White Suburban Heterosexuals and the Not Middle Class White Suburban Heterosexual Able-Bodied kids (Hassan, Tiny Cooper, Radar, Takumi, the Colonel, etc.) tend to be supporting characters in a very Traditional World War II Movie kind of way, and I think this is a totally legitimate criticism of my books.

While Chapter Six of this book focuses on how authors like Green leverage digital tools to respond to readers in posts like these, I want to emphasize the problematic implications of Green's words. It's difficult to read Green's response and not consider what voices are left out. Not simply in his books but in books across the YA spectrum: that Green can so quickly identify the ways he utilizes race in a "very Traditional World War II Movie kind of way" emphasizes the problems the genre as a whole faces. While I, as a reader and fan of Green's works, appreciate that he recognizes that characters tokenize ethnicities, sexualities, and body politics in his books, I also think that this recognition is not enough. Acknowledging privilege is the beginning of a step toward change but it is not change in and of itself. Green's response is a passive one from a position of power: as the creator and owner of these texts and as someone that has a direct financial interest in their success, Green's characters reify some racial stereotypes while trying to tell stories that speak to his readers. In doing so, there are some assumptions that are made from the position of white privilege: that his experiences reflecting a white culture are what need be validated.

Again, I want to emphasize that I find Green's texts rich for literary analysis. Each time I have taught an Adolescents' Literature class, Green's novels are a highlight for my students: they are loaded with literary references for astute readers to explore, the dialogue is witty, and the characters are beautifully flawed in ways that make them feel relatable for many of my readers. And as an author that identifies as "Middle Class White Suburban Heterosexual" Green writes from a position that he is likely most comfortable and familiar with. In fact, Green (2012) concludes his tumblr post with an additional note about placing too much focus on single authors like Green when critiquing representation in YA:

> … here's the thing: I am not the only writer. There are many, many writers creating a huge variety of stories—tens of thousands of novels will come out in 2012, for example—and it's not really my responsibility to tell every possible story. I can only tell the truest versions of the stories I know, so that's what I'm trying to do.

When looking at the individual level, Green is absolutely correct: it isn't his responsibility. Authors shouldn't feel compelled to pander to specific demographics,

especially in ways that will read as unauthentic. However, when a deluge of YA novels flooded the global market in 2012, as Green stated, how many of these novels actually represented a point of view that differed significantly from the problematic politics of representation? The challenge in thinking about representation in YA is not one to be dealt with on an author-by-author basis. Instead, young people should be encouraged to criticize publishers as a whole. It is perfectly fine for "Middle Class White Suburban Heterosexuals" to write YA books. I'll even read 'em if I hear they're any good. But more importantly we need to foster, in our classrooms and in our library acquisitions, a culture of supporting books by Working Class Individuals of Color, Queer Writers (particularly) Of Color, Empowered Women, Authors Whose First Languages Are Not English, and so on. The rich list of diverse YA voices that are severely lacking can go on and on. It's not enough to *wish* these books were available. It requires demands from libraries, research for stocking our classrooms, and working with youth to help write the unique and powerful narratives they are all capable of producing.

THE MULTICULTURAL CANON

Michael Cart (2010) explains the dearth of authors of color as such: "There still aren't enough editors of color, there still aren't enough writers of color, there still isn't enough of this, there still isn't enough of that–but most of all, the sale of multicultural books simply isn't generating enough dollars to entice publishers to significantly expand their offerings" (p. 126). As such, there are a number of books and authors producing YA today that are widely embraced for their representations of diverse characters and their ability to push beyond traditional racial stereotypes. It isn't uncommon to see all of these authors represented in a teacher's classroom or in a library. It isn't uncommon, either, for all of these authors to be lumped together in a corner of a shelf: the diverse and multicultural canon distilled into a handful of authors. Though omissions of certain authors could be argued, I would suggest that a general YA multicultural canon includes:

- Walter Dean Meyers
- Sharon Draper
- Sandra Cisneros
- Sherman Alexie

In coming up with this very short list, I spoke with teen librarians and classroom teachers about these selections. In particular, I wanted to see if there was–*at least*–one Asian American author that was widely recognized as a regular go-to multicultural author. While there are many Asian American authors, there was not a consensus (in my very informal survey) of an author that was as prominently known or recognized as the few listed above. I'd also note that the multicultural list expands significantly when including authors teens may encounter as part of the literature taught in American schools today: the works of Julia Alvarez, Junot Diaz, Walter

Mosley, and Amy Tan are regularly read in American literature courses. However, while these authors offer valuable insights into racialized lived experiences, they are not, for the most part, acknowledged as young adult authors.

While it is not problematic that the four authors on this list are beloved (their popularity is an important step towards more equitable racial representation in books), it *is* problematic that these are primarily the only authors that are so widely acknowledged and represented. And if I am a young reader and *not* interested in the hyper-masculinity of Meyer's books like *Monster* or *Lockdown*, or the sensuality of Cisnero's lyrical vignettes, I have very few notable options as a reader of diverse YA in most classrooms and many school libraries. In particular, the plight of being a passionate young, male reader of color is something I've seen frequently in my own teaching practice. I've regularly worked with youth that enjoy reading but agree with Corbin (2008) who challenges the limitations of placing too much stock solely in the male-marketed texts of Walter Dean Myers:

> Myers' oeuvre regularly is the only young adult fictional treatment of the adolescent black experience to be found at your local big box bookstore. Over more than 50 books—many award-winning—Myers has been single-handedly responsible for educating suburban and private school kids about the lives of those who attend segregated city schools (along with the platitudinous ghetto-life memes of *The Wire* and various cinematic permutations of *Menace II Society*). To those city kids themselves, however, Myers is thin, saccharine stuff.

Though this may be a harsh critique for an author that is often read with enthusiasm by my students, Corbin's note reminds educators of the need to look beyond cultural assumptions of skin phenotype when making reading suggestions.

While there is much more than *Mango Street* available for students, if teachers are not able to guide access to additional texts, the opportunities for readers are slim. Conversely, if I *do* enjoy the texts of the multicultural canon, there are many teachers and librarians that may be hard-pressed for reading advisory recommendations beyond the scope of these authors. How do we spread awareness and reading options beyond the authors, here, that can be counted on a single hand?

THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART TIME INDIAN AND CRITICAL RACE THEORY

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian is a text that looks critically at racial subordination in contemporary U.S. society in ways that are understood and embraced by a wide range of readers. A National Book Award recipient, Sherman Alexie's partly autobiographical work is one that offers a clear voice from the historically marginalized space of a Native American reservation while also being an accessible and universally admired text. The book is foremost funny and honest. It is written in accessible language about topics to which teens can relate. And, the book is littered with occasional comics and drawings.

What's so striking about *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* is that, despite being so highly-regarded and well-received, it is a book that does not shy away from personal tragedy, bitter, social commentary, and reification of problematic racial stereotypes. For instance, within the first nine pages of the book, Arnold describes being so poor that–when his beloved dog, Oscar, was sick–the father shoots the dog rather than get stuck with a pricey veterinary bill. Over the course of the book, three other individuals will die suddenly in ways that point to the kind of hardship Arnold experiences on the "rez" that his white peers do not get to perceive. For Arnold, this is a definitive difference in the narrative of Indians and white people: "I'm fourteen years old and I've been to forty-two funerals. That's really the biggest difference between Indians and white people" (Alexie, 2007, p. 199).

Alexie (2007) makes it clear that white society is responsible for the kinds of tragedy he and his family experience. However, he also places emphasis on the responsibility of Arnold and his peers in shifting the oppressive life Arnold initially faces. It is a former teacher that visits Arnold that explains, "Every white person on this rez should get smashed in the face. But, let me tell you this. All the Indians should get smashed in the face, too" (p. 42). Ultimately it is the anger Mr. P exudes that guides Arnold to attend a white school miles away from the reservation. So begins Arnold's journey of differentiating himself from his Indian peers. After a hard-earned basketball game victory, Arnold looks at the Indian team across the court and notes:

> I knew that two or three of those Indians might not have eaten breakfast that morning.
>
> No food in the house.
>
> I knew that seven or eight of those Indians lived with drunken mothers and fathers.
>
> I knew that one of those Indians had a father who dealt crack and meth.
>
> I knew two of those Indians had fathers in prison.
>
> I knew that none of them was going to college. Not one of them. (p. 195)

The crucial realization, for Arnold, helps him confront feelings of shame, anger, and insecurity in light of a basketball victory in a school of relative privilege. However, while Arnold both empathizes with and recognizes the missing narratives of his Indian neighbors, his word choice is also selective in separating them from himself. Demonstrating knowledge of each of his rivals, Arnold notes the ways "those" Indians live. While he exudes frustration here, he is also deliberately not affiliating himself with the defeated team; Arnold is different.

And while the book can be read as a scathing critique of racial inequity, the Native Americans Arnold is surrounded by are by no means the apotheosis of goodness.

Instead, Alexie points to how the people he lives with on the rez ultimately reflect stereotypical behaviors. Arnold's father is an alcoholic and is shown at various times in the book as too drunk to drive his son to school or to remember to save money to buy presents for Christmas. Arnold's best friend, Rowdy, is violent and reactionary. He is beaten by his father and often takes out his frustration on unlucky peers in schools. The persistence of alcohol, violence, gambling, and bullying within the Native American community within the book challenges readers to question not only stereotypes but the origins of these stereotypes.

Throw on top of these indictments of Native American and white culture a dose of bulimia ("'Anorexics are anorexics all the time,' she says. 'I'm only bulimic when I'm throwing up'" [Alexie, 2007, p. 107]), explicit discussions of masturbation ("If there were a Professional Masturbators League, I'd get drafted number one and make millions of dollars" [p.26]), and homophobic insults ("'We'll kick your asses next year,' Rowdy wrote back. 'And you'll cry like the little faggot you are" [p. 297]) and it becomes almost puzzling why this book is so pervasively popular for teachers in English classrooms today. I would argue that it is the voice of the infectiously likeable protagonist, Junior/Arnold that makes Alexie's text continue to be embraced since it was published in 2007. Arnold is so sincere in his description of his life, so articulate in being an insecure teenager with aspirations to leave his home reservation, and so funny in explaining such details as "Yep, I had a big erection when I learned of my sister's death" (p. 202).

Because of being so well received and offering myriad avenues for critical, necessary discussions with adolescents' *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* is a text that encourages careful consideration in how educators situate discussions of race. Instead of merely looking at the world Alexie describes and drawing immediate comparisons to one's own perceptions of the world, I think this text can be used as a tool for productive development and articulation of societal injustice, regardless of the color of the skin of the reader. What's more, I believe that the same kinds of questions that Alexie's book encourages can be used as a framework for looking at young adult literature in general. In her English methods text, *Critical Encounters in High School English*, Deborah Appleman (2000) describes applying theories to a text as the application of lenses (p. 155). Like glasses that an individual would wear, readers may select a lens and use it to view and interpret the text and, subsequently, the world around her or him. As much of *Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* details a young man's critical re-viewing of his world–admiring and problematizing the main tenets on which he grew up–Appleman's consideration of shifting from one lens to another is particularly appropriate.

In exploring Alexie's text, the theoretical lens from which I'd like to re-view the work is called Critical Race Theory (CRT). It is not one of the theories covered in Appleman's work. Instead, Critical Race Theory acts as an active opportunity for better understanding multiple viewpoints and ways race intersects with the experiences of everyday life. Unlike traditional literary theories like those that Appleman expertly describes in *Critical Encounters*, Critical Race Theory is an

inherently productive theory. By that, I mean that instead of merely looking at a text using CRT to build an analysis of it, CRT encourages response and action. Within the context of working with young people, CRT is a particularly ripe tool for engaging in writing, research, organizing, and action. Initially developed by legal scholars of color, Critical Race Theory was originally:

> ... the work of progressive legal scholars of color who are attempting to develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that work toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination. (Matsuda, 1991, p. 1331)

My personal understanding of CRT has spurred from the ways this work has been incorporated into the educational realm as a tool for exploring and responding to ways racial subordination and privilege affect the educational landscape in the United States. Working with students in my classroom and in extracurricular contexts, CRT is a tool for youth expression and action. In framing how educational researchers use Critical Race Theory, Solórzano and Bernal (2001) outline five main themes that I summarize below:

1. The intersection of race and other forms of insubordination–though race (as the name implies) is found at the center of this theory—CRT scholars recognize that race is intermingled with myriad forms of oppression, insubordination, and marginalization.
2. The active challenge to a dominant ideology–Critical Race Theory seeks opportunities to "speak back" to assumed color-blind and race-neutral practices.
3. A commitment to social justice–CRT actively works to address the elimination of poverty, sexism and racism as well as the empowerment of people of color.
4. The promotion of experiential knowledge–recognizing that tacit, experiential knowledge is legitimate and crucial to forming understanding of racial subordination, CRT demands the use of *testimonios*, storytelling, and narrative development.
5. A transdisciplinary perspective–CRT builds upon scholarship from ethnic, legal, historical, and sociological studies amongst myriad other fields.

Taken together, these tenets help illustrate some of the ways to approach a text like Alexie's. Further, these tenets are supportive in framing the assets youth bring into classrooms and positioning their knowledge as legitimate and valued. Through producing their own narratives about racial subordination, youth can act upon the principles of Critical Race Theory in powerfully productive ways. Their own experiences and engaging in facilitated dialogue around them allow youth to develop plans for action and social change.

I want to briefly describe how *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* can represent these main elements. To be clear, one of the strongest ways to build on youth experience as a process of theory-building and contributing to actionable outcomes is through the process of including their experiential knowledge in the

classroom. Storytelling and recasting youth experiences of subordination are important when fostered in safe, classroom spaces. As such, Alexie's novel is a strong depiction of a Critical Race Theory counter narrative. This book speaks back to some stereotypes of a (not "the") Native American experience and provides room for readers to find new ways to interpret pre-existing assumptions of Indian stereotypes. At the same time, Arnold's is not the defining narrative of Native Americans. It may be the only text written by a Native American many young people may read as part of schooling. As such, educators must illustrate how, from a CRT-lens this is *one* account of Native American perseverance in the U.S. and an opportunity to engage in *further* exploration.

Further, Alexie's text clearly elaborates on the notion that race is closely tied to other forms of subordination. Throughout the book, Arnold is not labeled simply "Indian." He is poor, he has severe health challenges such as being born "with too much grease inside my skull" and regularly recurring seizures. The mixture of poverty, physical challenges and race create a strong, personalized nexus of discrimination for Junior. This helps readers, too, locate ways racism is not perceived in isolation.

Related, the text is illustrative of what Pierce (1995) describes as "microaggressions":

> Probably the most grievous of offensive mechanisms spewed at victims of racism and sexism are microaggressions. These are subtle, innocuous, preconscious, or unconscious degradations, and putdowns, often kinetic but capable of being verbal and/or kinetic. In and of itself a microaggression may seem harmless, but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence. (p. 281)

The microaggressions of racist jokes and daily in-school challenges that plague Junior may echo some readers' personal experiences. However, they also help illuminate for readers the ways harmless language can impact social identity in schools. Again, within a Critical Race Theory framework, these microaggressions are moments for re-framing a narrative. Instead of seeing harmless jokes or uncouth language choices, CRT helps illustrate (through counter narratives) the ways these are violent actions of oppression. For example, when a harmless joke feels like a larger threat, Arnold's social actions lead him to instigate a fistfight; he has misread the social cues of white society and acted upon what his white peers perceive as harmless. Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solorzano (2009) note how "racial microaggressions cause stress to their victims, who must decipher the insult and then decide whether and how to respond … If they confront their assailants, victims of microaggressions often expend additional energy and time defending themselves against accusations of being 'too sensitive'" (p. 661).

Pushing against racist practices and challenging reader assumptions, Alexie flips traditional assumptions about race and representation within the book. As a book

that is not written by or about a white person, Arnold's frame for viewing the world is naturally different from that of the majority of other YA protagonists'. Instead of assuming characters are white and describing the exception—calling out when a character is black or Asian or Latino—Arnold makes a note of when a character is white. This is what is foreign in his experience—even as he ventures into the "white school" of Reardan.

While *Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* is useful in exemplifying the main attributes of Critical Race Theory and it may be a useful entry point for teaching and exploring this theory, it is by no means definitive. Just as CRT is used here to look at what Alexie includes and voices and privileges within his novel, CRT can be used as a means for responding to and emphasizing what is absent within a novel. It is important to help students build understanding around two related questions within YA books:

1. Who's voice is privileged? And
2. What kinds of assumptions and subordinations are assumed within a book?

In "Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth" Tara Yosso (2005) writes that Critical Race Theory "can be used to theorize, examine and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact social structures, practices and discourses" (p. 70). As Yosso explains, CRT can break down various forms of capital that may or may not be present within a community; the CRT lens highlights that "Communities of Color nurture cultural wealth through at least 6 forms of capital" (p. 77). These forms of capital include:

1. Aspirational Capital
2. Familial Capital
3. Social Capital
4. Navigational Capital
5. Resistant Capital
6. Linguistic Capital

By broadening the scope of what is considered capital, this approach embraces assets within a community and individuals in the community that are typically discounted within the confines of social reproduction. A wide array of knowledge and value can be ascertained within a group of people by examining their identity and ideology through a CRT lens. For example, Yosso demonstrates one form of newly defined capital: "aspirational capital is the ability to hold onto hope in the face of structured inequality and often without the means to make such dreams a reality" (p. 77). Such capital can be seen made manifest in Junior's transformative narrative. Not merely in Arnold's decision to roam in the same ways as traditional Native Americans (based on his friend Rowdy's explanation), the notion of aspirational capital can be felt throughout the book. Junior speaks deliberately of hope, it's entanglement in racial politics, and the constant drudgery across racial, social, and cultural borders as he goes to and from school each day.

WHOSE PART-TIME INDIAN IS IT?

Because of its resounding success, Alexie's YA book begs the question, who is its intended audience? On the one hand, the book lambasts both white society and the Native American behaviors that perpetuate the stereotypes that Junior is seeking to escape. On the other hand, the book validates striving for success and validation within a white society in ways that do not socially uplift Native Americans.

The thing is, even if a reader hasn't experienced the kinds of persistent racial subordination that Junior describes, it is all but assured that a reader has felt self-doubt, uncertainty about belonging within a school or social group, and a determined sense to rise beyond one's perceived limitations. These are innate feelings of the process of growing up. As such, Junior's journey is one readers identify with on a personal level regardless of the amount of money in one's bank account or the pigmentation of one's skin.

At the same time the structure of the book—with its many cartoon images and playful tone–means it is a simple entryway for readers. While teaching this text as part of an undergraduate course focused on Adolescents' literature, one of my students posted the following to our class discussion board:

> I actually heard of this book before I took this class, but it wasn't through any teacher. Last year, one of my friends, a guy who absolutely hates reading, recommended this book to me. He said he had to read it for one of his sociology classes and it was his favorite book. I glanced it over and dismissed it as YA lit, almost immediately.
>
> Going back to it now, I can see exactly why it connected with him. My friend, is a from a poor Mexican family, revels in some aspects of his culture but also can be seen feeling quite awkward about it. He's jokey, and not the best reader, so I can see how the pictures would hold his interest. And most importantly, he's the type of guy who would never pick up a book on his own. But once he got his nose into this one, he loved it.
>
> I think Sherman Alexie has a remarkable talent for creating a welcoming sort of tone and atmosphere. I don't think this is a book English majors would particularly like. But that's exactly why it is such a good book.

The student's reflection speaks strongly to my own experience teaching this book in urban Los Angeles. Since its publication, the funny voice and the strong lessons of individual efforts for success connected with my students. I've had more than one student ask if they can keep a copy of the book, Alexie's words so powerful they are worn over at home. And, as a teacher, it is hard to deny how incredible a feeling it is to be able to give a student a book you know has made a lasting impression on him or her. As I look at the ways this book has an impact on my students, I think of how the lessons of achievement that Alexie weaves in his narrative can be picked up and applied to my own classrooms.

MESSAGES TO READERS ABOUT ACHIEVEMENT

The book's form and its message are an interrelated structure that at once builds a sharp critique of the world in which Alexie grew up and also deracinates the assumptions of the capabilities of driven minority youth.

The challenge, however, is that by the end of the book, Junior is moving forward on a noted pathway to success, leaving behind the death, tragedy, and stereotypical pitfalls of reservation life. For students of color, the message is unambiguous: get out as fast as you can. Is Alexie endorsing assimilating into white society? Is it a rejection of one's past for individualistic success? In this sense, is this message one where Junior (and, in time, the reader) develop critical consciousness? Not necessarily. As such, this is precisely one of the dangers of teaching a book like Alexie's without constant vigilance in maintaining a critical skepticism of the work. For, as positive and empowering a text as *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* may be, it is also a text fraught with spaces of misunderstanding and opportunities for critical elucidation.

In her foundational text on culturally responsive education, *Young Gifted and Black*, Theresa Perry (2003) describes how students in America's South are rewarded for academic achievements. Perry relates an incident told to her by an acquaintance about his experiences as a student:

> When he and others came home from college, the older women in the church would engage in a practice called 'palming.' Cupping their hand, each woman in the church would put her hand in his hand and give him a dollar or whatever she had, telling him to keep on moving on to higher ground. (p. 95)

For Perry, this is an incident that she ties to cultural and group achievement. And though *Young Gifted and Black* is an inquiry into African American achievement, Perry's analysis of "palming" reveals an acute interpretation of the aspirational success: "One uplifts the race and prepares oneself to lead one's people by means of education" (p. 95). Junior's journey throughout the book is an uplifting one. However, it is uplifting for an individual. And while the Horatio Alger-like bootstrapping is a revered component of western success, it is a success that is staunchly a part of white privilege. Aspirational concerns are clearly divided for Junior. Page 57 of the book graphically represents the two sides of his emerging identity: "white" and "Indian." In this illustration, Alexie and illustrator Ellen Forney take for granted a white "bright future" and suggest only negative outcomes of "bone-crushing reality" for Indians.

The model of group achievement that Perry describes is one that I have been intimately familiar with over the years of working closely with immigrant students in my classroom. For many of these students, years of alienation from families and significant financial investment from neighbors and parents mean that numerous individuals depend on the students in my class to achieve financial success.

Unless, I am misunderstanding the ending of the book, this model is one that Junior patently rejects. In his conversation with his best friend Rowdy in the book's

conclusion, Rowdy says, "'I always knew you were going to leave. I always knew you were going to leave us behind and travel the world. I had this dream about you a few months ago. You were standing on the Great Wall of China. You looked happy and I was happy for you'" (Alexie, 2007, p. 229). In this rare moment of candor, Rowdy essentially gives his blessing for Junior to leave the reservation and to venture beyond the socioeconomic problems of the reservation. In doing so, Rowdy draws Junior's move away from Native American society as one that actually harkens back to traditional forms of Native American living: "'You're an old-time nomad,' Rowdy said. 'You're going to keep moving all over the world in search of food and water and grazing land. That's pretty cool'" (p. 230).

As I finished reading the book for the third time, I was left wondering what was Alexie's vision of social change. Should readers leave this book with an understanding that it's okay to carve an individual path and leave behind the conditions that addle them? If that's the case, it is okay; critical educators need to be able to work with such assumptions and be able to build from them.

I want to be clear that educators need to tread carefully in elaborating on the critical consciousness and possibilities for group achievement within the text. While my critical reading of Alexie's work points to some of its shortcomings, Alexie as the author is in no way "wrong" in what he writes or portrays. Especially considering that much of this book is autobiographical, it is not that the premise of Alexie's text is incorrect or that he has in some way made an incorrect decision in his life (or in Junior's). Instead, it is important for young people to be able to look at a text and find ways to build upon the narrative that exists to look for alternative blueprints toward critical consciousness and empowerment. As a central tenet of Critical Race Theory, the possibility of developing a counter narrative and seeing alternate avenues of success for Junior is not simply an imaginative exercise. It is a necessary step for youth to flex their understanding of the politics of representation within a book and how aspirational goals are shaped within the narrative. For young people to be able to speak back to a text and find alternative meaning is more than simply good academic literacy development, it is a means for students to enact their agency with the text.

Like the title of the book indicates, the protagonist deals with representing dual identities throughout the narrative. This is signaled not only in the geographic trek across town from the reservation to the white school and back but also in the name that is associated with the character at various points in the narrative. At the white school, the character is referred to by his legal name, Arnold Spirit, while on the rez he is simply called Junior. The shift from one name to another depicts the physical journey he makes back and fourth from one space to another and how this mirrors likely internal shifts and *code switching* as he dons various roles and their expectations.

A different and lasting message of Alexie's book is of taking control of your life; despite the odds and expectations of those around you, persevere and exceed beyond what others thought you are capable of. In the hands of a skilled writer like Alexie the message becomes a powerful one. Teen and adult readers that I've discussed

this book with have shared a sense of motivation at turning the final pages and seeing Junior able to spring into action after a year studying beyond the border of hopelessness that is his reservation. However, with this in mind, I am still left at the end of the book wondering who is someone that Junior looks up to? Who is his role model? Mr. P. acts as a volta within the text: because Junior hurls a book at P., the plot is moved forward through a powerful emotional exchange between the teacher and his student. Without this exchange and the violent outburst that instigates it, the text is written such that Junior would likely remain in a stasis like the rest of the Native Americans he lives with. Though she seems to disappoint her parents, Junior's sister could be seen as a potential role model: she is the first individual to thrive beyond the reservation. She is married, she is a writer, she is happy.

But she dies.

As mentioned earlier, hers is not the only significant death. Nor is it the only one that essentially kills off a possible role model for Junior. In essence, nearly every potential role model—Junior's grandmother, sister, and family friend Eugene–dies within the book. Though it could be inferred that part of Junior's destiny is found in carving his own pathway forward, the lack of role models is a frustrating reminder for both youth of color and white readers. Like popular media representations of Native Americans, Alexie's novel does not necessarily paint endearing images of the life lived or the expectations held on U.S. reservations.

For educators working with this text this is a crucial area to explore and to provoke young readers. In a book beloved by readers and teachers alike, *why* is there a dearth of role models in the text? What's more, by the end of the text, is Junior functioning as a role model for readers? Though my initial inclination when first teaching this book was to challenge the conclusions and encourage a reflective discussion with my 11th graders about the authoritorial decisions in the book, I have since seen the main critiques of this book as a doorway to powerful youth ownership and writing. For example, instead of complaining about how Junior is able to simply sidestep the hardship and tragedy that falls around him, I find it important to ask my students how they, too, have developed a resiliency and community-based knowledge of the world around them. Further, building on the tenets of Critical Race Theory, I find it important to frame Alexie's novel as a powerful multimodal counter narrative. Like the tenets of Critical Race Theory, Alexie's novel recognizes the difficulties of racism as well as its intersection with many other forms of discrimination, marginalization, and dehumanization.

Finally, it is important to return to the basic principles and roots of Critical Race Theory. As stated earlier, it is *not* a literary theory, it is an actionable theory. As such, working with Critical Race Theory and literature *must* extend beyond simply viewing and interpreting existing work. Instead, literature can act here as a portal for directly addressing, challenging, and improving sociopolitical contexts of schools and their communities. When I gave students the copies of Alexie's novel to keep, I did so enthusiastically, as I mention above. However, over the years I did so, also, with the plea that students not simply escape into the powerful stories Arnold weaves

about life on the Rez. Instead, I asked students to share their own stories, carve their own pathways forward, and to work closely with their peers to reshape our school in South Central Los Angeles. Much like Arnold throwing a book at Mr. P, I hoped that our discussions of Alexie's book could knock students toward challenging the norms of urban public schooling in the United States. Collectively, we can challenge and rewrite the expectations of youth of color.

ACTING WHITE

Reviewing the tensions that exist in the complex worlds of Junior/Arnold, the antagonist of the book is often perceived as whiteness at large. It is both an allure that feels unattainable for Alexie's main character and a gatekeeping device that fences in Junior's peers on the rez. In some ways, Junior's narrative is an uncomfortable tango with whiteness: striving toward it and, as a result, being castigated by his non-white social circles.

In educational research, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) write about a social labeling that they noticed among African American youth attempting to gain academic success in schools. Those students that were driven toward academic forms of success were labeled as "acting white." Though this phrase has troubled researchers and been met with criticism in the nearly three decades since this first publication, this tension between ways of acting and how these actions are perceived are played out again and again in Alexie's novel.

Expanding on this initial language of "acting white," Ogbu's (1991) continuing ethnographic research explored identity formation of youth of color. Describing youth that may push against dominant cultural practices as demonstrating an "oppositional identity," Ogbu points to why youth may resist formal schooling and social practices. As Finn (1999) describes, "Members of the oppressed group come to regard certain beliefs, skills, tastes, values, attitudes, and behaviors as *not* appropriate for them because they are associated with the dominant culture. Adopting these is seen as surrendering to the enemy" (p. 42). Rowdy's manifested violence, for instance, could be read as an embodiment of oppositional identity. Particularly in seeing his best friend adopt white, dominant practices, this can be read–perhaps–as treason-like actions for Rowdy.

As Junior is poised to finish at the white high school and eventually go off to pursue aspirations that lie beyond the scope of his native reservation, I read this book wondering from what position this text is written. Junior is critical of white culture and white oppression that causes him to cry "tears of shame" after defeating Wellpinit's basketball team (Alexie, 2007, p. 196). However, at the same time he is drawn to white culture and white notions of success within the text: he is dating Penelope, he attempts to dress in ways deemed formal by white culture, and he finds value in shifting into a white educational space. The conflicting identities that Junior deftly learns to juggle remind me of Walt Whitman's phrase, "I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" In some ways this mixed understanding is an

adolescent one; a longing for acceptance and an uncomplicated sense of belonging in two spaces allows Arnold not to always challenge the racial assumptions around him. He maintains dual identity practices he switches between. In addition, Junior's decisions within the book point to specific explanations of what an American identity means. Alexie's book reinforces often problematic notions of the American Dream. During my first two years as a high school teacher I spent much of my time teaching English Language Learners (ELL) classes. My students were all from Central America and Mexico. In discussions with them about the journeys they'd made and the reasons they were in my classroom, specific, cohesive definitions of the American Dream formed within the class. Linked to discussions of success were memories of loss and sacrifice (many students either left or were reunited with parents upon traveling to the U.S.). In one class, I asked my students to reflect on images of success and the American dream as a class-wide inquiry project. One student, who we will call Leonel, drew an image of the sun. Leonel's symbol of the American Dream becomes a complex interweaving of interracial dynamics, personal achievement, and the overcoming of adversity:

> This is the sun. To me this is a good symbol because it is the light. When we come from another country to the U.S. we come from the dark to the light. The sun represents all the good opportunities that we have here in the U.S. The sun represents the money and how different we look when we come to the U.S. that's what the sun represents to me.

Leonel's description of his symbol is an apologue of travel and opportunity. He casts the countries that his classmates come from in a pejorative setting of darkness. On the opposite end of Leonel's figurative spectrum of light is the United States. The American Dream, in this setting, is the apex that Leonel reaches for. Physically, the sun is the highest point for Leonel to imagine and, wisely, he invents a teleology centered around this image. Although Leonel drew the sun to represent the American Dream, he breaks down the various attributes of the Dream that the sun represents. The sun, for Leonel, is "money," differences in appearance, and "all the good opportunities" found in America. If Leonel is being consistent with his binary system of light/dark, the difference in appearance may be written about in a positive sense here. That it is included with money and opportunities, differences in "how we look" can be read as a pronouncement of diversity and Latino culture.

Leonel's strong sense of juxtaposed opportunities and transformation, to me, echoes the kinds of light-entering journeys Arnold makes to Reardan each day. It is a lengthy migration and–by the end of Alexie's novel–it is not one that the protagonist appears to deviate from. Instead it seems likely that Junior finds himself further entering white culture for the "good opportunities" that lay ahead. Like Leonel and his classmates, this too, may mean leaving behind the family and non-white cultural practices that have brought him to this moment.

The role whiteness plays in shaping youth identity (regardless of their own skin color) extends well beyond basic understanding of privilege. Instead, it guides

attitudes towards schools, society, and assumptions of success. In looking at Alexie's novel, how Arnold's moth-like attraction to whiteness plays out can be dizzying, disorienting, and familiar for young readers. It is important for educators to make complex these relationships.

LOOKING FOR DIVERSITY

Across the not-so-vast landscape of popular multicultural YA, I am reminded of the possibilities these narratives invoke in my own students. I look at these books as sparks to ignite critical articulations and actions about race within classrooms. And while there may not be a lot of them for youth to choose from in classrooms and libraries, I think that–too–is changing. Online discussions from authors like Green highlight the disparity of multicultural literature within YA as do popular blogs like Diversity in YA (http://diversityinya.tumblr.com/) created by two YA authors, Cindy Pon and Melinda Lo. Resources and writing like these give me hope about supporting powerful critical race theories developed by our youth.

Further, these advances give me hope when thinking back to the troubling and problematic exchange around *Night* and who is going to make societal advances if all of the white people in society are removed. As I look back and recognize that such statements are troubling if not atypical in our urban schools, the possibilities echoed here are important. As a collective of educators, we need to be able to identify moments for theoretical remixing: how can the student's comment about *Night* help reframe classroom discussions around experiential knowledge and storytelling? More importantly, what happens when we encourage youth to step away from assumptions of white supremacy as they are outlined in society? How do we push YA readership to look beyond reification of whiteness in books both in content and design?

Nothing is simply black or white (both literally and figuratively) related to unpacking racial stereotypes in YA. The ambiguity of the characters we encounter in books is also what humanizes them. Junior's decisions in Alexie's work, for example, may not offer the powerful narrative of resistance that I hope to instill in my students. However, it is also a salient narrative of uncertainty, tepid steps forward, and an (at least partially) honest account of Alexie's own pathway through life on the rez. In this fact, Alexie himself becomes a beacon to challenge and upheave dominant society's expectations.

During my first year at Colorado State University, Alexie visited the campus as a featured speaker. Though due to a scheduling conflict I could not make the lecture, my teaching assistant, Thomas, described the scene with a smile: before an anxious crowd packed into a university auditorium eager to hear the wisdom of the brilliant writer, Alexie leisurely walked to the front of the stage and *proceeded to talk about male genitalia*. It was a humorous, light talk that likely confounded much of the audience. It shouldn't be *that* surprising though, for readers of *Part Time Indian*. Instead of giving the hundreds in attendance for the university's week

devoted to diversity the talk they felt they wanted, Alexie gave them a talk that speaks to his own experiences and personal expectations. Even when talking about his penis, Alexie subverts an audience's assumptions and offers a new pathway toward diversity-driven narrative.

Likewise, while *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a book where whiteness is central to the novel's plot, other YA texts young people may read may not be so articulate in identifying whiteness. It will be necessary to unpack the invisible knapsack of race, stereotypes and subordination across YA titles.

CHAPTER 3

OUTSIDERS?

Exclusion and Post-Colonial Theory

Who are outsiders in YA?

The idea of the outcast, the loner, the outsider is so common in YA it is found as the title of one of YA's flagship titles. The feelings of alienation within society ring true in the greasers/socs battles of *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967). However, even in S.E. Hinton's book, the outsider is not alone; the title's last letter–making the solitary "Outsider" a member of a collective group of "OutsiderS"–is an inclusionary act on the behalf of Hinton: we are outsiders *together*.

Looking historically at YA, outsiders are a common presence. The salient theme of feeling like one doesn't belong is one that youth readily identify with. Books of the late '60s and '70s echo this sense of not connecting. Paul Zindel's *The Pigman*, Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* and *I am the Cheese*, the aforementioned *The Outsiders,* and even the junior fiction novels of the era that bridge young readers into issues of adulthood like Judy Blume's *Are you There God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970) note youthful fear of difference and acceptance.

Obviously the trend of focusing on isolation and a lack of connecting with peers or society didn't end with these foundational YA novels. The Potters and Katnisses of the blockbuster-era of YA in the 2000s, too, are indicative of outsiders. It is likely that part of how youth empathize with these fictitious characters is through recognizing their teenage emotions related to disconnection. What is striking across the majority of these texts is how being an outsider is characterized. Largely, not fitting in aligns closely with issues of social standing not simply at the high school level but in terms of socioeconomic standing. The greasers are united in their perceived low social standing. Before becoming "The Boy Who Lived," Harry Potter was a penniless boy living in the shadow of a bullying cousin.

As outsiders like Jerry Renault in *The Chocolate War* are the focus of YA books because of how *differently* they stand out from their peers, the genre's emphasis on class as a defining characteristic of not belonging is problematic: the romanticization of the working class stifles actual depiction of what living and *being* in working class neighborhoods actually looks like. The essentializing factor of casting today's working poor as the central scope of books creates false premises of the actual hardships of growing up working class.

Of course, not all YA outsiders come from working class homes. And being poor isn't the sole characteristic for developing magnetic protagonists for readers. However, a poor orphan that ends up being the nemesis of a powerful wizard or a poor huntress

that ends up toppling governmental control make more compelling narratives for western readers than if the characters came from wealthier backgrounds. Largely, the outsiders, in their struggle toward acceptance and or success within novels are illustrative of the Horatio Alger narrative of hard work that drives American Dream visions of prosperity for many readers.

There is an important tension at work in how stereotypes of outcasts play out in many books today. On the one hand, this class of individuals in *real life* are largely marginalized; their experiences are not privileged and their voices are often left out of popular media. At the same time, within the YA genre the working class is where lessons of valor, bravery, and success are often rooted. The working class are treated as the *other* and, at the same time, are romantically essentialized.

Helping young readers identify the salient characteristics of protagonists in the novels they are reading is an important strategy in better recognizing how the YA genre romanticizes the *other* within books. By making working class protagonists the envy of readers, what kinds of lessons do these books develop? Considering the literary desert that surrounded the high school where I taught–a lack of accessible libraries or bookstores made fostering lifelong learning a challenge–clearly publishers aren't focused on the working class readership. Instead, I think the Horatio Alger frame of starting from nothing and succeeding through prowess and perseverance appeals to the middle class readers of much of YA. It is not enough to simply see patterns in who is considered outsiders in YA novels. More importantly it is necessary to see who gets to be privileged with these labels and who, with few exceptions, is left out as even more literal outsiders in the YA genre altogether.

The challenge with labeling certain *kinds* of protagonists as outsiders is that they essentially become the definition of outsiders. In this chapter, my principal concern for teachers and readers of YA is this: if I am an adolescent that does not easily identify with any of the characters in the books that I am reading, what does this say about the kinds of books offered to me? And if, in doing a bit of investigation at the local library, I am unable to find a breadth of books that speak from my position and about my experiences, I am, as a reader, the outcast. Building off of the racial challenges of YA discussed in the last chapter, this chapter begins with a look at how race is *otherized* in YA and how class, too, is used as a means of isolating various social practices. Finally, the chapter ends with a look at how the *other* fairs in the dystopian settings that are dominating today's YA titles.

THE "BEST" IS ALSO THE "WHITEST"?

In 2012, National Public Radio released a widely read list, compiled from authors and book critics listing the 100 best YA books in print. Shortly after this listing, a general outcry online was being voiced. Even NPR published an article examining the center of the controversy. It's headline: "When A Popular List Of 100 'Best-Ever' Teen Books Is The 'Whitest Ever'" (Schumacher-Matos, 2012).

Of the 100 books compiled and listed by authors, critics and NPR readers, only two of the works featured protagonists of color (Sherman Alexie's *Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* and Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, both mentioned in the previous chapter). Review of the publication noted that NPR's readership tends to "skew white," meaning that NPR tends to cater to a middle and upper-class, white demographic (Schumacher-Matos, 2012). This, fact was pointed to as the reason for such little representation of other ethnicities on the list.

However, the NPR list wasn't an anomaly that eluded actual representation of the Young Adult genre in its present incarnation. Instead, though frustration has been vented online toward NPR's endorsement of a list that is severely lacking in diversity (not only racially but also in regards to sexuality, body image, and other forms of positionality), the list is a useful reminder of the perils of catering to a specific market. The list, as an instructional tool, allows readers to visualize who is included in the best that YA can offer and who is marginalized or absent altogether.

POST-COLONIAL THEORY AND OUTSIDERS

Feminist and post-structuralist theorist, Gayatri Spivak looks at the colonial legacy that lingers in literature and the voices most frequently marginalized by dominant culture. Her texts may feel intimidating for adolescent readers. However, her framework for post-structuralism and post-colonialism are important for unpacking the missing voices in literature. For instance, Spivak (1985) is perhaps best known for her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In it, like much of her continuing scholarship, Spivak looks at if and how marginalized voice can emerge within structures that deliberately limit it. Here Spivak's work helps consider the literature from a post-colonial perspective: how has the history of colonization impacted whose voices are privileged and heard?

At the same time, Spivak (1985) engages directly with texts to help look at post-structural challenges akin to how the theory was discussed in Chapter One. Her explanation of post-structuralism is a useful lens for exploring with students the challenges of representation and underrepresentation within the genre. She explains that the purpose of post-structuralists is one of asking "over and over again, What is it that is left out? Can we know what is left out? We must know the limits of the narratives, rather than establish the narratives as solutions for the future, for the arrival of social justice" (p. 19).

Spivak's questions are a part of a larger collective inquiry that pushes at representation and humanizing attributes of the *other* within post-colonial theory. At the heart of post-colonialism are intersecting questions of voice, power, and resistance. If certain individuals are privileged, how can such practices change?

In a classic post-colonial text, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon (1952) describes the concept of "dual consciousness": the concept that colonized individuals must be able to live out and enact two different identities depending on the social contexts they find themselves in. Fanon, here, deliberately echoes

African-American writer, W.E.B. Dubois (1903), who writes 50 years earlier about "double consciousness" in his work *The Souls of Black Folk*. There, Dubois writes of double consciousness as the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (p. 6). For Fanon, both in *Black Skin, White Masks* and later works like *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), colonial practices essentially strip away humanizing attributes of the colonized.

Acknowledging this global history of dehumanization and binary identities (a topic explored in depth by another post-colonial scholar, Edward Said), looking at YA literature from a post-colonial perspective is a necessary and useful means of approaching the notion of the outsider. In addition to racial subordination, issues of gender and sexuality are also at the heart of privilege within the genre.

WHITE PRIVILEGE AND YA

Even in YA novels where the author does not deliberately note the race of a protagonist, a book cover often helps illuminate an assumption of whiteness. Before the reader selects and engages with an individual book, he or she is confronted by the paratextual design decisions that vie for a reader's dollars and attention. The book

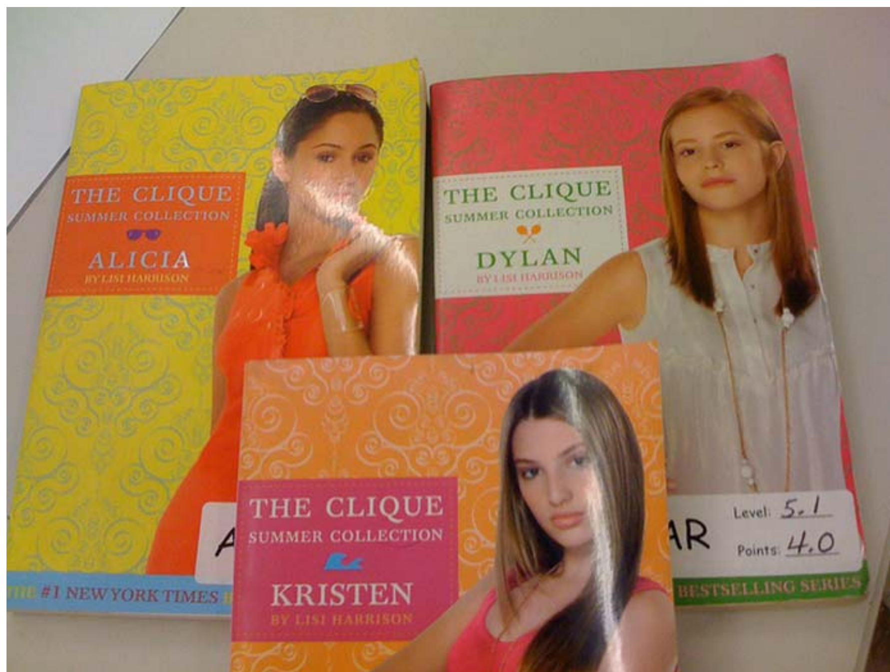

Figure 2. The Clique series.

covers are hugely important in drawing readers into lucrative book series; a poorly received design decision is a missed opportunity for sustained capitalism. One day, at my high school's library, I took two pictures of the book covers being promoted for students to check out and dive into.

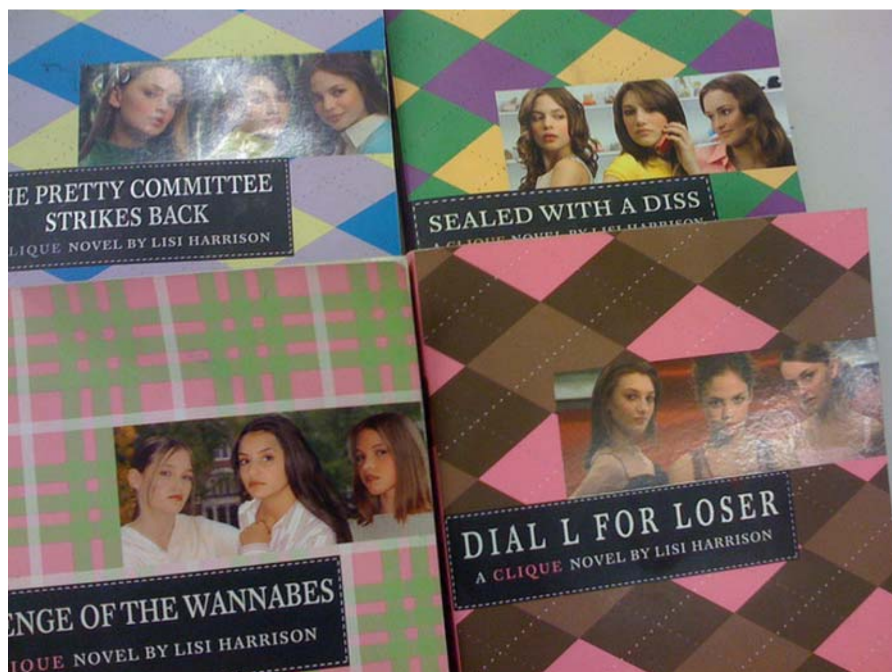

Figure 3. Additional Clique Covers.

While I cannot attest to the literary value of the majority of the titles, I can speak to the fact that the faces on these book covers are strikingly different, racially, from the faces of my students. In the eight years I taught at my high school, I never had a white student in my classes. This matched the school's demographics more generally; though the demographics shifted over the years, they were roughly 20% Black and 80% Latino (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2012). So what? Did the adults responsible at my school for procuring novels for students simply do a bad job? Not really. On the one hand the books pictured were usually picked up based on prominent placement in bookstores and catalogs: book publishers effectively market books to the audiences they imagine will buy them. On the other hand, these novels aren't exceptional in their depiction of whiteness. Frankly, the books being marketed and sold are written by, about, and designed to highlight white people. If students wanted to feel included by a book-buying community, the covers and narratives of popular YA indicate that they need to embrace books for white people.

Often, when I begin discussions of whiteness with my preservice teachers, the climate in the classroom shifts uncomfortably. Statistically, the majority of individuals entering the teaching profession are white, though classrooms are becoming more diverse (Zeichner, Grant, Gay, Gillette, Valli, & Villegas, 1998). Being deliberate in identifying whiteness in marketing, content, and cultural hegemony can feel jarring. Discussing white privilege and attempting to make it clear–such as describing the microagressions that Junior faced in Alexie's book, described in the previous chapter–are an important way of articulating a historical legacy of privilege and colonialization that our literature and our classrooms are steeped within. And while this conversation may be daunting, it is one that can and should be unpacked in adolescent classrooms through relying on popular media examples. For instance, with YA books proliferating into other media franchises, a text like *Gossip Girl* is ideal for discussing otherness and privilege.

ALIENATING READERS IN THE WEALTH OF *GOSSIP GIRL*

From the opening pages of Cecily von Ziegesar's *Gossip Girl* series, readers are confronted with a world that will likely seem vastly different from their own. Nearly everyone is an outsider bearing witness to gluttonous wealth of elite teens. This much is nothing new in terns of YA; whether it's a book about a teen moving to a new town and dealing with feelings of isolation and loneliness, a book about the post-apocalyptic future, or a historical period piece, YA thrives in placing its readers in a world that is unfamiliar from their own. However, what does separate *Gossip Girl* (2002) from the kinds of familiar YA tropes mentioned above is that this unfamiliar world is one of extreme privilege: "It's a luxe life, but someone's got to live it" (p. 2), says the anonymous gossip website author Gossip Girl in the first of the 13 book series. And if the displays of wealth and the extreme focus on materialism and reification of social values are not what you're looking for in a book series, well, it may be best to skip *Gossip Girl* or its nearly dozen other series that von Ziegasar has published or produced.

Of course, the problem is you *can't* ignore these books. Prominently displayed in bookstores, regularly consumed by teens, serialized in popular television shows, *Gossip Girl* has become an entire industry. This industry operates around selling not just copies and merchandise related to these books but in delineating the strict in and out rules of mainstream white culture.

Gossip Girl begins with an online statement from the anonymous Gossip Girl before diving fully into the love triangle of Blair Waldorf, Serena van der Woodsen, and Nate Archibald:

> Ever wondered what the lives of the chosen ones are really like? Well, I'm going to tell you, because I'm one of them. I'm not talking about beautiful models or actors or musical prodigies or mathematical geniuses. I'm talking about the people who are *born to it*–those of us who have everything we could possibly wish for and who take it all completely for granted. (Von Ziegesar, 2002, p.1)

Descriptions of what having *everything* entails is reinforced in every chapter. Whether it's the clothing labels for a tuxedo–"Hugo Boss, Calvin Klein, DKNY, Armani" (Von Ziegesar, 2002, p. 149), or the kind of alcohol a character orders–"Ketel One and Tonic" (p. 119), the specific descriptions of clothing, drinks, and accessories acts as a blueprint for young people to consider what to wear and to buy and to say. As Naomi Wolf (2006) writes in a review of the series, "brands are so prominent you wonder if there are product placement deals."

While it is easy for me, as a thirty-something male, to criticize and lambast the *Gossip Girl* texts and copycat series that followed the franchise, it is also important to identify that I am not the intended audience for the book. From a marketing perspective, I'm not supposed to enjoy this book. That being said, what is most confounding to me throughout *Gossip Girl* is just how unlikeable all of the characters are. Bret Easton Ellis' 1991 novel *American Psycho* parodied the same world and worldview shared by the *Gossip Girl* series to particular effect. Pontificating about '80s soft-rock band Genesis or the specific hue of his business cards, the narrator of Ellis' novel skewers the excess of the late '80s. And while *American Psycho* is a post-modern critique of the world of American materialism (and a book written for a very different audience), *Gossip Girl* is a ringing endorsement of buying and excess. Interestingly, the parody of consumption central to Ellis' text was lost in the film adaptation.

Perhaps a case could be made for the way the book is a powerful tool for readers if any of the girls' actions within the book were transformative in any way. What glues the book's alienating world to readers is both the reification of materialism and that the petty squabbles and magical power of gossip within the book to isolate and hurt may reflect how rumors can function in *real* adolescent social settings. However, in following along with the he-said, she-said of the book, readers also see students that not only focus only on manipulative power and expensive baubles but who also blatantly disregard the world that is less than first class. For instance after talking to a slightly less affluent classmate, Serena hesitates to travel on the subway. Likewise, a philanthropic effort within the book is focused on a pair of endangered birds inhabiting Central Park; Blair organizes the fundraiser unaware what the birds even look like. At one point, Serena questions the purpose of the fundraiser:

> "They're an endangered species, and everyone's worried that they're going to die or starve or the squirrels will raid their nests or whatever. So they set up a foundation for them," she explained. "Don't laugh. I know it's kind of stupid."
>
> Serena blew out a puff of smoke and giggled. "Well, it's not like there aren't *people* that need saving. I mean, what about the homeless?"
>
> "Well, it's as good a cause as any. We wanted something that wasn't too heavy to start the season off," Blair huffed, annoyed. It was fine for *her* to laugh at the cause she's chosen for the party, but Serena had no right. (Von Ziegesar, 2002, pp. 124–125)

The book's characters are so above those of all but the very elite in American society that they are often ignorant of the social mores they breach or trespass upon. Literally towering above others in apartments and lofts at the very top of New York's real estate, these characters offer an escapist view of luxury for readers. The appeal makes sense: though they may not have worked hard for it, the youth are living a dream of wealth. It is an awkward fantasia of sex, drugs, partying, shopping, and interpersonal drama. Though the students are regularly placed in dramatic, *gossipy* contexts because of a loose backdrop of schooling, the Constance Billard School for Girls is largely irrelevant. In fact the main sources of authority that could temper youth development and hinder kids from making *too* many poor decisions, teachers and parents, are often absent.

ON THE ABSENCE OF PARENTS

Each time that I have read *Gossip Girl*, I wonder when adult guidance and parenting takes place. For most YA texts I tend to not notice the absence or parents; checking in with adults or getting occasional advice functions as the kind of center around which various activities circulate. Because even though parents are largely absent from the main stories that are sold and shared with kids, they are usually perceived as a powerful presence in YA. In *Looking for Alaska*, for example, even though nearly the entire book takes place in a boarding school, de facto parents, like strict teacher the Eagle, act as adults with whom teenagers must check-in. Likewise, when Pudge struggles in the second half of the book, parts of his coping have to deal with calling *home* and talking to his parents. And Green's novel is typical: Jerry in *The Chocolate War* occasionally interacts with his father, Bella's father in *Twilight* is a controlling force, and even Four interacts with his parental figure in ways that guide his actions in *I am Number Four*. Though disobedience may help guide plot in YA texts, parents are usually acknowledged as aspects of teens lives. For the characters in *Gossip Girl*, however, that's not exactly the case. The first chapter of the book offers an excuse for this absence:

> Luckily Blair and her friends came from the kind of families for whom drinking was as commonplace as blowing your nose. Their parents believes in the quasi-European idea that the more access kids have to alcohol, the less likely they are to abuse it. So Blair and her friends could drink whatever they wanted whenever they wanted, as long as they maintained their grades and their looks and didn't embarrass themselves or the family by puking in public, pissing their pants, or ranting in the streets. They same thing went for everything else, like sex or drugs–as long as you kept up appearances, you were all right. (Von Ziegesar, 2002, p. 6)

This excuse allows von Ziegesar to essentially move away from the unspoken rules about parent guidance that dominates most YA texts and teens' lived experiences. In rewriting this trope and erasing parents from the picture of these books, von

Ziegesar allows greater agency for her characters in ways that frame their actions as sophisticated. Part of the appeal of these characters, for young readers, is that they are able to make adult-like decisions (though drinking in excess the night before exams does not have the same kinds of adult-like repercussions). “The problem is a value system in which meanness rules, parents check out, conformity is everything and stressed-out adult values are presumed to be meaningful to teenagers,” Wolf (2006) writes about the series and the progeny of books it has sprouted, adding, “The books have a kitsch quality — they package corruption with a cute overlay.” The difficulty with parsing out specific lessons for readers of *Gossip Girl* is that these are books driven to entertain regardless of the consequences. As the opening note about promiscuity and lassez faire parenting suggest, the moral and ethical questions the book could take up about privilege and class-based dominance are ignored. These are books about individuals thriving and conniving to be at the top of a social circle at the expense of others. The labor force that allows the characters of *Gossip Girl* to thrive are largely invisible–a maid is noted for having left fresh flowers in Serena’s room but is otherwise not mentioned in the book.

This absence of parents is reinforced throughout the book. On feeling despondent at school, Serena returns to her penthouse family apartment (across the street from the Metropolitan Museum of Art for those of you keeping tabs):

> When Serena got home the enormous apartment was empty. Her parents were rarely home. Her father ran the same Dutch shipping firm his great-great-grandfather had founded in the 1700s. Both her parents were on the boards of all the big charities and arts organizations in the city and always had meetings or lunches or fundraisers to go to. (Von Ziegesar, 2002, p. 87)

What’s troublesome about this lack of ethics or concern for others’ well being in the book is how these feelings are construed as *adult*. As privileged young people capable of spending most of their time away from the parenting eye, Serena and Blair’s actions are perceived as mature. Readers could see their actions as cool in how adult-like they seem. As Wolf (2006) notes,

> The girls try on adult values and customs as though they were going to wear them forever. The narratives offer the perks of the adult world not as escapist fantasy but in a creepily photorealistic way, just as the book jackets show real girls polished to an unreal gloss. It’s not surprising that Cecily von Ziegesar matter-of-factly told an interviewer that she sees her books as “aspirational” (which she seemed to think was a good thing). (Ryzik, 2007)

WHITE SUPREMACIST, CAPITALIST, PATRIARCHY

In discussing forms of subordination, critical scholar bell hooks (1994) talks about “white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy” (p. 71). In an interview (Jhally, 1997), hooks explains her language choice:

> I began to use the phrase in my work "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" because I wanted to have some language that would actually remind us continually of the interlocking systems of domination that define our reality and not to just have one thing be like, you know, gender is the important issue, race is the important issue, but for me the use of that particular jargonistic phrase was a way, a sort of short cut way of saying all of these things actually are functioning simultaneously at all times in our lives and that if I really want to understand what's happening to me, right now at this moment in my life, as a black female of a certain age group, I won't be able to understand it if I'm only looking through the lens of race. I won't be able to understand it if I'm only looking through the lens of gender. I won't be able to understand it if I'm only looking at how white people see me. To me an important breakthrough, I felt, in my work and that of others was the call to use the term white supremacy, over racism because racism in and of itself did not really allow for a discourse of colonization and decolonization, the recognition of the internalized racism within people of color and it was always in a sense keeping things at the level at which whiteness and white people remained at the center of the discussion. In my classroom I might say to students that you know that when we use the term white supremacy it doesn't just evoke white people, it evokes a political world that we can all frame ourselves in relationship to….And so for me those words were very much about the constant reminder, one of institutional construct, that we're not talking about personal construct in the sense of, how do you feel about me as a woman, or how do you feel about me as a black person?

The careful and deliberate way that hooks slices how she regularly experiences marginalization is a powerful approach for looking critically at how *Gossip Girl* functions as an ideological text. Bringing in this nexus of marginalization in dominant ideology is an important step for educators. Further, in thinking about the intersection of race, class, and gender it is important to see who may be the most obvious outsiders in *Gossip Girl* and books of its ilk. Unlike Hinton's flagship title, there are very few significant outsiders in *Gossip Girl*: wealth and beauty (from a heterosexist, misogynistic perspective) drive social acceptance. In addition to these three key areas of dominant ideological thought that hooks articulates, I would add two more that *Gossip Girl* contributes.

First, Heterosexism: throughout the first novel, the only references to sexuality that at all deviates from heterosexuality are of twin fashion photographers that assure Serena she is safe with them since they are gay and a brief, drunken kiss between Blair and Serena in a hot tub. Both of these simply reinforce the way homosexuality is cordoned off into *safe* areas of a heterosexist culture. As fashion is perceived as the domain of ostentatious artists, young readers can assume that it is *normal* for fashion photographers to be gay. Likewise, Blair and Serena's secret kiss enforces the notion that lesbianism is tantalizing and only a resource for women to draw upon to increase heterosexual appeal to men.

Second, I would add depictions of body image: the main characters of this book are good looking. I know this because the von Ziegasar reminds the reader constantly. In doing so, though, she reinforces traditional notions of beautify. Not an ounce of body fat is noticeable on the women in this book unless it is perkily found in their mammaries (lowly ninth grade student, Jenny, complains about the fact that she is a normal sized girl with a 34d chest size). In describing Serena, von Ziegasar begins with her family:

> The whole van der Woodsen family ... were tall, blond, thin, and super-poised, and they never did anything–play tennis, hail a cab, eat spaghetti, go to the toilet–without maintaining their cool. Serena especially. She was gifted with the kind of coolness that you can't acquire by buying the right handbag or the right pair of jeans. She was the girl every boy wants and every girl wants to be. (Von Ziegesar, 2002, p. 20)

Anticipating having sex for the first time, Blair scrutinizes her naked body carefully in the reflection of a mirror:

> Her legs were too short for the rest of her body, her boobs were small and not as "pay attention to me" as she would have liked them. Her jeans had left an angry red mark on her waist, but it was barely noticeable in the dim candlelight. Her skin was still nice and tan from the summer, but her face seemed young and scared, not nearly as sexy as it was supposed to look. And her hair was sticking up in a halo of frizz from the rain. Blair dashed into the bathroom and applied a coat of the lip gloss Serena had left on her sink to her lips and ran her hairbrush through her long brown hair until it cascaded onto her shoulders in the sexiest way possible. There, instant irresistibility. (Von Ziegesar, 2002, p. 132)

On the one hand the dissatisfaction with aspects of her body is one way that Blair may build a connection with readers. The changing bodies of adolescence is a prevalent topic for teens as popularized in many of Judy Blume's '60s and '70s novels. However, in dealing with these insecurities, the fact that a temporary red mark and a smaller-than-preferred breast size are her major flaws suggest that in all other ways Blair is flawlessly beautiful. And of these flaws, how are teens to react? Are they, too, expected to have unblemished skin and a bust size deemed appropriate in comparison to improbable media representations? Further, for Blair to transform into "irresistibility" through application of a simple cosmetic is also problematic in how it shapes readers' understanding of beauty. Through application of a red lipstick, through describing the brands of clothing worn, and through the ways Serena smokes exotically French Gauloise cigarettes, *Gossip Girl* instructs impressionable readers that beauty has a price tag. And to be desirable, it's a price girls need to pay to fit within patriarchal society. Outsiders in the world of *Gossip Girl* are girls that aren't pretty enough to bare comparison to the Blairs and Serenas

of the world. And beauty is only based partly on natural looks: wealth and the ability to use it are also key components to being an accepted member of this society.

Part of what makes *Gossip Girl* such a successful series is the way it contextualizes the everyday experiences with gossip and rumormongering within a world so different from that of most readers. As a result, the emotional component of longing and isolation are captured and displaced onto the unfamiliar and alienating. Salaciousness compels young adults to turn pages. Drugs, sex, and deviant behavior are enticing for readers. And at a time when young people are exploring their own identities, how the world sees them and how they want to the world to see them, getting to see rules being broken in texts is all too exciting.

Because it is blatant in illustrating the ways YA caters to promoting specific capitalist and dominant white ideologies, *Gossip Girl* acts as a beacon for how many books within the genre function. It should be noted that while books like *Gossip Girl* may present insidious values and ideologies part of what makes these culture-guiding texts so powerful is the sheer number of readers these books garner. Their clear branding and ease of recognition within bookstores makes casual readers able to identify and purchase the books, franchise materials, and spin off titles. At the same time, most libraries are driven by policies to give users the information and materials they are looking for. As aids in providing patrons with requested content, it isn't a librarian's job to necessarily challenge or pose alternatives when a teenager requests the latest *Gossip Girl* text. Incidentally the discerning parent and the teenager in a library will likely get different books handed to them. If a teenager is looking for a specific book she or he will be shown how to find it. On the other hand, parents may describe a *kind* of book, giving librarians more options in terms of suggested titles. All this is to say that libraries function to give users the books they *want*. Making their role even more resourceful, lists of related titles to popular books are usually at the ready in most libraries to help expand the options of voracious readers. Liked the Hunger Games trilogy? Your local librarian will likely have a bevy of alternatives to follow up the adventures of Katniss Everdeen. The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA, [2006]), a constituency of the American Library Association, as a result, has curated lists of books for fans that have finished the *Gossip Girls* series.

IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

For *Gossip Girl*, making young people connect to the world of rumors and identity searching that is universal for westernized teens turned a book series into a thriving industry of merchandise, television shows and endless spinoffs in various media forms. *Gossip Girl* made the familiar unfamiliar by placing the women with identifiable and common emotions in an uber-rich caste such that their world felt like a fantasy for the vast majority of its readers. At the same time, in grounding these descriptions of wealth in tangible products, *Gossip Girl* created a blueprint for consumption. In a similar fashion, YA texts have been making the familiar

unfamiliar–and making a healthy profit along the way–through casting books around desolate, post-apocalyptic worlds. These dystopian books that are so popular now also function as a gateway for readers. Feelings of isolation, identity, and yearning for exceptionalism often function as a crucible in which youth identify with the books they are reading. Even the mantra of "escaping into literature" is one that requires the reader to first identify with a protagonist to be able to follow along her or his journey.

YA dystopian novels offer an opportunity for exploring post-colonial theory with young people. Though the books may be flawed in terms of representation and plot-delineated definitions of success, they often still cast young people as outsiders in a world gone mad, sick, or in some terrible way disabled. Throughout the various YA dystopian novels one major trope that appears is a contested grasp of power between youth and established adult authority. Whether this be a youth-led resistance to the government in *Divergent*, the ad-hoc recruitment of runaways to fight off anti-abortion laws in *Unwind,* or a teenage rebel, Katniss, seen as the leader of a larger resistant network, the ways youth attempt to wrest authority from adult hands offers a useful opportunity for exploring issues of power and otherness in post-colonial theory.

The state of YA in the 21st century is that of a genre that has spun wildly into the future and that YA future is a bleak one for the human race. Though several prominent books written primarily for young people have marked adolescent literature throughout the 1900s, little else now fills young readers demands like the post-apocalyptic speculative series of the past decade. With Harry and Bella helping usher in a legion of adult and youth readers alike that have made YA a lucrative venture for writers and publishers (at least compared to the unstable state of book publishing at large), the book industry has focused prominently on books that deal with a strange future that wafts of familiarity. Across series like *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2009), *The Maze Runner* (Dashner, 2010), *Divergent* (Roth, 2011), *The Chaos Walking Trilogy* (Ness, 2009), *Matched* (Condie, 2011), *Uglies* (Westerfield, 2005), and numerous others still in various publication stages, familiar tropes are prominent in these series. All of these books imagine a post-catastrophic world in which some sort of unnamed devastation has radically restructured the norms and codes of society. Children, in these premises:

- are genetically modified to weed out physical differences (*Uglies*)
- are put through intensive psychological tests in an effort to find solutions to the world's undisclosed disaster (*Maze Runner*)
- are forced to violently kill in order to adhere to the expectations of adults that perhaps abuse power (*Hunger Games, Divergent, Chaos Walking*)
- are forced into limiting constraints of identity and labor associated with their identity (*Matched, Divergent, Maze Runner*)
- are in a classed society that further stratifies the wealthy and working class (*Hunger Games, Maze Runner, Divergent, Chaos Walking*)

Though the individual nuances of how these post-apocalyptic premises unfold is at the liberty of the books' authors, critical readers should recognize that such agency never falls within grasp of the texts' protagonists. Regardless of which cocktail of future calamity authors concoct for their protagonists, the steps forward are typically telecasted on the first pages of the books. Despite the harsh conditions of the world around them, the extraordinary characters must push against the machinations of adults and better the future society. These protagonists are working from a minority position. It's an endearing message for young people: they embody the capacity to challenge, to lead, to revolutionize. Of course, along the way, they will fight, they will fall in love, and they will do all of the things teenagers in other books typically get to do. And while they may be marginalized within the books, good looks, steaming sexuality, and physical and mental acuity ensure that they are near-superhuman in faculty.

Perhaps even more than in other types of YA books, the protagonists of the post-apocalyptic are of a singular variety: they don't fit the mold of the society they are placed in (often excelling beyond the expectations of tests and trials through which they are placed). Veronica Roth's, *Divergent*, for instance, is titled particularly because the book's protagonist, Beatrice, doesn't confine to one of the five factions that society has split into: Candor, Abnegation, Dauntless, Amity, and Erudite. Each of these factions represents specific personal dispositions from honesty to intellectualism (as their names imply). One would argue that well-rounded individuals would likely exude all of these qualities yet Roth's narrative is of a fractured society where sharing traits from more than one faction is cause for fear and marginalization. The title of the book implies *otherness* is not welcomed in society. To be *Divergent* is dangerous.

THIS IS NOT MY BEAUTIFUL HOUSE

And why post-apocalyptic YA in the first place? With novels like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* acting as blockbuster titles, the bestselling sub-genre begs the question why does this appeal to YA readers (both youth and adult alike)? Perhaps more tellingly, why are these the *kinds* of books being marketed toward impressionable youth?

First, as Chapter One noted, it is a strongly formulaic genre to produce. A litany of authors are able to begin dozens of ongoing books series by simply plugging-in varying end-of-the-world premises into a traditional three-act story arc. By leaving breadcrumb-like trails of clues as to the various mysteries in each book, the series pretty much guarantee a sustained returning audience from one book in a series to the next, regardless of the often diminishing returns in quality.

However, while other sub-genres in YA struggle to do little more than offer a simulacra of adolescent experience, the post-apocalyptic worlds of dystopian fiction offer a new (yet bleak) landscape of literary possibilities. Suddenly, the subaltern can explore and find other ways to be ostracized in future worlds. As such, dystopian

fiction is particularly powerful as a means of reflecting on current conditions of inequity. Playing out debates on immigration or abortion to illogical extremes have created some of today's most popular dystopian texts (*The House of the Scorpion* and *Unwind*, respectively). Though the breakneck, action-packed pace of typical YA texts is not forsaken in the process, a book like previously mentioned Neil Shusterman's *Unwind* (2007) applies the typical features of the genre in a compelling yarn that imagines one way the pro-life/pro-choice debate could play out. Before the narrative begins, Shusterman presents "The Bill of Life" that acts as the central conceit that drives the plot in the book:

> The Second Civil War, also known as "The Heartland War," was a long and bloody conflict fought over a single issue. To end the war, a set of constitutional amendments known as "The Bill of Life" was passed. It satisfied both the Pro-Life and Pro-Choice armies. The Bill of Life states that human life may not be touched from the moment of conception until a child reaches the age of thirteen. However, between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, a parent may choose to retroactively "abort" a child … on the condition that the child's life doesn't "technically" end. The process by which a child is both terminated and yet kept alive is called "unwinding." Unwinding is now a common and accepted practice in society. (Shusterman, 2007)

The framework casts children avoiding being "unwound" as a loose army resisting the government-instated practice. Their otherness offers to cast light on a familiar issue from a new, sci-fi perspective.

Similarly, Nancy Farmer's (2002) *The House of the Scorpion* is built on contemporary genetics debates about cloning and the rights of "beasts" like the book's protagonist (a clone), Mateo. At the same time, the book also imagines a future solution to drug cartels and immigration. Opium is not only the substance that drives an international drug economy, it is the name of an independent nation-state that runs *between* what was once the United States and Mexico, functioning as a buffer through which any undocumented border crossers get absorbed for indentured servitude. Like with *Unwind* this context is the background on which the story of a protagonist plays out. Through exploring what happens in a world of such extremes, Farmer helps offer new nuances for readers about how immigration reform may impact individuals, and what kinds of ethical challenges are posed by advances in cloning.

What is striking in texts like *Unwind* and *The House of the Scorpion* is not simply that they merge the popular components of the YA genre (both books feature grisly deaths and teenagers making foolhardy decisions because of *love*) but that they do so in ways that encourage in readers critical reflection about the salient current events that the books highlight.

A similar example, Cory Doctorow's (2010) *Little Brother* imagines a repressive police-state takes over San Francisco after a horrendous terrorist attack. As a result of ensuing government actions, the book's protagonist, Marcus (a.k.a "w1n5t0n"),

has no choice but to organize and lead his youth peers to create an independent army of hackers and activists to push against government power. The book is provocative in encouraging reflection on the same issues of fear, power, propaganda, and responsibility that Orwell emphasized in the book alluded to in Doctorow's title, *1984*.

When I assigned *Little Brother* to a class of ninth grade students in South Central Los Angeles, one of my students put the book down during silent reading one day: "Garcia," he said, "Is that thing real?"

"That thing," in this instance, was called Paranoid X-Box and it was a modified gaming console that allowed teens to communicate and organize with each other. I told my student that the product, though it was specifically named by the author, mimicked existing digital tools. I also mentioned that since the book's release, fans of the book actually constructed a *real* Paranoid X-Box system; yes, in that sense, that *thing* is real. Here was a dystopian society that mirrors challenges within contemporary society of YA readers in ways that instigated change and innovation.

THE SINGLE STORY OF YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

At the 2012 Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (ALAN) annual conference, YA author Scott Westerfield took a moment to reflect on why dystopian novels seem so prevalent within the YA world. He's someone in a position to respond insightfully about this: his four book series, *Uglies*, takes place in a futuristic setting where, after some sort of civilization-altering catastrophe, humans have surgically modified all adults to look attractive. The "uglies" that the first of the four books is titled after are the young people waiting to come of old enough age to live the sultry life of the beautiful or (as the second book in the series is titled) the *Pretties*. In looking at the experiences of young people, Westerfield explained that high school is "fundamentally dystopian." The comment is one that is trite and quotable enough to flurry across Twitter during the conference; Westerfield's statement provokes educators to consider how spaces of schooling and formal learning may marginalize the youth we serve. However, to say that the common feelings of loss and disharmony youth feel in high school are the clear connection between readers of dystopian YA and the endless series of books being published within the genre feels slightly disingenuous.

As I read Westerfield's statement being retweeted across the Internet, I couldn't help but reflect on how he helps reiterate a voice from a position of authority. Spivak's question of who can *speak* reminded me that it is adults and publishers that are dictating how high school space is construed: the attendees at ALAN and those reading about it online are not learning from the voices of youth in these schools but from those who went to schools in the past and in shifted cultural contexts. The outsiders of these schools–the students themselves–remain voiceless. In attempting to explore multicultural literature with my high school students, I often found myself integrating a short lecture by Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie into my

lesson plans. "The Danger Of A Single Story," a talk presented at the Technology, Entertainment and Design conference (2009) has garnered millions of views on YouTube and Ted.com since first uploaded. In it, Adichie discusses what it was like for her to read stories as a young girl about white princesses eating apples and experiencing snow (none of which are present in the Nigerian city she grew up in). Adichie describes (and it is the title of her talk), that if readers are only to understand a single story of a culture they will miss the critical nuances and differences that emerge from including more voices. There is, then, a danger in only hearing the dominant voices, according to Adichie.

Pedagogically, Adiche's storytelling delivery and candid explanation of how literature shapes her identity worked wonders within my classroom: students each year responded strongly to the message of the video. Within my classroom, Adichie helped launch a long-lasting inquiry into the lack of diversity of literature my students were expected to read and the ways representation is implied in books. For my students, the YA texts they are presented with are reifying a single story about who has a voice and privilege within these books. Both in the wealthy environments of *Gossip Girl* and the surreal, dystopian futures that Westerfield and his colleagues imagine, there is a single story that is excluding the outsiders that sit within our classrooms today. We must emphasize for youth how the subaltern cannot speak–cannot even find spaces for representation–in today's YA novels.

CHAPTER 4

GENDER AND SEXUALITY AND YA

Constructions of Identity and Gender

A lot is being made of the ways women are empowered in YA texts: women are fighting, leading, and generally kicking a lot more ass than traditional readers might expect in today's books. You'd think this is an exciting time for educators to highlight strong women in these books. And while that's generally the case, the YA genre still has a *long* way to go. Though texts like *Divergent*, *The Hunger Games*, *The Uglies*, *The Maze Runner*, and other contemporary bestsellers have strong representations of women and strong female protagonists, the depictions of traditional femininity still finds these characters as subservient and meek. Just because these characters are shown as physically powerful and intellectually superior to male counterparts, women are often still depicted as callously jealous and weak. Further, women are defined as powerful in these books in particularly limiting ways. Unless you are white, traditionally beautiful and heterosexual, you're not going to be getting a lot of mileage as a female in YA books at the moment.

MORE THAN FEMINISM

In describing why it is important for educators to present and guide use of a feminist lens in English classrooms, Appleman (2000) writes:

> There are at least four dimensions in which using feminist theory can transform students' reading–how students view female characters and appraise the author's stance toward those characters, how students evaluate the significance of the gender of the author in terms of its influence on a particular literary work, how students interpret whole texts within a feminist framework, and finally, and perhaps most important, how students read the gendered patterns in the world. (p. 77)

Appleman's four dimensions help offer powerful readings of canonical texts like *Hamlet* and *The Great Gatsby*. The strategies she outlines in her chapter have helped guide important lessons within my own classroom. While entire bodies of scholarship, academia, and literature exist detailing the nuances and inner-debates of feminism, Appleman's explanation allows students to easily navigate major feminist tenets without being bogged down by the minutiae of the theory.

In case it is not obvious for all readers, I want to make it clear that feminism as a literary tool is *not* solely for girls. Personally, I explain to my students that I

consider myself a feminist. I emphasize this to the boys in my classrooms so that they understand the personal stance with which I carry theory as a way of interpreting and acting within the world. When teaching about feminism, I start with easily identifiable aspects of books. In particular, a conscious recognition of the gendered authorship of texts within our classroom is a simple starting place.

That a text may be written by a male author is a clear place for students to begin casting assumptions about how gender can impact the text they are encountering. However, this in itself is only a starting place. More importantly within my classroom is recognizing that a *male gaze* perseveres throughout the books we read even if such books are written by women. As we'll see in several examples in this chapter, even the most popular YA texts that are written by women find their female characters controlled by men and unable to act on their own. The ways patriarchy guides popular culture such as YA can be made explicit through regular integration of a feminist lens within classrooms.

THIRD WAVE FEMINISM AND BEYOND

I've often used Appleman's (2000) explanation of feminism as a clear and accessible means to analyze canonical and popular fiction within my classroom. It is a powerful jumping off point for youth reflection and analysis. However, I have found it useful to complicate this lens as well. In particular I tend offer ways race and class are also components necessary to consider but sometimes disregarded in some feminist lenses. This incorporation, often acknowledged as "third wave feminism" in recognition of the history of feminism that it builds upon, is one I've come to understand through reading several scholars of color. In particular, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua's (1981) edited collection of essays *This Bridge Called My Back* is a foundational set of essays that explore subjected feminist stances that had not been widely acknowledged in feminist scholarship.

Generally, the ways race plays into feminism was not addressed prior to the era this collection emerged from; feminism prior was largely entangled with the socioeconomic concerns of (American) white women. As such, these authors, along with scholars like bell hooks (mentioned in the previous chapter), help reveal that there is not a single *feminism* but more a larger set of tools and thinking to draw upon. It is this ability of third wave feminism that allows the lens to be *opened up* for younger students. Working in a high school setting where I only taught students of color, third wave feminism allowed my students to begin with a recognition of how they—as men and women of color—live lives that are *gendered* and in which aspects of masculinity and patriarchy govern and underpin specific ways of living within their communities.

For students and teachers, being able to read a text like last chapter's *Gossip Girl* through a feminist lens provides a much needed space for recognizing how patriarchy continues to undergird social relations today. And when even the superficial aspects of *Gossip Girl* remind students of their lived experiences: devastating text messages,

bad hair days, hopelessly adolescent crushes, being able to scrutinize actions within the book from a feminist perspective helps unveil the possibilities for action and understanding in students' actual school lives.

BEAUTY AND THE MALE GAZE

Female identity in YA texts can be constructed subtly or overtly. Notions of beauty, attraction, and expected behavior of girls in books define for readers what is considered *normal*. The intentions behind descriptions and actions may not intend to limit female identity, but the effects are still the same. As one of the books my high school and college students alike have enjoyed, *Looking for Alaska* (Green, 2005) is pointed to as a powerful description of a strong, female character (even if the titular Alaska is not the protagonist). Let's look at an early description of Alaska:

> And now is as good a time as any to say that she was beautiful. In the dark beside me, she smelled of sweat and sunshine and vanilla, and on that thin-mooned night I could see little more than her silhouette except for when she smoked, when the burning cherry of the cigarette washed her face in pale red light. But even in the dark, I could see her eyes–fierce emeralds. She had the kind of eyes that predisposed you to supporting her every endeavor. And not just beautiful, but hot, too, with her breasts straining against her tight tank top, her curved legs swinging back and forth beneath the swing, flip-flops dangling from her electric-blue-painted toes. It was right then, between when I asked about the labyrinth and when she answered me, that I realized the *importance* of curves, of the thousands places where girls' bodies ease from one place to another, from arc of the foot to ankle to calf, from calf to hip to waist to breast to neck to ski-slope nose to forehead to shoulder to the concave arch of the back to the butt to the etc. I'd *noticed* curves before of course, but I had never quite apprehended their significance. (Green, 2005, p. 19)

As one of the opening descriptions of Alaska, readers are confronted with Alaska as a physical object of beauty and allure than as a bright-minded and witty individual. Alaska *embodies* female sensuality for the narrator, Pudge. She is less an individual here than a lesson of sexual attraction. The way the text lingers on Alaska's curves and breasts and body and butt may be indicative of heterosexual male adolescence, but it does so in ways that further reify these practices of male-hood. That is, Green's choice of making his character a believable one through physical descriptions is one that perpetuates that this is what being a teenage boy is about. And while hormonal sexuality is important to acknowledge in a description like this, readers should be guided toward seeing how the "male gaze" defines and frames Alaska. As the female object of Pudge's affection, Alaska lacks voice or agency. Instead she is vastly unknowable, like the distant U.S. state that shares her name. She is sexualized by Pudge and will remain so for much of the novel. Obviously, sexual attraction is a major component of how females are portrayed in YA. At the same time, the sense

that Alaska is mysterious and unreachable is an additional component of her beauty. By being an unobtainable *object* of Pudge's desire, Alaska's gendered role is one that is submissive to the whimsy of Pudge's narration.

Beauty in YA is not as simple as reinforcing conceptions of what is or is not pretty. Though it is true that the examples thus far reify western depictions of white skin as most desirable and body image being as thin as possible, it is also true that YA novels often tend to construct even more nuanced messages about beauty and individuals' actions. As examples of the complication of beauty and characters' actions, I want to explore the ways individuals are affected by beauty: both their own and that of others around them. In particular, beauty and attraction function as attributes that cloud female judgment. Let's look at parts of two popular YA novels as examples of the interrelation of physical beauty: Laini Taylor's (2011) *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* and Veronica Roth's (2011) *Divergent*.

While *Gossip Girl* utilized depictions of characters to reinforce capitalist practices and takes place in a somewhat contemporary and somewhat realistic depiction of society, Taylor and Roth's texts depict worlds fueled by magic and dystopian conspiracies respectively. Both of these texts focus on female teen protagonists that are at the center of potentially global-shifting mysteries. Their individual intelligence, quick wit, and occasional dashes of magic or expert combat training respectively, make these characters natural leaders and empathy-laden protagonists. And while these characters follow in the footsteps of Katniss of *The Hunger Games* as physically and mentally strong women, I would argue that the potential flaws in all three of these characters mean that they offer hazardous lessons for admiring readers to internalize.

In *Divergent* the female protagonist, Tris faces her fears in a simulation as part of the final test to join the Dauntless faction. After facing fears of crows, drowning, and being burned alive, one of Tris's final fears is best described as a fear of intimacy. More bluntly, Tris is shown as fearful of having sex with her character's love interest, Tobias. In the drug-induced simulation, Tris must face her fear in order to find acceptance within the sect she is a part of:

> He presses his mouth to mine, and my lips part. I thought it would be impossible to forget I was in a simulation. I was wrong; he makes everything else disintegrate.
>
> His fingers find my jacket zipper and pull it down in one slow swipe until the zipper detaches. He tugs the jacket from my shoulders.
>
> *Oh*, is all I can think as he kisses me again. *Oh.*
>
> My fear is being with him. I have been wary of affection all my life, but I didn't know how deep that wariness went.
>
> But this obstacle doesn't feel the same as the others. It is a different kind of fear–nervous panic rather than blind terror.

> He slides his hands down my arms and then squeezes my hips, his fingers sliding over the skin just above my belt, and I shiver.
>
> I gently push him back and press my hands to my forehead. I have been attacked by crows and men with grotesque faces; I have been set on fire by the boy who almost threw me off a ledge; I have almost drowned–*twice*–and *this* is what I can't cope with? *This* is the fear I have no solutions for–a boy I like, who wants to … have sex with me? (Roth, 2011, p. 393)

The passage challenges notions of what it means to be in control of one's feelings and actions. The narrator tells readers that Tris "wants" to have sex with Tobias but the description is anything but enticing. The male character "presses his mouth," and "tugs" clothing off, and "slides his hands" across the narrator's body. For someone who is fearful she must give in to the invasive actions of her love interest. Where is the narrator's agency here? More importantly, what does this passage suggest about femininity for readers? Is it to not be fearful when a boy one likes engages in similar activity? If this is her fear that she must overcome, should readers too find the willpower to endure such actions?

In similarly problematic depictions of female behavior, Taylor's *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* takes an otherwise independent and strong-willed protagonist and renders her all but helpless when encountering an attractive, male foe. Early in *Daughter of Smoke and Bone*, Karou encounters an angel named, Akiva. For Karou, his beauty is exuded to the point of distraction. While Karou is fighting Akiva, her internal monologue depicts a woman flawed by her own sexuality; the fact that she finds this angel beautiful drives her actions in ways that are potentially life-threatening:

> He stood a mere body's length away, the point of his sword resting on the ground.
>
> *Oh*, thought Karou, staring at him.
>
> *Oh*.
>
> Angel indeed.
>
> He stood revealed. The blade of his long sword gleamed white from the incandescence of his wings–vast shimmering wings, their reach so great they swept the walls on either side of the alley, each feather like the wind-tugged lick of a candle flame.
>
> Those eyes.
>
> His gaze was like a lit fuse, scorching the air between them. He was the most beautiful thing Karou had ever seen. Her first thought, incongruous but overpowering, was to memorize him so she could draw him later. (Taylor, 2011, p. 95)

Notice, across both Taylor and Roth's depictions of sexual attraction as a weakness and fear in female protagonists the use of the italicized "*Oh*." As if these women are stupefied and subsequently educated about sexuality through their encounters with men, both texts rely on this word as a means of suggesting the mental circuitry that wires women's sexual awakenings. To her credit, Taylor crafts her description such that it does not focus on specific physical attributes. Instead, such depictions of beauty are largely left to the imagination of readers. What is problematic here is the constant loop of physical attraction that runs through Karou's mind.

In addition to Karou's overwhelming sexuality, Taylor's text interweaves beauty and emotion for other characters in the text. For example, describing one of the ancillary characters, Taylor makes it clear that part of Liraz's beauty is specifically related to her being female and "sharklike". Taylor writes: "Though Hazael was more powerful, Liraz was more frightening, she always had been; perhaps she'd had to be, being female" (Taylor, 2011, p. 253). The construction of this sentence is striking: Taylor appears to deliberately draw connections that are powerful and problematic for young adult readers. It's not simply that Liraz is frightening *and* female–this in itself would be worth considering in how it implicates beauty for readers. Instead, Liraz is frightening *because* "she'd had to be, being female." Her frightening nature is due to how she is gendered by society. I want to make this use of "gender" as a verb clear: in the society of *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* Liraz is frightening and society casts her looks and frightfulness as particularly female attributes; they are cast, discursively, as what helps comprise her as a woman. For readers of this text the subtle construction of sentences like this one interweave feminine beauty – something that can be aspired to as frightening. However, perhaps more importantly, this beauty and fearfulness can be seen as powerful: beautiful women have power and can enact changes in the world around them.

Immediately following the above sentence connecting femininity to frightfulness, Taylor writes, "Her [Liraz's] pale hair was scraped back in severe plaits, and there was something coolly sharklike about her beauty: a flat, killer apathy" (Taylor, 2011, p. 253). This beauty is expanded to a less beautiful understanding of her appearance: her hair does not flow softly, it is "scraped" and "severe" and her appearance is "sharklike." The harsh alliteration within this sentence cuts into the reading of the text and makes the description of this female angel something wholly inhuman, frightful and dangerous. Whereas Pudge's view of Alaska as an unknowable and vastly sexual woman placed control of female identity in the hands and gaze of the male character, Liraz here is a strong and beautiful woman. However, the description here makes her cold, calculating, and dangerous.

While I've clearly hand selected fleeting moments in these books, I would argue that these are small microaggressions that female readers endure from one book to another. Instead of claiming that these readings of passages from Roth and Taylor critique too heavily minor, well-intentioned passages, I believe these are damning attributes of the literature we encourage young people to read non-critically. The

messages of how females must look and behave that are read again and again in these texts typify identities that sexualize and pacify a female readership.

A NOTE ABOUT MALE IDENTITY

Male identity in YA is a slightly trickier target to pinpoint. Unlike constructions of female identity through young adult literature, male identity is developed largely as a result of what is absent within current young adult novels. Though there are numerous male protagonists in books, what is most striking about YA books with regards to male identity is who constructs masculinity in these texts and assumptions about what drives male readers. For example, within my own classroom a struggle for male readers was finding texts that engaged them if they were not interested in violent fantasy stories, sports reveries, or urban tales of struggles in and out of gang culture. As discussed in Chapter One, these are the markets that men are placed into within the book-buying world of adolescents' literature. However, while some of my students are naturally interested in these avenues for reading in their formative teenage years, others end up selecting these books–through purchasing them at a store, checking them out at a library, or being advised to read them by a teacher–simply because there are few options other than these books to fit the niche market of male readers. As I'll discuss below, male identity in books is limited and, as a result, the reflections of what this means for teenage males in the 21st century is also striking. In particular, I see three main reasons that male identity is limited in its depiction in books:

1. A larger portion of today's YA texts are written by women.
   In an article for Slate, Laura Miller (2012a) explains that the reason more than half of the best YA novels listed on the previously mentioned NPR top 100 list are written by women is because it is a "prestige free zone," Miller explains that because YA may not be seen as "serious" "literature" (emphasizing the problematic use of both words), it is not a space driven by male-authorship anymore. Meghan Lewit (2012) in the Atlantic also echoes this sentiment. Looking at industry trends, Lewit reports that books by and often marketed for women "represent both the target teen demographic, as well as the adult readers that have fervently embraced YA lit." In doing so, it becomes apparent that the YA genre (even when sales are generated by adults) can be seen as an extension of *chick-lit* in ways that make book buying a gendered activity.

2. Books catered for a primarily male audience fall into readily identifiable tropes.
   For male readers, book choices are limited. With few exceptions, books marketed for boys are about sports, urban violence and survival, or fall into genre fiction like fantasy and science fiction. And while many readers will pick these books up, they limit what it means to be a male reader. How male readers are forced to choose between a small selection of sports, violence, or fantasy titles reflects

the marketing structures described in Chapter One. What about the students (like many I've had in my classroom) that simply aren't interested in these topics? For the more voracious readers, exhausting the books I have that don't fall into these categories and are not explicitly marketed as "girly" can come about very quickly.

3. The books published for boys may skip the YA genre entirely.
   As Miller (2012a) writes:

> Many grown men recall segueing briskly from middle-grade kids' books to adult fiction in their teens, skipping the YA section entirely. They were, they say, keen to move on to the "real" books. No surprise, then, that fewer of them are inspired to write for a genre that they never particularly wanted to read and that, like teaching and librarianship, has traditionally offered little recognition.

The male-focused YA desert is problematic in the gap it can create. While appreciation for reading may be fostered at younger ages, students not ready for the leap to *real* books may be left floundering for material to read during their adolescence.

While generalizing depictions and assumptions about female identity in contemporary young adult literature is a somewhat easier platform to establish, how male identity is complicated in YA texts also offers significant illuminations about how males and gendered male identity are shaped by today's books. In looking at these limiting forms of male identity constructed within YA texts, it is also worth considering that the YA constructions of male readers imply, to an extent, that males are not avid readers. There are efforts to help promote male-reading activities. YA and junior fiction author Jon Scieszka has created the popular website (and related publications): guysread.com. With books and online opportunities to network, the site encourages book selections for males. However, even these interpretations of what it *means* to generate content for males can be problematic (as it is with females as well). What ideologies are implicit when we think of what books for boys are about? Such questions of identity construction are necessary for classroom spaces to challenge head on and reflect upon. Even in classic YA novels, the ways genders are described and developed represent challenges that lie ahead for the growing genre.

ASKING ALICE

In a segment on his stand-up comedy album *Freak Wharf*, comedian Paul F. Tompkins (2009) describes the YA novel *Go Ask Alice* (1971) as "the phoniest of baloneys you could possibly imagine, so clearly written by the writing staff of *Dragnet*." Attempting to frighten readers of the perils of drug use through sensationalist anecdotes that are purported as *true*, *Go Ask Alice* is a text that plays comically when its details are shared in the live, nightclub setting that Tompkins performs. The title of Tompkins album, in fact, is a lengthy riff on the way the protagonist of *Go Ask Alice* describes the mental institution to which she is admitted as a "freak wharf." Tompkins focuses the brunt of his tirade on the fact that the reason *Go Ask Alice* is

such a compelling story for young people is due to how the protagonist relates to her readers. As Tompkins notes, the idea of a narrative about a girl's struggle with drug addiction is banal without a sense of connection to the reader's personal identity:

> Here's why [the book] was so scary: This book was a diary that somebody found and published and it told the real story of this young girl's descent into a quagmire of drug addiction. So what? People get addicted to drugs all the time? You don't understand. The person in this diary was a *regular* person: meaning white like you or me. 'A white person on drugs? Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-but *I'm* white!' [Laughs].

Over the nearly 4 decades between Tompkins's humorous rant and the book's original publication, *Go Ask Alice* has sold millions of copies and is a cultural icon for many youth across the years. At the high school where I taught, numerous copies were stocked in most English classrooms and in our library. It was a book my own, non-white students would pick up, devour, and recommend to friends. Taken into a nightclub setting, the book's framing device as a *true* story feels hollow, awkward, and absurd. However, it remains a book that garners readership today and remains a part of today's cultural milieu.

Go Ask Alice is a work of fiction as Tompkins points out (though it was not authored by the writing staff of *Dragnet*). That being said, the book purported to be a *real* diary and until the mid-'80s *Go Ask Alice* was shelved in stores and libraries as teen non-fiction. In actuality, the book is largely credited to Beatrice Sparks, a therapist that supposedly worked closely with the unnamed girl that *Go Ask Alice* is credited to. The conceit of making the book's contents feel *real* is one we've seen carried into today's fiction. As described with *I Am Number Four* in the first chapter, the sense of reality here makes the book feel more salacious and morally-guiding than a purely fictional narrative. However, with *Go Ask Alice* and the other Sparks edited works, the veil of realism is intentionally deceptive.

While discerning readers can clearly see the alien invasion at the heart of a book like *I am Number Four* as a framing device to draw interest, the attempt here at constructing an *anonymous* and *true* book is false and troubling. Sparks would continue this tradition of masking fictional attempts across numerous other works she authored or produced including *Jay's Journal* (1978), *It Happened to Nancy: By An Anonymous Teenager* (1994), and *Annie's Baby: The Diary of Anonymous, a Pregnant Teenager* (1998). The titles hint at the moral lessons that–aside from *Jay's Journal*–focus on behavior and expectations for girls. These are scared-straight narratives to avoid drug use and premarital sex. That Sparks' limited biography tends to emphasize her background as a devote Mormon can help delineate the moral line that Sparks threads across her works.

As read by millions over decades, *Go Ask Alice* acts as a guide for *why* girls should not do drugs. Before being committed, the protagonist of the book becomes a prostitute, destitute, and homeless. Throughout the book there is a clear moral calculus that is developed for the unnamed protagonist. For readers this not only

reinforces what is normative, acceptable behavior for female readers, it also guides what is normative and acceptable in terms of who can *be* a female protagonist. As Tompkins' punch line indicates, the *Go Ask Alice* protagonist is white. She is heteronormative in her fretting about liking certain guys. At the same time sex and sexuality are threatening and fearful within the text. Once she takes drugs they become a gateway to expressing her sexuality; otherwise, sexuality is shameful and to be hidden. Related to these points: not only is this young girl heterosexual but she is also fearful of homosexuality. Homosexuality and heterosexual sex are construed as things that happen to girls who do drugs. They are (in the ideology conveyed by the book) bad. They are dangerous.

These lessons–and the many played out in other shock-and-tell books that have followed in the sub-genre that *Go Ask Alice* helped create–have guided decades-long reinforcement of gender norms for young adult literature. More than simply depicting good and bad decisions of a girl, *Go Ask Alice* has singlehandedly helped delineate *normal* race, class, and sexuality for female characters in YA. In turn, the book implies who counts as a *normal* female reader.

DEPICTIONS OF HETERONORMATIVITY

Much of the remainder of this chapter explores gender and sexuality in YA. In particular the focus here is on challenging *who* gets to enact certain sexualities in young adult literature and how genders are constructed. In discussing different forms of sexuality in this chapter, I want to make several of my vocabulary choices clear. Though they are ever changing and evolving, I will be using the acronym LGBTQI as an adjective to describe books and series that focus on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and intersex (LGBTQI) characters. Different theorists will add to or rearrange the order of these letters. I have chosen these labels in this order due primarily to familiarity: as a teacher, these are the initials I used for discussing and teaching and displaying in my classroom. If this label denies and excludes identities that are not understood as traditionally heterosexual, this is not my intention.

In addition, another term I feel it is important to define at the outset of this chapter is heterosexism. Throughout this chapter, heterosexism (or, as an adjective, heterosexist) refers to dominant cultural practices and beliefs that assume individuals are heterosexual and that explicitly or implicitly promote a heterosexual–or heteronormative–lifestyle. Perhaps the clearest indication to me of prevalent heterosexist practices came annually in my classroom when high school students would ask me if I had a girlfriend. The assumption that my romantic partner would be a female because I am a male functioned as an opportunity for me to discuss heterosexist practices. I would emphasize to my students (as I do here) that heterosexism is engrained in dominant culture. Student assumptions about my sexuality conformed to the cultural practices they grew up on; I did not challenge my

students' assumptions on a personal level but instead as a means to look at societal influences on individuals and their actions.

Like in *Go Ask Alice*, the ways heterosexual behavior is construed as *normal* is found again and again in young adult literature (just as in popular media at large). There are several ways that heteronormativity is maintained in YA texts. In doing so, these books reinforce assumptions about what are *normal* sexual feelings and *normal* ways to associate gender and behavior. One major way that heteronormativity is maintained is through suppression of LGBTQI presence within novels. That the majority of protagonists are heterosexual and passionately driven in their actions by fulfillment of male-female romantic relationships represents assumptions about what readers of YA texts want.

To be clear, the majority of readers will, as a result, expect heteronormative characters with heterosexual romantic quests, but that may not be because of sexual or personal interest as much as the way they are assumed to be a heterosexual audience. With little choice but to consume predominantly heteronormative books, this concept is cemented one YA page at a time.

Another major way that heteronormativity is reinforced in YA texts is through pejorative assumptions about LGBTQI behavior or LGBTQI identity as abnormally different. As point of example, take a look at this passage from the beginning of *City of Bones* by Cassandra Clare (2007):

> "Why not?"
>
> "Because I like someone else," Simon said.
>
> "Okay." Simon looked faintly greenish, the way he had once when he'd broken his ankle playing soccer in the park and had had to limp home on it. She wondered what on earth about liking someone could possibly have him wound up to such a pitch of anxiety. "You're not gay, are you?"
>
> Simon's greenish color deepened. "If I were, I would dress better." (p. 39)

Though Simon is sheepishly unwilling to confess his attraction to Clarissa, the small exchange implies three things that all reinforce heteronormativity. First, the exchange implies that Simon is attracted to Clarissa (even if she is stupidly oblivious). This is almost banal in how common nearly all relationships in YA texts are heterosexual in nature. This is only mildly problematic and–it could be argued–Clare is setting up the tension that will be read later in a (heterosexual, of course) love triangle between Simon, Clary and Jace. Secondly, look at how the question of Simon's sexuality is posed. It is not a harmless inquiry such as "Are you gay?" It is, instead, a *harmful* castigation that it is a problem if Simon is gay; it reads more like an accusation or a mean spirited joke. The discursive structure here: "You're not ____, are you" implies that whatever label is placed in here is an inherently negative one. As such, heteronormativity is reinforced through portraying homosexuality as a negative condition to be afflicted with. Finally, Simon rebuts the accusation with an equally

harmful response through reinforcing LGBTQI stereotypes. Through assuming that if he were a gay man Simon would dress better, Clare's passage tokenizes LGBTQI activities as limited to the kinds of behaviors seen in other forms of media such as film and television.

When looking closely at such small exchanges as the ones above, there is a danger that such analysis can be seen as scornful, mean-spirited nitpicking. You might say, I am reading too much into a single paragraph of a lengthy novel. I get these kinds of responses to critical readings of books, films, and TVs enough that I imagine I've burned a few book club and movie going invites over the years. The problem, however, is that this is such a small part of a book and yet Clare is able to imbue it with enough heteronormative coding that readers can quickly glance at these passages and internalize a message that non-heterosexual relationships are not *normal*.

For readers, these encounters with textual passages like the one above can be interpreted as heterosexist microaggressions, as described in Chapter Two. While we've already looked at how racial microaggressions are enacted in various YA texts, I think the concept is particularly important (and under-recognized for LGBTQI readers of YA texts). The vast majority of YA texts readers encounter function as literary assaults on LGBTQI ways of being and individual agency. To read of assumptions that gay men are better dressers or to hear the mock concern from Clarissa that Simon might be gay function as passing notices that LGBTQI readers are tourists when excavating plot and meaning from a book like *City of Bones*.

Related, looking at what is often considered a classic of the YA genre, I want to explore the way Robert Cormier exhibits heterosexism in *The Chocolate War* (1974). Taking place in an all-boys' private school *The Chocolate War* focuses on a bleak outlook about what happens when a single individual, high school freshman Jerry Renault, decides to stand up to the forces that insist he conform with his peers. In refusing to participate in the school's annual chocolate sale, Jerry is ostracized by his peers and is eventually put in physical harm's way. In a passage near the final third of the book, Jerry is confronted by a classmate that seems bent on instigating a physical altercation. Emile Janza starts his assault with verbal barbs. He is coy in how he phrases his comments to Jerry.

> "You live in the closet." Janza smiled, a knowing, this-is-just-between-us smile, intimate, creepy.
>
> "What do you mean–closet?" (Cormier, 1974, p. 200)

While readers could look at Janza's statement as an insinuation about Jerry's sexuality and that he is still living "in the closet," Janza expands the statement several paragraphs later in what becomes the highest moment of tension in the book thus far; more than any other part of *The Chocolate War* (including the violent conclusion) this is the passage of the book that shows Jerry angry enough to resort to violent action:

> "This is what I mean by *closet*," Janza said, his hand flicking out again, touching Jerry's cheek, but lingering this time for the fraction of a second in a faint caress. "That you're hiding in there."
>
> "Hiding what? Hiding from who?"
>
> "From everybody. From yourself, even. Hiding that deep dark secret."
>
> "What secret?" Confused now.
>
> "That you're a fairy. A queer. Living in the closet, hiding away."
>
> Vomit threatened Jerry's throat, a nauseous geyser he could barely hold down.
>
> "Hey, you're blushing," Janza said. "The fairy's blushing …"
>
> "Listen …" Jerry began but not knowing, really, how to begin or where. The worst thing in the world–to be called queer….
>
> "I'm not a fairy," Jerry cried.
>
> "Kiss me," Janza said, puckering his lips grotesquely.
>
> "You son of a bitch," Jerry said. (Cormier, 1974, pp. 201–202)

The use of homophobic slurs throughout the passage is problematic. Though Cormier doesn't imply that words like "queer" or "fairy" are appropriate, he does imply that being called these names is a source of such cruelty that it could be understandable to attack someone. To be called these names and for it to be suggested that someone is homosexual is reason enough to be upset. As such, like with the Clare example, Cormier reinforces heterosexist language used toward LGBTQI communities and also implies that sexual orientations that deviate from heterosexual are not okay.

Each time I've read and taught *The Chocolate War*, I am always struck by this passage and confused by Cormier's intentions. How are young adults supposed to understand this passage? Readers are told early on that Jerry matches the demographic of most YA texts: he is a heterosexual white male attracted to women. We know from Cormier's writing that Jerry is not gay. And while Janza is deliberately trying to provoke Jerry (who shortly falls into his trap and is physically beaten up by small children), it is striking to look at the approach Janza takes. Cormier makes Janza's actions almost as reprehensible as the insinuation that Jerry is gay. In looking at the escalating dialogue, the remark that finally sets off Jerry is Janza's request for Jerry to kiss him. Janza pretends to be gay (there is an audience of children watching, just as there is an audience of young adults reading) and *that* is what disturbs Jerry the most. Janza's "lingering" touch of Jerry's cheek and "grotesquely" puckered lips disturb Jerry to the extent that he becomes violently mannered and violently ill. Janza becomes a monster through depicting grotesque homosexuality here. It is frightening and insulting to Jerry. Cormier's depiction practically justifies a world-vision of queer behavior as a threat.

As Cart and Jenkins have already noted, the predominance of existing LGBTQI texts focus on men and predominantly gay men. Though they sprout up in texts like Julie Ann Peter's 2005, *Keeping You a Secret* or Cecil Castellucci and Jim Rugg's 2007 graphic novel *The Plain Janes*, the individuals and their experiences represented by the remaining letters in the LGBTQI acronym are left without a place at the YA table most of the time. This, too, is in some sense a microaggression.

Though it is in and of itself a vastly underrepresented sub-genre in YA, LGBTQI books have their own internal representation problems. These books tend to primarily focus on gay, white men. As such, mainly white men get to be gay in YA. Questioning women and men of color, bi-sexual teens and transgender individual have very few options to read about characters that are, in terms of sexuality, like them. And while YA texts usually do not validate the experiences or feelings of these individuals, they also in turn do not offer a view of a diverse world for the broad audience of readers. If young adults only read about heterosexual relationships (and even encounter the harmful language that non-heterosexual behavior is perverse), these texts reify assumptions about sexuality that have lifelong ramifications.

WHO GETS TO BE GAY IN YA?

I want to emphasize that any texts that speak directly about and for LGBTQI experiences are valued and significantly lacking within the YA genre today. In *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content: 1969–2004* Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins (2006) clarify that though LGBTQI representation in YA has broadened in recent years, it is still a vastly under-published subject within the genre. In their introduction, they note that the first young adult novel with gay content appeared in 1969–John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*. Cart and Jenkins note that "in the more than thirty-five years since then nearly 200 young adult novels with gay and lesbian content have appeared in the U.S." (p. xv). While that number may sound large, it actually averages to 5 novels a year.

Regarding Donovan's groundbreaking introduction of homosexuality into the YA genre Cart and Jenkins (2006) describe the book as:

> tremendously important three-and-a-half decades after its publication, not only because it was the first book for young readers to deal with homosexuality, but also because it established–for good or ill–a model for the treatment of the topic that would be replicated in many of the novels that followed in the 1970s. The characters are male, white, and upper middle-class. The physical nature of what happens between them remains obscure. A cause and effect relationship is implied between homosexuality and being the child of divorced parents–more specifically, having an absent father and a disturbed and/or controlling mother. (p. 14)

As the slow trickle of LGBTQI books continues today, the titles most widely available help categorize what YA queer fiction looks like. That is, with so few

books available, the ones that do get published create a patchwork picture of who is privileged as represented in queer YA fiction. With several significant exceptions (Alex Sanchez's [2003] *Rainbow Boys* comes to mind), LGBTQI characters are often white and socioeconomically privileged. They may not be wealthy but Tiny in *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* or Holland Jaeger in *Keeping You a Secret* are anything but financially burdened in their stories.

And so, while I applaud the slowly diversifying representations of sexuality emerging in YA, I would argue that these books also identify who gets to be gay in YA. Likely based on increasing a wide readership, these books are about white and middle or upper-class individuals (reflecting the book buying audience).

In looking at the problematic representation of LGBTQI characters, I am intrigued by the trajectory of David Levithan's novels. Over the many books that Levithan has authored through 2013, every single text includes LGBTQI characters, often they are at the center of the stories. For instance, Levithan's (2003) first book, *Boy Meets Boy* is a warming love story about Paul, an openly gay 11th grader. *Boy Meets Boy* details Paul's adventures as he falls in love and reconciles past relationships and friendships in a welcoming high school. It is playful, silly, touching and campy. More than any other aspect of the book, the biggest pushback my college students that read this book in an adolescents' literature class have is that the book is too unrealistic in its positive depictions of acceptance. The book plays with expectations of what takes place in high schools (the star quarterback at the school is also a popular cross-dressing homecoming queen named Infinite Darlene). The book plays out as fantasy or idealized and over-the-top visions of inclusion in school spaces.

In the decade that he has been publishing books, Levithan's stories have become more fluid in their depictions of gender and identity. At the same time, the books' forms tend to challenge how we read and understand novels. Though these can be seen as two separate stylistic decisions on Levithan's part, I believe the uprooting of gender and sexuality can be tied to an uprooting of YA book structures as well. In the ten years since *Boy Meets Boy* was first published, a striking shift in Levithan's novels becomes apparent. One of his next books, *The Realm of Possibility* (2006), also focused on a gay characters. However, the form was strikingly abstract: a series of poems constructs a collage of narratives of love and growth. The book reads like a chorus of echoing voices speaking across and at each other.

In 2011, Levithan published *The Lover's Dictionary.* As its name implies, the book's short entries are organized alphabetically. They detail a cycle of a relationship: from attraction to love to dispute to separation. The narrative is one that the reader must cobble together. When did certain actions happen? Is this relationship concluded? Flourishing? Stewing in some sort of stasis? Arguments could be made in any direction. For some, this may make this an unfulfilling narrative. There lacks the kind of definitive plot and resolution that readers expect. However, on the other hand, this is also a book that offers powerful, liberating possibilities for readers. There is no set way to read the book. Want to read an entry from the letter R first? Go for it. The story is fluid in ways that makes relationships seem like extended

possibilities and hiccups. There's also something else significantly apparent the longer you spend time with *The Lover's Dictionary*: there is no set gender in the book's descriptions and entries.

A heteronormative view of the book could easily assume this is a detailed account of a romance between a male and a female. Readers more familiar with Levithan's repertoire could likely infer that this is a book detailing a homosexual relationship. However, I do not see the structure of the book as one that was developed in an effort to please various readers. Instead, the book looks like an effort to blur our understanding of gender. The way conceptions of being male and female are created and defined by contemporary society can feel out of step for questioning young and not-so-young people alike. If the ways I enact my gender as a thirty-something male do not fall in-line with how society casts male gender and masculinity, my behaviors and actions are in discord with general social rules. *The Lover's Dictionary*, then, is a challenge to these expectations. The universality of the feelings, experiences and emotions within the book establish that it doesn't matter if a protagonist is male or female. Levithan's book succeeds because of the structural conceit of veiling the text in a swath of second person pronouns: "you" and "your" replace the gendered labels "he" or "she" and "his" or "hers." Levithan is able to create an engaging and critically lauded novel with few clues about gender.

The conceit of writing a book where gender is largely absent would seem like a singular experiment. However, Levithan followed up *The Lovers Dictionary* with a similar attempt: *Every Day* (2012). The fantastical premise of this novel is something like this: each morning the protagonist of the novel wakes up as someone new. This isn't just anyone; the age of the person is consistent with the age of the protagonist. However, name, location, gender, and sense of identity are all that of a new person. In essence everyday the main character becomes someone new (while still preserving past memories). The protagonist refers to itself as "A." Throughout the book, A embodies men, women, straight and queer identities. However, after a central turning point the protagonist finds an innate connection with a female character. And so begins a central question that is at work *across* Levithan's books: how do we communicate and fall in love with those around us, regardless of gender and sexuality? These are not simply defining categories in which we are placed in Levithan's texts, but fluid states we move between. *Every Day* follows A's elusive search for this female character. Is this a romantic relationship? A spiritual one? As a female being sought, does this implicate that A's true nature is a heterosexual one? That is, deep down inside, is A gendered as male? Conversely, is this an LGBTQI text that engenders A with female qualities? Levithan reaches beyond traditional expectations of gender and looks for human-to-human, *individual* connections.

THE THING ABOUT STANDARDS

For better or worse, standardization within professions that incorporate young adult literature is an integral component to the ways teachers and librarians operate. That

the teaching profession is becoming a more rigid space through specific forms of assessment of teacher fidelity to standards is a common theme in U.S. education policy in the 21st century thus far. Likewise, librarians confine the organization and distribution of their media products so that these space are navigable for users; if I am familiar with the systems and codes of one library, chances are high that I should be fairly adept at transferring this knowledge to another library branch. The standardization of U.S. education is highly problematic, driven by corporate textbook and test creators.

Lately, as I've been reading and questioning the choices in young adult literature, I've been wondering what kinds of standards underlie the YA texts I pick up. Does YA have a set of rules that guide the logic of what is printed for teens? And while there are *always* deviations from these rules, I believe that, yes, YA's depictions of society (even futuristic societies) and people (even non-human, paranormal people) tend to conform to specific standards. In general these standards reinforce cultural practices and assumptions about how readers should live and judge the world around them. In particular, the standards for how gender is construed within YA texts is limiting and troubling for the diverse readers these books are marketed to. Likewise, unless a book is specifically marketed for an LGBTQI audience, a heteronormative stance is the standard for YA.

Of course, hopeful exceptions continue to emerge within the genre, *Putting Makeup on the Fat Boy* (Wright, 2012) was a well-received novel that focuses on teenager Carlos, a gay, cross-dressing boy in New York. The novel received numerous awards including the American Library Association's Stonewall Book Award. The book breathes new life into a genre that lacks the diversity of characters like Carlos.

In *Gutenberg Galaxy* Marshall McLuhan (1962) describes how the introduction of print culture in the 1600s functioned as a mechanism for nationalization. Print helped guide and control dominant thought. And while I will discuss shifts of power in terms of production in Chapter Six, McLuhan's analysis continues to stand true for the ways YA literature defines and depicts gendered ideologies.

CHAPTER 5

PEDAGOGY OF THE DEMONICALLY POSSESSED

Critical Pedagogy and Popular Literature[1]

In his notable, if under-read, treatise *The Miseducation of the Negro*, Carter G. Woodson (1933) writes:

> When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary. (p. 84)

For Woodson, the way education plays a controlling force in the lives of a marginalized and oppressed group of Americans helps clearly articulate a legacy of racism and privilege that is at work in today's society still. As an avid reader of contemporary YA, however, I am struck by how Woodson's words are made manifest in the most popular of today's titles. Series like Veronica Roth's *Divergent* and James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* play deliberately with plot conceits involving mind control. In particular, savvy and able-bodied youth are at the mercy of sinister adults to takeover or destroy the livelihood of many. Even in Suzanne Collins' trilogy *The Hunger Games* shadow government officials sway the actions of youth for large, power hungry plays at control. The controlling of a person's thinking is alive and well in the best selling titles of YA today.

And while I'm sure that Woodson never intended for his words to echo across the dystopian novels that are filling shelves in bookstores today, I see a powerful and transformative opportunity to help youth understand connections *across* these two different texts.

Careful and deliberate facilitation of YA discussions in classrooms can help foment a critical consciousness articulated by Woodson and other critical theorists. Popular and critically acclaimed books such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999), for instance, teach powerful lessons of identity and civic participation when reinforced through transformative pedagogy. This chapter looks at opportunities to engage with YA literature in classrooms utilizing a critical pedagogy. Henry Giroux (2001) defines critical pedagogy as "an entry point in the contradictory nature of schooling, a chance to force it toward creating the conditions for a new public sphere" (p. 116). Looking at specific practices and using example texts, this chapter provides a theoretical framework for both critique and textual production using YA books in English classrooms.

WHO IS FREIRE AND WHY WOULD HE CARE ABOUT YA?

A discussion of critical pedagogy often begins in Brazil in the late 1960s. Working to teach a working class adult population to read, educator and theorist, Paulo Freire helped spark a revolution in ways to foment literacy and education. He framed reading, writing, and communicating as tools for a working class to wield and reshape the society around them. Writing in his now canonical text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first translated into English in 1970, Freire describes how social change through the teaching of literacy is not only possible, but a mandate for how critical educators must approach their craft. A pedagogical and theoretical perspective on education at large, *Pedagogy of The Oppressed* may not seem like an immediate entry way into interpreting young adult literature. However, while many tend to see critical pedagogy as starting and ending with Freire, it is important to recognize the long-line of scholarship and critical thought that has preceded and followed the work of Freire. In *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth*, Ernest Morrell (2008) traces critical scholarship back to Socrates, an important reminder for educators and students alike to see the long line of shoulder-standing the field of education builds upon.

By definition, critical pedagogy is not a literary tool. It is, as suggested by its title, a pedagogy–a method and practice for teaching. Though it is often discussed in theoretical terms, critical pedagogy *should* be an approach that can be pragmatically applied in educational contexts. While I delineate my current understanding of critical pedagogy below, I do so with the express purpose of looking at intersections between teaching practice and young adult literature. How can literature be used to push forward an inclusive and contemporary critical pedagogy? How do some YA texts illustrate a critical pedagogy and opportunities for its application? Unlike *critical theory*, a critical pedagogy is not intended as a lens to scrutinize verbiage or themes; critical pedagogy is to be enacted and experienced and challenged.

In the abstract, critical pedagogy is not easy to pin down. Ira Shor (1992) characterized it as:

> Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal circumstances of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media or discourse. (p. 129)

The sprawl of this definition can be a useful means to find myriad access points for classrooms, however it also makes delineating clear guidelines tricky. I would argue that while critical pedagogy shies away from decontextualized explanations, it is a responsive pedagogy that inverts power structures of marginalized voices in learning contexts. At the heart of critical pedagogy is the urge to not simply resist but also push against hegemonic ideology. For example Freire and Macedo (1987) explain:

> It is also important to stress, for instance, that the understanding of a subordinated groups' cultural production is indispensable in any attempt to develop a type of emancipatory literacy. To do otherwise would be to develop pedagogical structures under the guise of a radical pedagogy that has hidden goals for assimilating students into ideological spheres of the dominant class. (p. 136)

It is with this emancipatory reading and critiquing of texts that I see the largest potential for teachers to transform educational paradigms through young adult literature. Instead of simply reading and advising youth to engage with acclaimed multicultural texts, I feel it is important for students to be able to dive into the contested and contentious waters of YA texts that reinforce white privilege and minority subordination.

Critical pedagogy is directed at the process of learning and can be read as a critique of capitalist schooling structures. And while the rhetoric of critical pedagogies focuses on students, teachers, power, and subordination, the lessons that critical pedagogy reveals vis-à-vis the nature of inequality and education are just as appropriate to consider when looking at the nature of young adult literature and its power of influence over impressionable youth. For instance, in explaining how power functions within schools, Henry Giroux (2001) notes, "it is … important to remember that ideologies are also *imposed* on students who occasionally view them as contrary to their own interests and who either resist openly or conform only under pressure from school authorities" (p. 91).

Fundamental to the genesis of critical pedagogy is Freire and Macedo's (1987) understanding that "the dominant curriculum is designed primarily to reproduce the inequality of social classes, while it mostly benefits the interests of an elite minority" (p.125). With the assumption that such a dominant curriculum is not in the best interests of most students, an adoption of critical pedagogy begins with a look at how to create change and instill an efficacy toward change within students. This fomentation of critical consciousness is brought about through dialogue, reflection and praxis–theory put into practice. Like Critical Race Theory discussed in Chapter Two, the theories underpinning critical pedagogy are not rooted in a literary tradition. The scholars mentioned in this chapter thus far–Woodsen, Freire, Macedo, Giroux, Shor–are activist scholars. Theirs is a corpus of research that reflects how to engage, interpret, and respond to the unique contextual challenges of education and social transformation for a given society. Though the principles and the focus on shifting power remain the same, a 21st century critical pedagogy for the youth in U.S. society is going to be markedly different than the model of education enacted by Freire in Brazil in the '60s.

As critical pedagogy actively pushes against the dominant cultural practices of education that debilitate large populations of student, the role of literature as a controlling mechanism can be inferred. If the majority of the texts that are available by mainstream media simply reify mainstream practices, their consumption by youth of color, youth of varied sexualities, and youth that–in any way–deviate from white

supremacist, capitalist patriarchal values are subordinated. Like schools, I would argue that the ideological space carved out by popular books like aforementioned *Gossip Girl* and *I am Number Four* "have to be viewed as contradictory social sites, marked by struggle and accommodation, which cannot be viewed as totally negative in terms of their effects on the politically dispossessed" (Giroux, 2001, p. 115).

THE DEMONICALLY POSSESSED: CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND *TWILIGHT*

Like the *Perks of Being a Wallflower* (discussed below), Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series was a tremendously popular book franchise. Creating a series of popular films, additional spin-off and copycat texts, *Twilight* is YA genre fiction that helped propel YA into mainstream, adult interest. Following the family-friendly franchise of Harry Potter, Meyer's *Twilight* series explored a paranormal world of vampires, werewolves, and hormonally-energized teenage girls. Though the books advocate against premarital sex, it is a series about sexuality, beauty, and the tensions that arise because of them. The soap-opera-like storyline is one that made *Twilight* a huge crossover text for adult readers.

Briefly summarizing the work, the Twilight series follows clumsy high school student Bella who quickly becomes the competing love interest of Edward–a human sympathizing vampire–and Jacob–a Native American werewolf. Over the course of four books, Bella is the target of various supernatural dangers, the subject of traditional parental tensions with her protective father, and at the whim of her own *nearly* uncontrollable sexual desire. Throughout, protagonist Bella is caught in a love triangle between feuding *species* of non-human creatures. As a desirable and white-skinned girl, her beauty is a temptation that, at any moment, can lead to all out war not simply between vampires and werewolves but within the highly regulated society of vampire government. In this reading of the text, Bella is a powerful woman who can wield her wanted sexuality (and human blood) as leverage for an otherwise weak, human species. Such a reading, goes only so far as Bella eventually becomes a vampire in the final book and–married–engages in lots of undying carnality. Further, Bella's helplessness also points to ways the book is squarely placing power in the hands of men: "Bella, once smitten by Edward, lives only for him" (Miller, 2012b).

Popular critiques of the book point to how the characters adhere to life-choices that are acceptable from a Mormon viewpoint–Meyer's religious affiliation. The book's seeming push away from pre-marital sex (despite protagonist Bella's strong desires), for example, are seen as lessons for adolescent readers to follow. However, when looking at the development of characters and narrative arc within the *Twilight* series, the story can be read as one about power, control, and possession. There is a complex hierarchy of power within the book that intertwines, race, gender, supernatural-species, and experience. Further, when Bella becomes impregnated, days after her marriage, the paranormal baby growing rapidly inside her is a physical threat to her well-being. That she perseveres to carry the child at her own detriment

is read by some feminist analysis as a pro-life message within the book (Wilson, 2011).

If the heart of critical pedagogy is focused on exploring power and guiding freedom for an oppressed class, Bella's suppressed agency within the books is a space to highlight with youth. Encouraging alternative possibilities of how she can respond to and speak back to male characters and non-human adversaries is an important step in incorporating these texts meaningfully within classrooms. Further, the ways non-human characters create a classed system of privilege within the book is also important to emphasize. As feuding paranormal factions, the werewolves and vampires in the book take on symbolic positions of power for youth to explore. Though they may be equally matched, how Native Americans are positioned as the individuals that turn into werewolves can be read problematically. Essentially going to schools on the "rez"–like Junior in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*–the characters that turn into werewolves are an oppressed class in *actual* society. Bella ultimately *chooses* the white vampire, Edward, as the man she marries. The paranormal backdrop of the book helps reify American societal power dynamics.

The depictions of race and gender within the book help illuminate how these forms of representation play into power for students today. A critical pedagogy is one that engages youth in dialogue around a text like *Twilight* as a source for developing and acting upon critical consciousness–what Freire (1970) calls "conscientization." Through developing an understanding of the societal forces that suppress individual agency, a critical consciousness is one that allows youth to take action against these forces. As such, I would argue that a text like *Twilight* that is largely seen as inferior to other YA texts in literary quality (Cart, 2010), can be an important tool for students to explore their own interpretations of the world. *Twilight* is neither a *good* or a *bad* text for youth. The fact that it and the many paranormal books that it helped spawn are so widely read make it a useful text for developing strategies for a critical pedagogy made accessible for today's youth.

LITERATURE AS A PATHWAY FOR YOUTH TO CRITIQUE AND PRODUCE

The wave of fantasy and science fiction YA film adaptations–such as *Twilight*–continues to build financial success of YA franchises as discussed in Chapter One. As *Twilight* was a defining YA-adapted film in the first decade of the twenty-first century and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is proving to be one in the second decade, a note about these two texts as films is necessary.

As I write this chapter, a 2012 film adaptation of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* has sparked a renewed and continuing interest in a book that's now more than ten years old. The continuing appreciation of the book is akin to youthful interest in the foibles of Holden Caulfield. Both Charlie of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and Caulfield are lone teens in search of stronger understanding of the process of growing up. As they speak to their audience, these two protagonists offer important

opportunities for empathy from readers. If film continues to persevere as a dominant form for depicting cultural shifts, translating Charlie's adventures into a 2012 film only further the messaging of the popular YA text.

One way to consider the possibilities of a text like *The Perks of Being A Wallflower* for developing critical consciousness is through also seeing it as an opportunity for developing critical literacies. Closely tied to critical pedagogy is a body of literature around critical literacy. As Allan Luke (2012) notes, the central question at work within critical literacy is, "What is 'truth'?" (p. 4). Luke goes on to explain, "The term critical literacy refers to use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life" (p. 5). As directly impacting the reading, producing, and interpretation of texts from standpoints of power, critical literacies empower youth to treat texts as sites for cultural understanding and critique. A book like *Gossip Girl* is not simply a book for young people to read and interpret the powerful gender messages described in the previous chapter. Instead it functions as a site for personal articulation beyond. As Luke notes, critical literacy "is about the possibility of using new literacies to change relations of power, both peoples' everyday social relations and larger geopolitical and economic relations" (p. 9).

The Perks of Being a Wallflower can allow this intersection of societal forces and youth ideologies to help guide powerful writing and production practices. It is a book that–despite problematic politics of representation (I left the movie theater telling my partner that the adaptation was *the whitest movie I've seen*)–can offer clear ways to explore critical literacy practices within classrooms. And while the book is layered with content to unpack, the most important lesson here begins with its form.

DEAR FRIEND

As an epistolary novel, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* belongs to a sub-genre of YA that can foment a stronger relationship between reader and protagonist. I argue here that these texts can offer a clear portal into tenets of critical pedagogy for classrooms. YA texts that are crafted as a series of letters *(The Perks of Being a Wallflower*), as a diary (*Go Ask Alice*), or as some sort of school report (*Rat Saw God*)–though there are significant differences between these forms–offer significant opportunities for learning, growth, and engagement. They, too, frame the reader (and thus assumptions of whom she or he is) in specific ways.

Epistolary texts are not at all unique to YA. With notable poems, books, and exchanges published in the epistolary form, a text like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is a welcome addition to a genre that already focuses on amplifying interior feelings and emotions to a direct, reading audience. J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in The Rye*, for instance, is perhaps one of the most widely read (and likely most frequently assigned as *required* reading) YA novels. In it, Holden Caulfield recounts to the reader his own experiences and perspective leaving his school and slumming across New York for a few days. The perspective is one that allows

readers an intimate look at the foibles of a teenage boy and gives literature teachers across the country an opportunity to engrain in young people the concept of the unreliable narrator. Salinger's approach of addressing the reader directly is largely carried over in his other works detailing the relationship of the Glass siblings. *Raise High the Roof Beams, Carpenters* is an extended letter written by Seymour Glass to his younger brother, Buddy. Its bound neighbor, *Seymour: An Introduction* is an incomplete narrative description by Buddy about his late brother, Seymour–it too is written directly to readers.

Though there is less framing in *Catcher* than in a text like *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, both are constructed around being written *to* an audience. While the same could be said for all books, there is an intention in the books to note that they are present as an audience. There is a "you" implied in these books as being the person holding the physical book and looking at it (just as "you" are reading this very paragraph right now). It should be noted that it is more than the fact that these are first person accounts. Instead, it is the fact that these novels find the protagonist, explaining, recounting and reflecting on things in their lives. Though these are not a large genre of texts, the prominent texts within this sub-genre (including previously discussed *Go Ask Alice* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*) are so widely recognized as hallmark novels in YA that a look at the structural form of these books is necessary. In particular, we will focus on *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* as a widely-read example of this form.

The epistolary form of these texts allows the protagonist space to question and ponder varying incidents instead of merely offering a play-by-play of life as an adolescent. It is a dialogic space that invites reflection and a sense of participation for readers.

Comprised of a series of letters written to an anonymous receiver, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* frames the book's narrative so that it offers a voyeuristic view of Charlie's struggles growing up. Though Charlie explains that he is taking efforts to anonymize the names and identities of the individuals he writes about, he is very specific about who he intends these letters to be received by. In his first letter, he offers a rationale why "you" are getting this story:

> Dear friend,
>
> I am writing to you because she said you listen and understand and didn't try to sleep with that person at that party even though you could have. Please don't try to figure out who she is because then you might figure out who I am, and I really don't want you to do that. I will call people by different names or generic names because I don't want you to find me. I didn't enclose a return address for the same reason. I mean nothing bad by this. Honest.
>
> I just need to know that someone out there listens and understands and doesn't try to sleep with people even if they could have. I need to know that these people exist. (Chbosky, 1999, p. 2)

Based on this opening, it is clear that the "friend" that Charlie writes to is not the reader: you and I and the millions of other readers of *Perks of Being a Wallflower* were not at "that party" and yet are still, somehow, privy to the letters and extended monologues left by Charlie. Because of this specificity, the actual readers of *Perks of Being a Wallflower* are like Charlie themselves: somewhat out of place, often left feeling uncomfortable with the way the world within the text unfolds, and silently watching what happens next. During a party early on in the book, Charlie's friend Patrick offers a toast about Charlie: "He's a wallflower … You see things. You keep quiet about them. And you understand" (Chbosky, p. 37). Just like Charlie, the reader, too, is a wallflower. However, whereas Charlie is able to come to terms with the world around him and mentally block the trauma of childhood abuse, the reader is left to simply follow along. It is our haphazard circumstances that have somehow brought Charlie's letters into our hands, as readers–they were neither intended for us (within the conceit of the story) nor were they ever offered in a way that gives us, as readers, any agency.

The idea of the reader having any power of *voice* when reading a text like Chbosky's or a novel at all may seem strange. However, in looking at how different authors position their protagonist in relation to a reader, it is apparent that novels can be read in terms of how they position the reader to gain any sense of empowerment or control over a text.

Chbosky's narrative frame is not something unique to *Perks;* this concept of voyeurdom is echoed directly in the conceit of *Gossip Girl*, for instance. In between chapters about the constant bickering and feuds of Blair, Serena, and Nate, updates and Q&As from the anonymous Gossip Girl provide contextual clues for how gossip functions within the novel. The conceit is drastically different from that of *Perks* in most ways except for one major similarity: Gossip Girl's insider information allows readers to feel like the fly-on-the-wall that is privy to the rumors and sightings of the text's main characters. The distancing feature of writing and responding to fan letters during the recurring columns allows readers to peak into a world that is often shaded away from public view and even feel like they could contribute or comment on an online post. Unlike *Perks*, the epistles of *Gossip Girl* offer more agency on the part of the reader. Though the reader does not participate other than reading what occurs within the text, *Gossip Girl* is clearly a space that encourages dialogue. Readers see that Gossip Girl publishes and responds to readers questions. The result is a YA text that creates the sense that, if this were a *real* website, readers could write letters to Gossip Girl and possibly receive a response. This dialogic entry of can be seen as an opportunity for readers to engage with and push beyond the framework.

What would happen if readers wrote back critical responses to Gossip Girl asking about race, class, or gender representations on her site? Can a fictitious gossip column function as a lens for critical analysis of the book and the "real" world of readers? In contrast with *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, there is a heightened sense of agency for readers of *Gossip Girl.*

Though readers will not likely try to write letters to the anonymous gossip writer of the novel, the sense that this is a possibility, that she is even soliciting invitations to contribute, reframe the stance between reader and text. At the same time, readers can *write back* to Charlie in Chbosky's novel. Though the letters are unidirectional–they are only written to a "Dear friend," the space for inclusive voice can be found in responding through classroom writing. Likewise, the epistle as a form of genre writing can offer powerful opportunities for critical pedagogy: it is written *to* someone. The assumption of an audience (even a very broad one) can allow youth to convey pointed narratives for specific individuals and purposes. In doing so, young people must consider necessary negotiations within their letters and ways to communicate effectively. As Charlie notes in the introductory letter "listening" and "understand[ing]" are crucial components to the dialogic strategies of authors of letters. Though it is not the only pathway forward, I would argue that *Perks* demonstrates clear guidelines for articulating narrative points for critical consciousness.

Related to the position of author and audience it is striking how this book reverses the stance between author and reader. In *Perks*, Charlie becomes a character that readers can understand by the end of the book but the reader learning little about what "you" – as the intended recipient of Charlie's letters–is/are like. Can we infer that this "you" is the you reading the book?

FROM DEAR FRIEND TO DEAR ME

Differing from the epistolary novel in significant ways, books like the previously discussed *Go Ask Alice* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* imagine the novel as an extended diary. The diary form as a novel is a particularly salient format for YA because of how inherently insular it is. By its own structural features, a diary is autobiographical. It is a chronological account of events, feelings, and rumination about the world as one experiences it. It is a daily soliloquy about what happened and what one worries about, yearns for, dreams of. For teenagers trying to understand their place in the world that may be changing around them, a diary acts as both an anchor into someone else's experiences and–perhaps–a place to seek empathy.

However, a diary is also an object that could be considered highly private: it is usually intended to be read only by its original author. For us to pry open the diaries that are marketed as YA is to choose to breach a social contract. We are instructed to peer into the innermost thoughts of others. And while the approach is one that allows readers the kind of unfettered access into the thoughts of people that are represented as their age, the process of accessing this content is one that is ethically deleterious. Though this may seem minor–after all we're talking about fictitious books marketed with the intended use to be read and enjoyed–the act of reading someone else's diary is a transgressive one. The power with which we gain our insights as readers is one that must be examined and acknowledged. This sense of voyerdom, one could argue, is something that is perceived in any novel not written in the second person.

Unless a book directly addresses "you," then theoretically you have no place to be looking at and reading the pages. I think the role of voyerdom is particularly relevant to diaries, letters, and transcripts in YA because these books position the reader as someone that has somehow come across a text that was not necessarily intended for him or her. As a result, our reading of these texts is a peek into a world we were not necessarily invited into.

In *On the Brink: Negotiating Literature and Life with Adolescents*, Susan Hynds (1997) details several years of literacy instruction in the classroom of Meg (a pseudonym used throughout the book). At one point, Meg describes the relational aspect of reading circles and spaces within the classroom:

> I noticed a lot of kids in the library talking about their books. So I thought if I given them a forum to do that in class, they might encourage each other. And so sometimes we'd have whole-class book talks where I would just pick a name out of a hat and the kid would just talk about the book he was reading in any way. And that was one thing I learned from doing the response journals. I didn't say, "Well, there are five ways to do this." I said, "You could talk about your book in a way you wanted." (Hynds, p. 240)

What I appreciate about Meg's reflection is how youth voice dictates and guides classroom space. Though Meg, as the classroom facilitator, helps ensure alignment with course goals, the class is largely driven (at least for this activity) by student voice. In terms of literature, I see a parallel between the taking up of classroom space and the taking up of a blank page of possibilities. In seeing diaries and letters as valid forms of fiction within classrooms, youth too can utilize these tools for their own powerful critical literacy practices.

Later in *On the Brink*, Hynds argues that Meg (and literacy instructors at large) need to "*step in* and point out the racial, ethnic, and gender issues" that arise in their classrooms (p. 254). While I've argued throughout this book about the problematic issues that come out of texts like *Go Ask Alice*, I would also caution adults to move beyond focusing solely on these issues. While a critical pedagogy–like Critical Race Theory–must address these issues within the classroom discussions and texts, it is also a pedagogy that is driven by leveraging a text for movement and action. *Perks*, for instance, can function as a powerful exemplar of participatory and action-driven classroom discourse and personal reflection. And with the tools for authoring texts becoming easier to utilize in classrooms due to advances in technology, it is time educators look at literary texts like Chbosky's less as tools for analysis than as templates for social change.

A WIRELESS CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

In a previous research project (Garcia, 2012a), I looked at the kinds of work fostered within my high school classroom and used my own experiences, frustrations, and

limitations to consider how a critical pedagogy in the 21st century deviates from what came in the past. In these efforts, I noted that critical pedagogy is not a static notion or a cemented concept. Instead, critical pedagogy must be in a constant process of reinvention, looking at and acknowledging the ways the world around it shift power, oppression, and individual agency. With this in mind, I playfully call an updated form of critical pedagogy a "wireless critical pedagogy." This is to acknowledge the shifts in technology and participatory culture that affect the kinds of experiences of young people in classrooms and schools today.

The context and era in which Freire developed his own practice varies significantly from that of any classroom today, decades later. In this sense, young adult literature is primed to help better illuminate the changes we face socially when building a critical literacy that responds to the needs of today's adolescent youth.

In my previous study, this critical pedagogy expanded the notions of what students could produce and how they drove the discussions of critical consciousness within their classrooms and their lives. This pedagogy is one–like Critical Race Theory–of production. Instead of simply viewing and consuming textual products of mainstream media and authors in positions of power, these texts are gateways into actualizing student voice.

One major component of wireless critical pedagogy is the recognition that young people are included as individuals that research and not as simply subjects in someone else's research. As such, instead of looking at research as something that is done to better understand a text or in order to support a thesis, I utilize a burgeoning tradition of Youth Participatory Action Research (Fine & Cammarota, 2008). In my own experience collaborating with students on a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project, finding ways to mutually explore research topics salient to and responsive to community needs is a delicate balance. Further, grounding student research in age-appropriate literature can help provide context; in one project students and I read *Little Brother* while we explored technology use as a tool for data collection. In another project my students and I became detectives much like the protagonist of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*, which we read at the same time. While the power struggles of a purely equitable YPAR within classrooms are substantial, I've argued that teacher power is something that needs to be transparent in classrooms (Garcia, 2012b).

Though not tied specifically to the teaching and use of literature, the table below highlights six key tenets my students and I developed for adapting critical pedagogy for the 21st century.

Why do I think the tenets outlined here are part of a modern day critical pedagogy? When looking beyond the theoretical arguments that fill contemporary discussion of critical pedagogy, I see a clear relationship between how young people are positioned as subjects in schools, the socioeconomic and other potentially dehumanizing ways young people are cast, and the opportunity to expand, challenge and reassert power through revolutionary means. Wireless critical pedagogy takes these understandings and pushes them into the 21st century: utilizing the cultural norms and resources that

Table 1. Key Tenets of Wireless Critical Pedagogy

Student Centered	• Student interest, knowledge, and perspective drive content and production. • YPAR acts as a component of wireless critical pedagogy, not as a separate pedagogical approach.
Empowered Identities	• As mobile devices can allow students to document, share, and amplify their expertise, they can act as tools for Freire's (1970) concept of "conscientization." • Likewise, adjusting the activities within classrooms to situate student learning within various roles shifts how students perceive and interpret class work and its relevance in the "real world."
Community Driven and Responsive	• In conjunction with youth-driven research practices, work within classroom contexts speaks to and focuses on community needs and concerns. • Critical educators can help bridge in-class learning with the expertise, opportunities, and challenges that are faced beyond the school boundaries; through digital tools, visits, and role-play, alternate voices help bolster student interaction within their communities.
Culturally Relevant	• Though popular YA series can be seen as embraced as part of youth culture, bringing these books into classrooms changes the context of how they are perceived. Simply "using" popular books–like the latest technological fad–in a classroom is not culturally relevant. • Applying youth cultural practices, including YA within classrooms, responds to and builds upon how socially transformative learning unfolds.
Critical Technical and Academic Literacies	• Classroom learning still places focus on academic literacies and technical skills. However, these are applied within purposeful contexts. Students produce academic texts and develop technically complex media in order to advocate, inform, persuade, and ignite discussion amongst an audience. • While students still write and produce research reports, persuasive essays and other content expected within traditional, standards-aligned classrooms, this work can look different: a student's essay may be a persuasive memo written to (and actually given to) the city council; a research report may be turned into an edited segment of a Wikipedia entry; a response to a literary text may become a blog post to engage in public- driven discourse.
Not Reliant on Technologies	• Though this pedagogy is responsive to cultural shifts as a result of participatory media tools like mobile devices, it does not require expensive technology. • A wireless critical pedagogy is a revitalization of critical pedagogy for the twenty-first century, not simply utilizing digital tools within a classroom. As such, educators need to look beyond specific tools and apps, focusing on incorporating the cultural practices of participatory culture for critical education (this is discussed in detail in the next chapter).

students are familiar with, the walls of the classroom become fluid for revolutionary dialogue and discourse.

So, where does YA literature fit into all of this? While several projects noted in the next chapter, such as the Harry Potter Alliance*,* rely on some of these principles for engagement, I believe that these are generally powerful ways to elevate words on pages to tools for critical consciousness. This pedagogy can be about fomenting passion and literature as a lens for critical and revolutionary social change.

CHALLENGING THE GENRE

Much like the title of this book, a framework rooted in critical pedagogy offers teachers and students the opportunity to challenge the books they engage with. More than simply pointing to the problematic instantiations of race, class, gender, sexuality and power depicted in a text, a critical pedagogy framework for readers allows students to respond to and manipulate text in ways that are amplified for other readers and classmates.

I want to emphasize that critical pedagogy is more than something one does. More specifically, a teacher doesn't *do* critical pedagogy as one component of a lesson and then switch to another aspect of the daily teaching responsibilities. Likewise, when discussing and exploring critical pedagogy, it is not a practice that students turn on for an assignment and then switch off. Critical pedagogy is pervasive. And while scholarship in critical pedagogy is mired in theoretical abstraction, the root of the theory is based on *action* and *reflection*. The cyclical nature of renewal and discourse here are key to working productively with youth. And–as emphasized by the examples in this chapter–critical pedagogy should not rely merely on canonical or "good" literature. Whether a student is reading a *Twilight* clone or a curriculum-approved YA novel like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* a critical pedagogy is one that engages readers in dialogue around power structures that exist: both in the book and in one's own society.

As a wireless critical pedagogy is one that builds on youth's own empowered identities, I want to emphasize that culturally relevant and high-interest books for youth are necessary tools to validate how individuals learn within our classrooms. And while I emphasize that critical pedagogy in the 21st century does not depend on digital tools, I also believe that they can greatly enhance how we communicate and enact transformative literacy practices. As we'll see in the next chapter, digital technology is not just changing learning in classrooms, it is redefining the YA genre as a whole.

NOTES

[1] Portions of this chapter are adapted from my previous research: Garcia, A. (2012). *Good reception: Utilizing mobile media and games to develop critical inner-city agents of social change.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.

CHAPTER 6

GRASSROOTS YA

Don't Forget to Be Awesome

> What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it. That doesn't happen much, though.
>
> — *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1951, p. 25)

More than half a century has passed since those iconic words were printed in J.D. Salinger's (1951) *Catcher in the Rye*. In the context of reading that sentence as part of my 11th grade literature required reading, the statement gelled in my understanding of how literature functioned. Serious, mysterious individuals in fancy houses or maybe in cabins with wood burning stoves labored endlessly over works that were shrouded in importance. By the time I–a lowly teenager–was able to pour over the words, a personal, reciprocal connection between me as the reader and the austere author was guaranteed to be impossible.

My English teacher at the time mentioned to the class that Salinger was a recluse. That his work hadn't been published in decades. I never quite understood as a high school student when my teacher explained that the fanatical reception of Salinger's work by some led to the assassination of John Lennon. The entire thing seemed so mysterious to me that I was drawn into the literary world of Salinger's Caulfield and Glass families less by the snappy dialogue and philosophical quagmires of the varied protagonists than by the notoriety surrounding the books and their author. In those years of my upbringing, I loved the fantasy of being able to call up an author. The sheer impossibility of it made it such a fun conversation to purely *imagine*. The reclusive nature of Salinger is characterized in books like *Shoeless Joe* (Kinsella, 1982) and in films like the 1989 adaptation of *Shoeless Joe, Field of Dreams* and *Finding Forrester* (2000).

But here's the thing: I grew up in a cultural setting where holding a book rather than writing one put me staunchly within the positionality of consuming a product. The same situation doesn't hold water in the 21st century. What's more, while it is unlikely I can quickly pick up the phone to chat with a favorite author, the chances are actually pretty high that–if I were inclined–I'd be able to talk with an author via email, social networks, or a personal blog. In fact, although J.D. Salinger died in 2010, he's actually incredibly active in maintaining an online presence.

Currently, Salinger has dozens of Facebook pages (most use the same black and white stock photograph that accompanied news articles about the seldom filmed

author). Sending J.D. Salinger a message (or at least someone with an email account tied to that name) is a mere matter of a few button clicks. Of those myriad Facebook Salingers, at least a few of them are up for a conversation with an admiring fan. To dive even further into the realm of digital possibility, I have to admit that I had to stop counting the number of Holden Caulfields that are currently on Facebook. Nearly all of them list their school background as Pencey Prep (even though it's only pages into Caulfield's narrative that he gets the axe from the school). The various Caulfields are also nearly all in relationships with Sally Hayes or list their relationship status as "It's Complicated."

That Salinger and his literary progeny are so multitudinously resurrected online points to important considerations about the shifting relationship young people hold toward literature today.

In *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, and Weigel (2009) write:

> Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways. (p. 8)

The fact of the matter is, advances in digital technology in the past decades have fundamentally changed the ways society interacts with media. As part of this change, the role of young adult literature is significantly different from my own experience growing up as an avid lover of books. Today's readers are not only able to get up-to-the-minute information about book releases, author tours, and movie adaptations, but they can now talk to authors, share their enthusiasm with other fans, and rewrite their favorite stories entirely. While the book reading world I grew up in was strikingly similar to Holden Caulfield's where communicating with an author "doesn't happen much," today's world is much more about the blurred relationship between consumer and producer.

To put this cultural change as simply as possible: young people today are not only consumers of media. They are also producers. What used to be a unidirectional movement of media from author to consumer is now a complex matrix of fan networks, readers, writers, and remixers. The fact is, digital tools make it easy for young people to create. With a few clicks of a mouse or swipes on a mobile device, an adolescent today can upload a photograph or video for the world to see. In essence, the students we serve today can *publish* at will. Likewise, a personal blog, a writing website, or even a Twitter account can serve as a launching pad for someone's literary magnum opus. Acclaimed YA author Cory Doctorow, for instance, simultaneously publishes all of his books online and in print. The main difference (aside from reading his book on a screen versus in deckle edged pages) is that the online copies are free. Hosted on his personal website (craphound.com), Doctorow's books are offered in numerous formats for interested readers to download and share at no charge. In the introduction to his book *Little Brother* Doctorow (2008) explains his reason for giving away

his books: “For me—for pretty much every writer—the big problem isn’t piracy, it’s obscurity.” Though traditional publishing markets depend on consistent sales of books in stores, Doctorow and other artists and writers are finding new ways to monetize and distribute their work.

Beginning by examining successful civic engagement opportunities as a result of YA texts, this chapter describes the work of John Green and the Harry Potter Alliance. Next, it looks at how YA books may act as sources for civic engagement and challenges in manifesting such change through literature. As more and more youth are finding meaningful connections to the world and society through young adult literature, the genre can be seen as a liminal space of possibility.

With technology making communication between YA fans and YA authors easier than ever before, the ability to share work is just the beginning in terms of possibilities. Reading and engaging with texts is now a launching point for youth-production, interaction with authors and–more importantly–social change. Using literature as a starting place, participatory culture allows young people to engage civically and extend ways they find meaning in texts to the physical world around them. While technology enabled the shifts in engagement that are articulated throughout this chapter, I want to stress that not all of the media production activities that youth engage in today occur only online or with devices that need to be charged and plugged in. Meeting with friends to discuss books, to rewrite stories, and to create new works are all activities that have happened decades ago. However, the advances in how social networks connect physical world relationships and the ways blogs indicate the ease with which a layman can become an author act as beacons for engagement with and about books and authors today.

JOHN GREEN AND THE NERDFIGHTERS SAVE THE WORLD FROM WORLDSUCK

My Internet browser is currently streaming a live YouTube channel. It’s a dour looking John Green. He says little and his pen scratches quickly across one page and then another. And then another. For an hour. Green reminds his live viewers that he’s not answering questions today and his usual pep is lacking. He’s explained that he’s just come out of surgery and needs to spend some time just signing books. After an hour, he signs off (though he’ll be back online via Twitter and Tumblr throughout the week and will have a more animated and explanatory video in the following week).

In 2011, Green announced that the entire first edition of his fourth novel, *The Fault In Our Stars*, would be signed: that, if you preordered the book or went to most stores the day of its release, you were essentially guaranteed a copy that Green had signed - like the front pages he signed in his not-so-best-of-days Youtube video. That meant 150,000 copies hand signed. That meant fans voting on preferred pen colors for Green to sign with. It meant *a lot* of time sitting in front of a camera surrounded by boxes of paper awaiting John Green’s John Hancock.

Over the course of his four sole-authored novels, a co-authored book with David Levithan and a contribution to *Let it Snow: Three Holiday Romances*, John Green’s

young adult novels have been read by millions of young people. His first book, *Looking For Alaska* (mentioned previously in Chapter Two), follows Miles Halter aka Pudge as he seeks an adventure and "the great perhaps" when he enrolls in Culver Creek Preparatory High School. Enlisted in hijinks with his roommate, the Colonel and becoming infatuated with alluring and rebellious Alaska, Pudge's is a traditional coming of age YA story.

Like his two novels that followed, *Paper Towns* and *An Abundance of Katherines*, Green's debut novel focuses on a male protagonist pining for a waifish and clever girl. Green's 2012 novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, is an entirely different kind of work (though still staunchly YA): it is essentially the love story of two teenagers with terminal cancer. And while the book is indeed as sad as that description may sound, it is also a book that I found treats illness with reverie and honesty that Green–in part–attributes to his time as a hospital chaplain. All of Green's books have been hailed critically and have sold well. *The Fault in Our Stars* debuted and spent weeks as the number one bestselling young adult book on the New York Times' list. And following *The Fault in Our Stars's* release Green's debut, *Looking For Alaska* also shot to the top of the bestsellers list. Within my adolescents' literature course, Green's novels, rife with literary references and nuanced symbolism are crowd pleasers with my students. Yes, we problematize the fact that Green focuses on primarily white and primarily heterosexual relationships (aside from his LGBTQI-focused collaboration with David Levithan). However, despite the ways we can quibble at the heteronormative, white tropes in which Green writes, his texts win over even the reluctant participants in my classes.

All that being said, the powerful and popular texts that John Green has published are not the reason I have chosen to focus on Green as a key lynchpin in challenging and changing the landscape of young adult literature. Instead of discussing why his audience likes his work, it is necessary for us to explore how Green engages this audience. Green isn't just popular in my classroom. He's a worldwide phenomenon at this point. He (in collaboration with his brother Hank) has sold out Carnegie Hall. He has gotten to ask President Barack Obama about what to name his child. He reminds fans, "Don't forget to be awesome."

A conversation about John Green starts with the Internet and YouTube and, eventually, finds us in sold out concert venues, creating a record label, teaching history and raising millions of dollars to stop "world suck." Seriously. As busy as we can imagine it may be in the life of John Green, being a fan can be just as exhausting.

The first thing you notice when you visit John Green's website is probably an embedded YouTube video with the overly excited face of either Green or his brother Hank peering at you and, likely, enticing you to press play. These are the Vlogbrothers. Since 2007 John and Hank Green have been communicating with each other via Youtube videos. The videos can be musings about science, updates on forthcoming books, discussions of projects, current events, responses to fan questions and emails or pretty much anything else that's striking the fancy of the two brothers.

The next thing you'll probably notice on John Green's website is a perpetually scrolling bar of text on the right hand side of the screen. Those are tweets that mention John Green or his books. Two sample tweets at the time that I wrote this say:

> "I've decided that any book written by @realjohngreen is the literature equivalent of crack. #lookingforalaska #cantputitdown,"
>
> and
>
> "Listening to the "Looking for Alaska" audiobook, had a short work out and now making lunch. :)."

That this feed of tweets is constantly changing is staggering: there sure are a lot of people talking about John Green and the books that he's written. Just below the whirring update of chatter about Green is a sampling of Green's own recent tweets. As of early 2013, Green had just about a million and a half followers on the social network. The connection between the tweets *about* John Green and the tweets *by* John Green makes it clear that Green is as closely connected to his audience and fan base as someone with so many followers possibly can be.

Looking at the rest of his webpage, it is clear that there is a plethora of marketing information about his books. However, this does not seem to be the priority; fan engagement is the heart of the site. Sure, there are links to each of the books that Green published on the left of the screen, but the simply designed text for these makes it clear that they are not the immediate focus of the page. While parts of this website promote Green's work, most of it is focused on building engagement with an audience that extends long after the final page of one of his novels is turned. In fact, are you wondering why exactly Green chose a particular setting for a novel? Or what was the inspiration for Hazel Grace in *The Fault in Our Stars*? Or what's the deal with "The Great Perhaps" in *Looking For Alaska*? Green's got you covered: he has a blog for each of his books that allows readers to ask him questions about the books. The URLs for these emphasize that these are *spoiler-heavy* spaces: http://onlyifyoufinishedpapertowns.tumblr.com/ and http://onlyifyoufinishedtfios.tumblr.com/ for instance.

It turns out Green has a lot of URLs he regularly maintains. He has a general tumblr (Fishingboatproceeds.tumblr.com) that allows fans to ask him questions, and he posts miscellaneous photos, links, and rants. He has several twitter handles. One in which he discusses sports only: twitter.com/sportswithjohn (naturally). And he has numerous Youtube channels.

I should probably mention that Green's brother also has similar amounts of Tumblr, Twitter, and Youtube channels, all regularly updated as well. Hank's wife, Katherine, often joins him during videogame playing sessions, and John's wife does not. In fact, among the many in-jokes of Green's fan is that John's wife is referred to as "the Yeti" due to the fact that she is so rarely seen in John's videos.

If it's not clear by now, John Green in collaboration with his brother, has spent significant energy creating spaces for engagement online. Instead of a large number of Twitter followers or book buying fans, Green has amassed a *community* of

passionate readers. And yes, these efforts result in massive book sales. As mentioned, *The Fault in Our Stars* was an assured bestseller due to pre-sales of signed copies long before it was actually released. And while this innovative use of technology to acknowledge his readers is admirably different from the bulk of other authors online, it is what Green has done in conjunction with his fans that is helping reshape the possibilities of the young adult genre.

NERDFIGHTING AND WORLD SUCK

It's a school night and I am packed into a room of screaming fans (of both genders). John Green is onstage and reading a passage from his book even though it's a foregone conclusion that nearly everyone in the room has already read his latest work, The Fault in Our Stars. Aside from my wife and I it is doubtful that anyone in the room is over 20 (though it does look like a couple of confused parents may have tagged along). John's brother, Hank, sings admittedly nerdy songs. Self-released songs like "Book Eight" (about wishing J.K. Rowling had written an additional volume of the Harry Potter series) are not only well-received but also adoringly recognized by the audience. A chorus of teens sings along with the playful lyrics. This is just one of the many stops John and Hank will make across the country in support of John's latest book. It is a social gathering of "nerdfighters" around the country and it is about much more than a love for books. Instead, John Green has helped organize young adult readers into civically engaged members of an organization that addresses issues of justice and inequality.

To begin to unpack the kinds of ways Green and his brother so successfully engage with a continually growing audience, the style and genre of online video production that they use must be explored. This begins with a deliberate acknowledgement of the work of Ze Frank. Recognized as the creator of the video blog or "vlog" style most seen online, Frank's series of videos "A Show" and "The Show" mixed humorous, candid, and touching personal videos with projects and missions that engaged his viewers as much as possible. "A Show" was updated every weekday for a year and garnered a huge audience of fans who appreciated Frank's approach to connecting with an online audience. In his videos, Frank looks directly at the camera and speaks quickly. With infrequent blinking, he looks at *you.* Along with rapid video edits to include asides, inside jokes, and various references, the style of Frank's videos is replicated constantly. In terms of technical prowess involved, the genre is easy to participate in: look into a camera and speak your mind. However, in addition to the form, Frank's efforts to engage his audience are perhaps what are most clearly developed in John and Hank Green's online activities.

In 2006 Ze Frank challenged his audience to create an "earth sandwich." Through connecting and organizing amongst his many fans, Frank's followers identified viewers on exact opposite sides of the earth. These individuals would then coordinate an exact time to place a piece of bread on the ground, in essence creating a sandwich that capped each end of the planet (fans in Spain and New Zealand were the first to

coordinate the creation of the sandwich). Frank blends humor with efforts to make emotional, empathetic connections with what would otherwise be a faceless Internet. For instance, as part of a Kickstarter fundraiser to relaunch his show Frank offered to literally walk a mile in one fan's shoes. The video documenting this project reveals the frustrating fact that the shoes are a size smaller than what Frank wears. "You can really feel the shoe," he grunts as he tries them on. As the viewer watches the video of Frank hiking in uncomfortable shoes of a stranger, Frank describes his correspondence with the original shoe owner. Moving from a humorous joke about proverbs to an analysis of why one fan felt it so important to wear this particular pair of shoes (they were one of the last pairs he was ever able to walk in before a long stint of physical therapy), Frank weaves humor, engagement with an audience, and pathos into a five minute video that speaks to the human condition.

There are all sorts of projects that involve individual members of Frank's viewers and building connections between them. From songs sung to give advice to a girl in school to large photo projects (take a picture of someone at the exact moment you tell them you love them), Frank's show is less about him as an individual than about Frank facilitating group interactions that are shared on Youtube and other sites.

The Vlog Brothers, aka John and Hank Green, have taken the style of Frank's videos (they look at the camera, speak rapidly, and offer humorous anecdotes and other online flotsam to their videos). In addressing a question from a fan about why John and Hank don't blink in their video they state, "It's sort of a tribute to the original video blogger, our hero, Ze Frank." However, it should also be added that the Vlog Brothers' efforts to connect individually with as many fans as possible–like Ze Frank–are a key component to their online work.

You see, John and Hank are nerdfighters.

This a label they've coined and which they invite others to become. Though there is not an official definition of what counts as a nerdfighter ("It's not about anything in particular," Green states), it has loosely come to mean the group of fans that circulate in and around the various online networks that the Green brothers create. In particular, nerdfighters tend to organize (both online and in person) to focus on social justice issues that are important to them. There are a lot of nerdfighters out there. U.S. Olympic gymnast Jennifer Pinches is a nerdfighter, for example; she was seen in several Associated Press photos holding up the official nerdfighters hand signal (Fishingboatproceeds, 2012).

The story of nerdfighters organizing to save the world is a short one, and it begins with a simple problem: "world suck." World suck is defined as "the amount of suck in the world" (vlogbrothers, 2009). In short, nerdfighters are driven by a collective mission to decrease (and eventually end) world suck. Oh and "DFTBA." DFTBA is nerdfighter code for "Don't forget to be awesome," important advice for all nerdfighters out there. Does this sound juvenile? Silly? Probably. But I don't think nerdfighters take themselves too seriously in that regard. They are self-proclaimed nerds after all. What they do take seriously, however, is their focused efforts to improve global conditions they jokingly call world suck.

One way nerdfighters have fought world suck is through participation in the online microlending site Kiva (kiva.org). Kiva is "a non-profit organization with a mission to connect people through lending to alleviate poverty," according to its About page. The site functions by allowing individuals or teams to donate small amounts of money to individuals to be paid back; though there is a risk of non-repayment, the site boasts a 99% repayment rate. On the team page for nerdfighters, the following message greets browsers: "We're Nerdfighters! We fight against suck; we fight for awesome! We fight using our brains, our hearts, our calculators, and our trombones." By the end of 2012, nerdfighters had made more than fifty thousand loans, included more than thirty thousand members to their Kiva team, and lent more than $1.5 million. Again, this is *one* project by a group of the *nerdfighteria* and a largely youth-driven form of engagement. At one point Green challenged his fans to raise $1 million dollars for Kiva before he and Hank had created 1000 YouTube videos (a lengthy amount of time). Nerdfighters responded to the challenge and lent the amount in less than three days.

In addition to microlending, there's also the annual Project For Awesome that John and Hank organize. It is described as "an annual event on YouTube in which thousands of video creators make videos supporting their favorite charity. Anybody is allowed to participate - simply make a video about a charity you support and post it on YouTube on December 17th" (projectforawesome.com).

Let's see, what else? There are also the details behind Green's reminder to readers that they "Don't forget to be awesome."

Don't Forget to Be Awesome (DFTBA) is more than a slogan. It is a way of acting and being within the world. It is a greeting. It is an online record label and store. In 2008, John and Hank Green opened DFTBA.org which releases commercially the music of Hank Green as well as several other artists. If you are a fan of nerdfighters' inside jokes, you can also buy t-shirts such as a dramatic photograph of John Green with the word "Pizza" printed on it (because, obviously, John Green likes pizza). The site releases products from independent artists (usually all nerdfighters). The argument could be made that the site is focused on sales and nerdfighting is a marketing scheme to get dollars funneled toward the Green brothers. However, I would argue that the constant efforts of Hank and John do much more than that. The site prints posters and products made by fans, cements humorous jokes started by the nerdfighter community ("Pizza," again), and links regularly to fan videos, blogs, and ideas. While it may be neat that a bestselling author and his brother have gotten a lot of attention online. It is more powerful that they have used this attention to attempt to work on social justice projects in coordination with fans.

However, what exactly does this have to do with young adult literature? you might ask. Aside from the fact that this largely starts with Green and *Looking for Alaska*, DFTBA and the many sites and URLs that have blossomed from Green's work have offered new ways of thinking about how young people can extend texts in participatory culture. This is a way to instantiate reading as actionable change of the world around us.

Several years ago, I purchased a copy of *Looking For Alaska* for a friend. As I was checking out of the bookstore, I felt a small lump that suggested an object was inside the book. Turning the back cover, a small foam dinosaur unfolded from the book along with a handwritten note congratulating me, the buyer of the book, as a newly pronounced nerdfighter. This was followed by a small smiley face and "DFTBA." In one sense, *Looking for Alaska* became a portal for an unsuspecting reader into a world of playful engagement and social change.

Educational researcher Joel Westheimer once mentioned in a meeting I was in, "fifty percent of social justice is social." John and Hank Green make it fun to be a part of their various efforts to improve the world. Many fans may be approaching the nerdfighting mission because they are fans of Green's work and have stumbled into a larger realm of ways to participate. But there are also many nerdfighters who may not have read Green's books first, or even at all. In the summer of 2012, my partner and I moved from Los Angeles to Fort Collins, CO where I began working in the English department at Colorado State University. Roaming the campus for the first time, I noticed, amidst the haphazard smattering of fliers for concerts and work-from-home opportunities, chalked walls stating: DFTBA. Green's name was nowhere. It was a mysterious set of letters for the unknowing. For the nerdfighters at CSU, it was a nod that they were among friends. And what better way to *feel* awesome than by being in the know of a secret society fighting against world suck?

THE HARRY POTTER ALLIANCE

In Chapter One, I briefly mentioned that many of my college students lamented that they never received their invitations to enroll at Hogwarts when they turned ten. While these students and likely many more around the globe may try to recreate these dreams through consumption of books and products in spaces like the Wizarding World of Harry Potter, there is a growing mass of young people who are taking the principles of Harry Potter's universe and applying them to the world around them. In particular, they are claiming to be a part of Dumbledore's Army: the collective of students that organized to fight against Voldermort and the Death Eaters in the series' conclusion.

The Harry Potter Alliance engages in various forms of social justice-oriented work. However, in order to describe the kinds of activities the HPA conducts in "the real world," a discussion of horcruxes is in order. Whether it is from reading the J.K. Rowling books where they appeared or watching the film franchise that they played a pivotal role in, many of you reading this are familiar with horcruxes. For those of you that are not, they are described by Professor Slughorn in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* as, "A Horcrux is the word used for an object in which a person has concealed part of their soul" (Rowling, 2005, p. 497). The text continues: "Well, you split your soul, you see," said Slughorn, "and hide part of it in an object outside the body. Then, even if one's body is attacked or destroyed, one cannot die, for part of the soul remains earthbound and undamaged. But of course, existence in such a form ..." (p. 497).

It is revealed that there are seven horcruxes created that Harry Potter must find and destroy in order to rid the world of Voldermort. And while Harry Potter successfully destroyed the seven horcruxes that contained parts of his nemesis, Voldermort, in the final books of the Harry Potter series, I have some bad news. Unfortunately, there are still horcruxes out there and they are in serious need of being destroyed.

The only problem though, is that "out there" is no longer the magical world that exists just steps away from Platform 9 ¾. Instead the world where horcruxes exist is the very same one where you are currently reading this book. Yes, *you*. Instead of taking the shape of magical objects like Rowena Ravenclaw's Diadem or Nagani the menacing snake, horcruxes in the "real" world are more insidious and far-reaching in their terror. The seven horcruxes that were recently battled (in chronological order) are:

- Starvation Wages
- Dementor
- Body Bind
- Bullying
- Illiteracy
- Child Slavery
- Climate Crisis

If some of these look like actual social issues it is because they are. All of them are, in fact. (Dementor is a horcrux about depression and Body Bind is a horcrux focused on the media's narrow interpretations of beauty.) And if the literary trope that millions grew up reading about is suddenly present within our real lives, then perhaps it is time for literary fans to rise up and fight back against the insidious evil that is manifested as horcruxes.

The Harry Potter Alliance, which was responsible for creating and subsequently defeating these seven vile horcruxes, was started by a young man named Andrew Slack. Having recently graduated from college, Slack looked at the world around him and his own relationship to literature and built the HPA as a means of funneling literary fandom into social good.

The premise behind HPA is simple. Their motto is "The Weapon We Have Is Love." For fans of the Harry Potter series it should be a familiar one. The motto speaks directly to what separates the magical powers of Potter and his arch-nemesis Voldermort. In the book series, Potter becomes the defacto leader of an army of classmates that are devoted to protecting their school and the individuals within it. They are a small and rebel army that faces insurmountable odds and ultimately helps Harry defeat Voldermort. When enough individuals are driven toward a specific cause, the text suggests, social change is all but inevitable.

And so, taking a tip form Rowling's final installment in the Harry Potter series, the Harry Potter Alliance encourages the growing army of fans of the Harry Potter series and challenges them to engage civically and participate in youth-organized activism. The Deathly Hallows Campaign is a good example of how a connection

with literature can spur actual social change. During the time between the final seventh and eight films in the Harry Potter series were released (November 2010 and July 2011), the HPA fought off the seven horcruxes listed above. The number was consistent with the number in the book series and was a timely event that tied participant's actions to the upcoming finale of a massively successful film series. Participating by taking action against the horcruxes was, for some, a way to feel connected to the books and films that they grew up with while simultaneously improving the world around them. The net results are staggering. As a result of fandom for a lightening bolt-scarred wizard, more than 32,000 books were donated in a fight against illiteracy. In the name of Harry Potter, more than 6200 phone calls and 246 digital postcards were sent to legislators in support of marriage equality. As members of Harry Potter's self-organized army, the HPA created YouTube videos to battle body image stereotypes; the channel's videos have been viewed more than 200,000 times.

Part of what's so successful about a campaign like this is how it interweaves the text with the real world. This is more than simply getting a group of fans together. In many ways, this is an extension of the themes of *Harry Potter* in ways that allow all of us muggles the opportunity to partake in adventures that only previously existed in fantasy. This is playful and fun, but it's also *important*. Just like Green is able to leverage fans to fight world suck, Andrew Slack essentially gathered the passions of readers world-wide to have fun and take on social issues that are meaningful to young people. Along the way, members of the HPA have created chapters at various college campuses and have fostered various meet-ups. Quidditch–the fictional game that is played on broomsticks in the *Harry Potter* novels–for instance has become a highly competitive sport. If you have ever been curious what it looks like when a handful of college kids run around chasing each other with broomsticks held in place between their legs, check to see if your nearest university has an HPA chapter or Quidditch league.

Importantly, if one book series can instantiate social change for thousands of young people in out-of-school contexts, what are the ways schools can harness literature for civic education in an era of participatory culture? More broadly, what civic opportunities does literature offer? Clearly, the ways young people can engage with the world around them can be informed by the messages they take away in books. However, it is imperative now, in a participatory culture, to consider how we can *extend* these narratives' messages to world as well.

YOUTH BEING PARTICIPATORY

I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter the notion of "participatory culture." As technological advances have made media production even more rampant in recent years, researchers like John Seely Brown and Douglas Thomas (2011) have described these new forms of participation as ushering in a "new culture of learning" (p. 18). These changes pose both significant opportunities and challenges within

classrooms. For example in *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture*, Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, and Robison (2009) identify several "new media literacies: a set of cultural competencies and social skills that young people need in the new media landscape" (p. xiii). Among these are several skills that are particularly pertinent when considering young people's relationship to literature such as:

- **Appropriation**: The ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content
- **Transmedia navigation**: The ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities.
- **Networking**: The ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information.
- **Negotiation:** The ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms. (Jenkins, et al., p. xiv).

Along with additional skills such as "play," "multitasking," and "distributed cognition," Jenkins et al. argue that these are the kinds of new media literacies that are included in the matrix of learning in the 21st century. In examining these skills, educators must realize that YA literature is no longer simply about consumption. Though I may passively read and digest a novel, I am also able to–if the interest arises–respond to, build off, or reinterpret novels in ways that can be public and collaborative. For example, if I were to imagine a new set of hijinks for Harry Potter and his ever-reliable confidantes Ron and Hermione, I would have a slew of options of how to portray and disseminate my ideas online. What's more, I would be able to easily leverage my own interest in Harry Potter in a way that would allow me to work with a close fan-based community of other Potter enthusiasts. It is reasonable to assume that within the forum of a Harry Potter fan community I could share my reinterpretation of Harry Potter and receive informed, astute feedback.

In this sense, it is best not to consider YA novels as mere texts to be read. Instead, I would argue that, in the participatory culture of the 21st century, a YA novel–be it *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* or *Gossip Girl* or *Go Ask Alice*–is a participation engine. Given the right interest and disposition toward the text, YA can drive youth production: books, essays, online discussions, songs, films, and multimodal texts are found in abundance online based on YA novels. And though young people can independently share and publish their work, I want to emphasize that there are online community spaces where young people collaborate and share their original productions. The ways teens today are able to appropriate popular texts in varied modalities, network with peers in a digital space, and conform to the unique norms and behaviors of these online spaces represent not only the new media literacies described above but also spaces that educators must consider when rethinking how texts are read and utilized within academic spaces.

For all of the positive attributes that come with new media literacies, there are numerous challenges that prohibit the full application of these literacies in academic settings. Most pressing, for instance, is that the education system in the

U.S. is generally ill-equipped to incorporate the youth interest-driven dispositions of participatory culture within classrooms. The pedagogical infrastructure for teachers to be able to incorporate skills like networking and transmedia navigation in the classroom is severely underdeveloped. This is not solely because teachers are not interested in these skills or in adjusting their practice but also because school policies are often in direct opposition to the kinds of learning practices that are being developed in out-of-school contexts. For example, the kinds of networking skills required to develop meaningful relationships for feedback and collaboration online are often lost in schools' stringent efforts to filter potentially harmful content from school computer users. While online filters may be in place for protection of young people they can also constrain how young people can engage with media production in the 21st century.

Likewise a disposition like appropriation can be quickly reinterpreted as a more problematic phrase if not contextualized properly within academic institutions: plagiarism. Because participatory culture shifts the status of media products like novels from static objects to malleable tools for re-creation and adaptation, the ways young people identify, cite, and incorporate existing media products is troublesome. Even beyond the scope of schools, the legal challenges of remixes and interpretations of copyright and fair use are at the forefront of participatory culture. (For an in-depth look at how teachers can practice fair use principles with media in their classroom see *Reclaiming Fair Use: How To Put Balance Back in Copyright* by Aufderheide and Jaszi [2011]). And while I believe that attribution is an important component to creating new media by standing on the shoulders of giants, I also think that lessons around ownership and production of media are important to have with young people as they are likely intimately involved in media production outside of the classroom.

Further, another important challenge is how to mediate relationships online in schooling environments. Presently, I am predominantly seeing schools avoid the issue altogether by prohibiting social networks or spaces where individuals interact closely with one another. And while I understand the fear of online predators, bullying and other issues particular to young people, I also wonder if schools should play a part in developing responsible and socially conscious media users. Long before *World of Warcraft* or MySpace or even Napster existed, Julian Dibbell (1993), in an article in the *Village Voice*, identified the perils of wayward and deviant use of technology online. "A Rape in Cyberspace, or How an Evil Clown, a Haitian Trickster Spirit, Two Wizards, and a Cast of Dozens Turned a Database into a Society" details the way an individual spun a fictitious tale of sexual violence that upheaved an online community in the nascent days of online networks. Utilizing scripts within the online game, a player described violent and unwilling sexual acts taking place to characters in the game. And while the story is harrowing in its depiction of a rogue individual ruining an online space for others, it also does something else that's interesting: It paints a picture of a group of individuals that learn to negotiate online discourse collectively. Reading Dibbell's description, one gets the sense that this is an online community that is negotiating its own rules and norms. The breach of these norms

did not physically harm anyone but–as described by one player–acted as a "breach in civility" in the online game.

So what does this have to do with YA? As mentioned these are all the challenges adults face when considering media in classrooms today. And even if we aren't considering these challenges for our students during the hours of 9-3 everyday, we need to still recognize that the kinds of complex identity negotiations that are articulated in Dibbell's article from way back in the '90s are being enacted everyday. However, what's more important to connect between the above descriptions and YA is the malleability of text. Again, novels are now fluid material; they are not passively consumed. As such, when a young person goes online and writes from the point of view of Snape or creates a video about their favorite Hunger Games installment or decides to record a Youtube video explaining why they liked Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series, they are *extending* the text. As YA novels can be engines to drive youth online production today, they are not stationary objects. Literature today is actionable and I'd like to describe some of the ways my own students put a passion for YA into their own, original productions.

YOUTH PRODUCTION AND NANOWRIMO

There is an inherent struggle between the changing nature of consumers and producers of YA today. While young people are more disposed to engage in meaningful activities as a result of fandom, proprietary laws like copyright and in-school expectations make supporting this work as teachers tricky.

YA literature as a genre and as a profitable market is in state of flux at the moment. Though the past decade has been one in which YA novels sell in outlandish numbers, drive popular film franchises and are read across age divides, it isn't clear if this is a trend that will continue in the future. In particular, the advances of participatory culture are positioned to more radically shift the nature of YA than simply encouraging kids to start quidditch teams or tweet their favorite authors. Instead, the ease of digital publication and immediate feedback mean that young people may be considered more producers than consumers of YA soon. Already this relationship between production and consumption is more fluid than ever before, as already noted in this chapter.

This transition is one about power and isn't necessarily one that is being ushered in amicably. For instance, the kinds of writing practices that guide young people to write well received YA content are likely ones that begin in self-guided forms of learning that mirror apprenticeships. In their text on sociocultural learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) describe such forms of learning as "legitimate peripheral participation" (p. 29). As such a label implies, more confident and independent forms of learning, production, and community membership are driven by support that is tangential to larger organizational goals. Within their text they identify, apprenticeship as an example of this kind of peripheral participation. Learning from and modeling skills within guild-like organizations is not only a form of learning

they suggest, but something that has emerged in a digital age as "situated" learning (Gee, 2004) in games like *World of Warcraft* (Chen, 2011; Gee, 2008).

In my own classroom, I collaborated with one of my students to encourage the class to become authors of work that they felt represented the kinds of books that they wanted to read. My student, Sam, was a notable passionate reader and writer within my classroom. Based on conversations with her, I was aware that Sam had written her own novels and was also a voracious reader of YA texts; at the time I remember being struck by how many times she had read the Twilight and Harry Potter series. I was alert that Sam's passions for the genre and for participating in YA writing were sources of expertise that I did not sufficiently grasp as the assumed expert in an ELA classroom. As such, I asked Sam to work with me to guide our class of 12th graders through writing at lengths that most students at our school would not. Loosely in coordination with the dates of National Novel Writing Month (Nanowrimo), Sam offered weekly structured lessons for the class on crafting a plot, developing characters, and finding the self-discipline to write more than 30,000 words each. I note that this was only loosely based on Nanowrimo as that organization's goal is for authors to complete at least 50,000 words of a single manuscript in the month of November. My own class took a bit more than five weeks over November and December and also balanced the in-class essays and course novels I asked them to complete. Their own novels (or memoirs as some students elected to write) were a culmination of the kinds of narrative explorations we conducted in the class as a community of inquirers and were bit of a change of pace from the requirements I imposed on the students regarding college applications and personal statements.

Of the more than thirty students in my senior class that year, I received 28 complete novel manuscripts. The return of complete works and partial drafts from many of the remaining students were indicative of the fact that this was an assignment that felt different from what is perceived as academic work. Yes, numerous students expressed continual frustration and feelings of being overwhelmed by the daunting word count that was imposed. However, I would most credit my collaborator on the project, Sam, with assuaging doubts and guiding classmates to chip away at the mountain of prose they had to climb.

Having a peer community to work with and collaborate amongst, I would argue that the class interaction during this time of production felt different. My students heard me confess to them that I felt like a bit of a lame duck when it came to this exercise: Sam was the only person in the room who had written the amount of fiction I was asking the class to attempt. Meeting in writing circle and eliciting feedback from peers, students came up with their own writing strategies ranging from writing notes on their phones to jotting while riding on the bus. And while it could be interpreted as a critique of my teaching, I appreciated the resiliency my students developed: they became writing experts within the race-like Nanowrimo genre.

That year was the last that I would teach a senior class. I was then voluntarily bumped to work with ninth graders and I spent time there also exploring the nature of YA production in Youtube videos (like Green's and the HPA). In a similar project,

I collaborated with one of my 11th grade classes to produce a documentary play similar to Anna Deveare Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* that detailed the Los Angeles Riots of that year. *Stop It: Our Future, A Threat* was a sixty-page play about the impact that California budget cuts would have on the lives of the students and physical community of South Central Los Angeles. Through interviews with parents, teachers, classmates, and local business owners, the play was a work of collaborative non-fiction that was freely published on my own website and emailed to the entire school community. The play was context-driven–this was an issue that was important for the students and their immediate physical community. Likewise, this work was collaborative and responsive to existing models of literature they were engaged with. So, while this wasn't YA in the same sense as Green's novels or the *Harry Potter* series, it was a way for young people to turn the tables in terms of their traditional relationship with media.

Throughout my classes, finding ways for students to produce media products they would like to read has been an important part of my own teaching practice. In a survey given to my students the first week of school I ask my students what book they would write if they were given the opportunity. (They don't know it at that time, but whether through shorter assignments or Nanowrimo, I will try to help them fulfill this literary vision by year's end.) It isn't a surprise to me that a bulk of students note an interest in writing a non-existing sequel or alternate universe-like approach to books they've already read. Taking Sam's cue, most of the students in my senior class either wrote imaginative sequels to their favorite YA titles or original works that fit strongly within the genre of YA that I'd see them read throughout the year. A student's appreciation for the Vladimir Tod series written by Heather Brewer, for example resulted in a book where a teenage vampire boy is an attendant of the same high school where I taught. This close reading of and then modeling on a known YA text is indicative of the kinds of legitimate peripheral participation that my students naturally undertook. Students essentially took an author they liked and adopted that author as their assumed mentor. In looking at young people as producers of YA content, these models of sociocultural learning are indicative of the kinds of iterative steps of writing and publication that can ultimately upend traditional and capitalist forms of publishing and distribution.

What's striking to note is that this isn't exactly a model that is unsuccessful either. There are presently numerous examples of widely popular YA and non-YA books that began as fan fiction. In fact, look at popular fan fiction communities such as the generic fanfiction.net, and readers will see plethora of fan fiction works being generated and read daily. In an article that details the large amount of fan fiction contributions related to Harry Potter, novelist Lev Grossman (2011) described the opportunities for spinning new narratives from existing worlds:

> Fan fiction that isn't constrained by canon is known as AU, which stands for Alternate Universe, and in AU all bets are off. The canon is fired. Imagine how Harry Potter's story would have played out if on his first day at Hogwarts he'd been sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor. Or if he were a vampire, or a werewolf? Or for that matter, what if he were black? Or if instead of trying

> to kill baby Harry, Voldemort adopted him, raised him as Harry Marvolo and conquered the entire British Isles? (This scenario has been intensively explored in a group of fan stories known collectively as *Alternity*.)

As Grossman acknowledges, there is a plethora of fan fiction that is sexually driven. Educators need to be cautious not to simply encourage in-class wanderings across fan fiction sites, as such. That being said, even these sexualized interpretations of YA have yielded widely read forms of literature. E.L. James's *50 Shades of Grey* series, for example, has its origins in *Twilight*-influenced fan fiction (Deahl, 2012).

One of the biggest challenges with fan fiction, particularly in today's participatory culture that embraces media production and remix, is the issue of copyright. As Grossman (2011) explains:

> In the U.S., at least, copyright is checked by something called fair use: if a work qualifies as fair use, it can borrow from a copyrighted work without permission and without paying for it. There are four factors that determine whether a work qualifies, the most germane here being whether it can be considered competition for the original work in the marketplace, and whether it's "transformative": it has to change what it borrows, making "something new, with a further purpose or different character, altering the first with new expression, meaning or message." (The words are those of Supreme Court Justice David Souter in *Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music Inc.*, which concerned whether 2 Live Crew's "Pretty Woman" made fair use of Roy Orbison's "Oh, Pretty Woman." The court decided unanimously that it did.) Does fan fiction transform, or does it merely imitate? Is it critique or just homage?

It should be noted that Grossman, the author of this article is a bestselling novelist in his own right. His book *The Magicians* and its sequel *The Magician King* (the first two installments in a planned trilogy) are hugely popular novels within the fantasy genre. In recommending it to friends, I have described it as *Harry Potter* for adults. In a 2012 YouTube video listing possible books to give as holiday gifts, John Green describes *The Magicians* as an ideal book for fans of Harry Potter as well.

The issue brought up in Grossman's article is an important one: who owns Harry Potter? Is it the property of the author? Is it the publishers and product producers that continue to rake in dollars on the world of Harry Potter? Is it the fans that continue to explore the adventures and alternative life decisions Potter may have made in their own online spaces? And considering that Potter is only one microcosm of fandom within YA, the question of ownership and authorship become tricky. Let's look at the career pathway of another massively successful YA author and her own concrete flirtations with fan fiction.

FROM DRACO TO CITY OF BONES

Let's try this: Imagine that everything you know about the Harry Potter series dropped after the fourth book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Instead of

following Harry's quest to defeat He Who Shall Not Be Named, the series takes a drastic new direction and follows Harry's school rival, Draco Malfoy. The new story now revolves less around defeating Voldermort and instead focuses on foibles involving switched identities and a love triangle as a result of a Polyjuice Potion that includes Harry, Draco, and Hermione.

If this whimsical adventure sounds intriguing, rest assured it is only the beginning of a three-book trilogy. Also, rest assured that the involved and complex story is entirely unauthorized in the eyes of J.K. Rowling's publisher. Published over the course of several years beginning in 2000, the Draco Trilogy (comprised of *Draco Dormiens, Draco Sinister,* and *Draco Veritas)* was a hugely popular contribution to the world of Harry Potter fan fiction (Fanlore.org). That past sentence is deliberately written in the past tense: in the years following the well-received fan fiction, the author of the Draco Trilogy removed the work from hosted sites. It's unclear just how many people have read part or all of the Draco Trilogy; like most things tied to the Internet, the Draco Trilogy has a stubborn tendency not to go away just because its author wills it to do so. With a few Google searches, I found the complete trilogy hosted on a blog and as downloadable PDFs. According to one report, drafts of the Draco Trilogy had more then 6,000 comments and led to its own smattering of spin-off fan fiction often collected at the Draco Trilogy Archives (now defunct). That's right: this fan fiction series has its own fan fiction.

However, along with the praise for the nuanced and entertaining story are serious accusations of plagiarism. The book is rife with direct dialogue and descriptions from popular works of fiction and television including Monty Python and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. However the real controversy came about when one reader noted that a large passage of the third book borrowed from Pamela Dean's novel, *The Hidden Land* (2003). This is the main reason the text was withdrawn by the author. And while the author may have been at the center of a controversy around plagiarism in fan fiction, the trilogy also helped her build a repertoire of YA writing tropes and an audience of fans immersed in her work.

The Draco Trilogy was written by Cassandra Clare–previously discussed in Chapter Four.

In 2008, Claire published her first original novel, the aforementioned *City of Bones*. It was the first in a planned three part series, the Mortal Instruments. The series, however, was so successful that Claire then extended the series with a fourth book, *City of Fallen Angels*, which will likely be the beginning of a new trilogy within the Mortal Instruments series. Claire's books have also resulted in a prequel series, the Infernal Devices, which takes the same paranormal world of the Mortal Instruments and looks at a Victorian era for teenage adventures to ensue. A large-budget Hollywood adaptation of *City of Bones* hit the screens in 2013.

Like a majority of Claire's readers, I first discovered her work through this hugely popular franchise. The books comprising the Mortal Instruments series were staples in my classroom library, and I quickly learned that students looking for more paranormal-riddled worlds a la the Twilight series would likely find themselves

immersed in Claire's work. As of 2012, Claire's books have sold more than 10 million copies worldwide (Kaplan, 2012), a number likely to have skyrocketed since the release of the film and subsequent volumes in her series.

The world of fan fiction, like most communities that meet either in person or virtually (or both), is filled with jargon that is often impenetrable to outsiders. To describe the Draco Trilogy is to locate this particular fan fiction as "het" with "harry/draco" undertones and is the origin of the "Draco in Leather Pants" trope. To unpack that, the Draco Trilogy deals with primarily heterosexual ("het") relationships, though some readers notice more than a brotherly bond between Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy. There is an entire subgenre of fan fiction dedicated to expressing and exploring homosexual relationships between Harry and Draco ("harry/draco"). Finally, Claire's inversion of readers' expectations of Draco as a whiny and sniveling bully became so popular that the phrase "Draco in Leather Pants" defines tropes in fan fiction that stretch beyond just the Harry Potter universe: "When a fandom takes a controversial or downright villainous character and downplays his/her flaws, often turning him/her into an object of desire and/or a victim in the process" ("Draco in Leather Pants", 2013).

Yes, fan fiction is a playful space for those that are passionate about a specific book, television show, or film to extrapolate other possibilities and alternatives within these worlds. However, it is also a serious space. The arguments and rule-building that guides fanfic communities is a space of research and participation that well exceeds the scope of this book (for recent research on fandom see *Fandom Unbound: Otaku Culture in a Connected World*; Ito et al. [2012] and *Fandom At The Crossroads: Celebration, Shame and Fan/Producer Relationships,* Zubernis & Larsen [2012]). The implications of community, ownership and participation within fan fiction communities, however, is an area to look to when guiding the YA reading and participatory decisions for young people. It is also a space that is contested in regards to the capitalist model of consumerism that drives YA books sales today. To put this in perspective, the Draco Trilogy would not have existed without the massively popular and economically lucrative books by J.K. Rowling. Likewise, based on its publication just years before the Mortal Instruments books, I would argue that the Draco Trilogy served as a kind of training grounds for Claire to practice her prose and storytelling techniques for a receptive YA audience. In this sense, fan fiction can serve as a kind of lynchpin for profit and professional writing preparation.

YA OTAKU

Otaku is a Japanese term that originally described individuals obsessively interested in anime. These were the super fans with encyclopedic knowledge of niche aspects of their genre. The term, since the late '80s has come to be more broadly used to describe geeks of specific media forms. As Ito (2012), notes, otaku culture is "hotly contested" (p. xi). She explains that otaku is "a distinctive style of geek chic: a postmodern sensibility expressed through arcane knowledge of pop and cyber culture and striking technological fluency" (p. xi).

And while the term is in flux, I would argue that otaku culture is a powerful way to consider the positive possibilities of YA fandom. Ito et al. (2012) ultimately utilize a definition of otaku culture that sees it as "a constellation of 'fannish' cultural logics, platforms, and practices that cluster around anime, manga, and Japanese games and are in turn associated with a more generalized set of dispositions toward passionate and participatory engagement with popular culture and technology in a networked world" (p. xi).

Fandom is more than consumption for today's YA readers. Online communicating, writing fan fiction, and engaging in civic activities all illustrate ways participatory and otaku culture can transform how youth engage with literature today. Further, though most of the YA that is being consumed today does not specifically deal with traditionally Japanese media products like manga and anime, the dispositions of fandom represented in otaku culture carry over into several YA texts as well as into how YA readers interact with and about these novels.

Embracing one's passion for literature and for geek culture, youth can find sprawling communities and myriad forms of participation available today. From clicking and "liking" John Green's weekly vlogs to meeting other fans for civic action as part of the Harry Potter Alliance to developing one's own writing practices through fan fiction writing, the possibilities of otaku in an era of participatory culture are bountiful. In making fandom more than consumption, today's participatory media is redefining the YA genre. It is no longer merely the capitalist powerhouse described in Chapter One. YA, when supported, can act as a liberatory and transformative, productive tool.

CONCLUSION

YA AND THE "EMERGING SELF"

Looking Ahead at the Genre and Our Classrooms[1]

If there is one major trend across the various chapters in this book it is the illustration that the young adult book genre is in a period of flux. As a genre that more or less emerged in the middle of the 1900s, YA is a relatively young component of western literatures. Like the readers it caters to, it is stretching uncomfortably in its current adolescence.

From a view of capitalism, YA only found a strong footing in the last two decades. Identifying its leverage in larger markets of film and merchandising, the necessity to sell books has driven YA increasingly into the realm of serialization and incessant spin-offs. That's not to say that the precedent wasn't there before Harry Potter and the regimes of serials that followed, but the Hardy Boys and Sweet Valley Highs of yesteryear put up pitiable sales numbers in comparison to the behemoths that help drive large sectors of the book and film markets today.

Likewise, depictions of race in YA shifted significantly over time. Paradoxically, it is an area that has become both more dominant and invisible. The outcry around the "whitest" list of top YA novels that NPR published in 2012 sends a clear message that representations of youth of color continue to remain absent from the critically acclaimed lists that help drive school and teacher book-buying decisions.

And though for females in YA texts frailty continues to frequently be thy name, strong female voices have dominated recent titles. Beyond the sultry allure of the *Gossip Girl* leads, Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* and Tally Youngblood in the *Uglies* series indicate that they are beyond the need to be saved by men in power. At the same time, problematically, men continue to act as sources of folly for female leads; strong women like Karou in *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* and Beatrice in *Divergent* illustrate that women that tend to lead continue to still be portrayed as making irrational decisions based on the sexual appeal of men.

Of course this reliance on men continues to underscore the ever present emphasis on heterosexual relationships. That there is a niche market of LGBTQI novels available for readers is growth in and of itself. Is it *enough* growth? Absolutely not. Perhaps more than any other area of exploration, the significant absence of strong LGBTQI characters as anything other than ancillary to a central plot continues to illustrate how much additional growing the YA genre has to go. Like issues of gender, race, class, and capitalism, the books within YA are driven largely by dominant cultural hegemony. The beliefs and values of a dominant class are not

only reinforced through these popular texts but they highlight that this is a symbiotic process: these texts are popular because they reinforce hegemony.

As in flux as I see the YA genre presently, I also see the unifying theme of teenagehood. That may sounds obvious, but it is also something I was blind to as a young and critical educator. Even when I strongly disagree with depictions in *Go Ask Alice* or *I Am Number Four,* the books speak to growing up, looking at the world from changing eyes, and dealing with western notions of adolescence. And I worry that this is sometimes something critical educators lose site of.

Grams (1980) calls this aspect of adolescence the "emerging self" (p. 18), explaining that "the adolescent rediscovers his world" (p. 18). The issue of gendered pronouns aside, Gram's explanation helps locate young adult literature as an illuminative guide not only for individual self discovery but for understanding along *communal*, societal lines. That is, while Grams discusses this growth in terms of an individual *self*, I would add that what emerges is not simply one's unique identity but an understanding of how youth, as part of a westernized society, adapt beyond adolescence.

While this book maintains a critical stance on depictions of race, class, and gender in literature, I have a real problem with the thrust of articles along the lines of Vizzini's (2011) "The End of the White Outsider," which argues: "Teachers and writers who venerate *Catcher* [*In The Rye*] have to ask themselves: How relevant is Holden in a world where he is an actual minority?" While I agree with the author's call for inclusion of much-needed non-White heroes, I also think simply tearing down what we have is also problematic. When I was still in the high school classroom, I *did* ask myself if Holden was relevant for my class of all black and Latino youth. I did this during my first year as a teacher. At that time, I specifically felt that the whiny voice of a rich, white east-coast male would be completely alien to my students. It would be patronizing to force them to spend their time with such a literary character.

But what I forgot was that Holden is the apotheosis of being a teenager and growing up. I've had few texts that have quite the near-universal positive response as *Catcher* gets in my 11th grade classroom.

While I ask students to think about the critical nature of the text and its politics of representation, I also recognize that students need to look at the world from myriad viewpoints – especially when those of privileged folks like Holden end up looking a whole lot like their own. Each time I taught this book, I had students ask to buy a copy when they are finished. I had students each year admit it's the first book they've finished reading. Ever. I had impassioned and emotional reflections from students that discuss their fears, uncertainties, and desires about growing up. The fact that Holden is white or male doesn't get in the way of this pathos or this ability of students to engage meaningfully with an aging text.

Ultimately, I think there is a danger in taking an effective and proven piece of literature like *The Catcher In The Rye* and allowing it to function as an effigy to burn in tribute to large and significant questions about racial diversity, representation, and media. These are important questions–questions we've spent nearly an entire book focusing on. But the approach is misguided and uninformed.

Which brings me to a real conflict that educators face: *Catcher In Rye* is a proven "winner" within classrooms for generations. It is difficult to argue with Salinger's craft for sharing pathos and empathy with a teenage readership. At the same time, the wealth and whiteness of the book reflect the way that–even amongst changes in the genre–YA continues to focus on limited viewpoints and perspectives. It's not enough to simply engage with these books non-critically. At the same time, we cannot ignore the ways YA books act as totems for guiding the emerging selves that flood into our classrooms and libraries. It is a delicate tango of letting the literature speak and empowering youth to speak back and question what's there. And as schools increasingly offer garroting restrictions on what can happen in classrooms, the possibilities for this dance are becoming limited.

YA IN AN ERA OF COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

As I finish writing this book, the state of public education in the United States is strengthening its emphasis on standardization across individual states. An overwhelming majority of states have adopted a set of national Common Core State Standards. With emphasis on technical writing and literacy development within individual disciplines, popular media has raised alarmist flags about the diminishing role of literature in English classrooms. And, I would argue, unless educators maintain a strong stance to protect their craft from the corporate reform of CCSS authors, such threats may come to fruition. However, as of now, it is unclear what the role of literature in schools will play in the near future. More importantly, regardless of what is mandated district-by-district, the power of reading and a passion for it is not coming under fire. Even if the ways and topics of reading in schools shifts away from literature, the reading choices of young people outside of the hours of 9-3 are going to be dictated by YA marketing. Educators are going to have to structure lessons to provide a critical and engaging stance for literature in these spaces.

And while this book did not offer direct lessons for application, I want to emphasize that the context from one classroom to another will drive how educators confront and challenge the YA genre with and for their students. And, I would argue, that being able to interpret and *read* the context for engagement in classrooms is perhaps more important than reading the critical messages in today's YA texts.

When confronted with the fact that he did not offer deliberate guidelines for implementing a critical pedagogy in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire explained:

> When one thinks about the context that generated *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and also thinks about one's own context, one can begin to re-create *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. ... In essence, educators must work hard so that learners assume the role of knowing subjects and can live this experience as subjects. Educators and learners do not have to do the exact same things I did in order to experience being a subject. (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 134)

The significant and transformative roles of educators today will be in negotiating the challenges of reform like the Common Core State Standards and encouraging critical consciousness vis-à-vis YA literature.

As a book focused on theoretical readings and responses to YA, I want to return to the fact that these are personalized and individualistic in nature. Youth ways of being and the "emerging self" are subjective experiences that are shaped through guidance and personal reflection. Critical media literacy theorist and educator Jeff Share discusses viewers' assumptions about photography in an article called, "The Camera Always Lies." In it, Share writes that a general public's assumption that photographs are neutral "contributed greatly to photography's power in society." As photography exhibits an individual's interpretation and subjective vision of the world, so too does the YA genre cast out subjective lessons for young people to interpret and internalize. I want to draw attention to Share's title and the emphasis that "The Camera *Always* Lies."

Often, critical media literacy is assumed to be the domain to interpret films, music, and multimodal "new" media. However, media, as the plural of medium, is any form for conveying messages, idea, and content to an audience. As such, the critical media lessons of Share and other critical media theorists (Hall, 1980; Kellner, 1995) offer important guidelines for how we read and interpret the YA novels we receive today. For publishers, viewing the YA readership as a marketable audience has significant repercussions in how these readers are categorized and cast as specific kinds of consumers.

The critical media literacy lessons that cameras are not objective are even more pronounced in the young adult field. Across each novel, the authors and publishers of YA provide lessons and models for thinking, acting, being. With the amount of prolonged and hyper-focused engagement required to complete a novel, YA books are one of several dominant texts in a young person's life. Recent studies focus on how much time young people spend online, watching TV and playing games (Pew, 2011, 2012). Additionally concerns about multitasking and the dwindling attention of young people are often seen as the perils of the "always connected" generation. However, the consumption of books (both paper and digital e-books) requires sustained attention over long periods of time. I would argue that the print medium continues to be as influential as all of the other forms of content that saturate the lives of young and old alike.

NON-PARENTAL GUIDANCE REQUIRED

As I wrote each chapter of this book, I was struck by just how useless (and in some cases, villainous) parents and adults were in YA books. As the genre continues to embrace an adult readership that helps contribute to its skyrocketing sales, I would imagine there have to be some adults that are more than encouraging sideline coaches, like Charlie's teacher in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. However, for the most part, the adults in YA are largely ignored and unnoticed within the texts. The

*Peanuts "*wah-wah" droning of adults in schools is often a static hum that does not affect a story's narrative. Instead, school functions as a social site on which a book's plot unfolds. And in dystopian settings, not only are adults of little use but they are typically villains and responsible for the deathly demise of futuristic societies.

What's striking about this passivity of adults is the way that YA is shaping young people. It is a powerful transfer of responsibility found in these books: adults cannot rectify the past nor can they correct the future. It is up to the students in our classrooms–the students reading these books–to transform society for the better. YA, then, if we are to look for a unifying message *across* these books*, is* about teaching youth how to grow up and own the future.

The stories and sub-genres may change, but YA as a whole speaks to the possibilities and potential each young person represents. Each reader a volta or turning point.

And while YA is fundamentally not a genre about its readers or about its authors, these messages cannot be ignored. Even when we acknowledge that the origins and current trends of YA are driven by sales and trends in stores and increasingly online, these books' revolutionary possibilities cannot be undermined. Even as we recognize that the dominant cultural hegemony maintains stances of privilege toward hooks' (1994) "white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy" (p. 71) within YA (and will likely continue to do so), the ways these books can change and transform students lives should be forefront in the minds of educators and librarians.

It doesn't feel like we've come very far as a genre, to be honest. More than thirty years ago, Farnsworth (1980) wrote about YA:

> Although many people believe that the current discontent and low morale among the young is of quite recent origin, dating back only about ten years, a survey of the literature shows that numerous prodromal signs did exist in the attitudes and behavior of deprived groups and that these signs preceded the disenchantment of college students with their society. (p. 5)

More than thirty years ago? The concern for the discontented generation of students in our classroom from one epoch to another is neither surprising nor disenchanting (to speak back to Farnsworth). Perhaps what we see as discontent and "low morale" are instead signs of one form of emerging self that does not speak in concert with adult conceptions of the future. Perhaps our efforts at schooling and standardizing are creating a regime that reflects adult expectations more than youthful potential.

Also dating back to the hey-day of YA's golden years, Holland (1975) describes an adolescent as:

> a human being on a journey in that great, amorphous sea called adolescence. That is he or she is somewhere between age twelve and ages eighteen or nineteen. In this period almost anything can happen to a human being–and usually does. […] An adolescent, therefore, is a human being who is journeying from childhood to adulthood. He or she is learning, whether for good or ill, to do without certain things that were important to him or to her during childhood. He is also learning

> how to acquire certain qualities, skills, and defenses that will be important to him when he becomes an adult. But the adolescent is both a child *and* an adult, and his tastes in reading as in everything else, reflect this fact. (p. 34)

Again, gendered pronouns aside, how does Holland's definition challenge the role of formal education? If books are the guides for youthful journeymen toward mastery of adulthood, where are teachers (and again, adults in general) to be found? Instead of seeing the teaching force as the experts for the contexts of adulthood in the second decade (and beyond) of the 21st century, I would imagine, we–too–need some guidance. Our classrooms, thus, are spaces for mutual exploration with our students.

EACH BOOK A REVOLUTION

At the end of the year I tend to look at the lessons taught in my classroom (both by me and by my students). What have we learned? Where have we gone? And, as I reflect, I usually ask myself, "Was it enough?"

The answer is always no.

What else, really, can it be? If I don't set tremendously high expectations for myself as an educator, who will?

As I reflect on the role that young adult literature has played–year in and year out–in also shaping what my students have learned and where they have gone, I wonder if the books they got to read were enough?

In describing the potential of literature for young readers, Peter Scharf (1977) writes that "the beginning of social doubt and questioning is a necessary developmental step toward finding a set of autonomously chosen, universal moral principles" (p. 104). Scarf then describes the importance of finding, for young people, a "literature of affirmation" (p. 105).

I would argue that this question of enough-ness is one we need to place on *how* we teach and engage with the YA genre. If this book has argued anything it is that YA is a problematic genre. Underneath the billions of dollars of sales and franchises, YA is a behemoth of possibilities and challenges. If we treat it simply as a docile form of entertainment we are squandering a liberatory opportunity. As educators, we must push beyond binary *good* and *bad* definitions of books. Sure, the writing in *Gossip Girl* or *Twilight* may not be winning Pulitzers anytime soon. However, I believe it is our mandate to engage our students in the books that are captivating their interest and holding their imaginations for ransom. We must transform these from passive texts to tools for liberation. Each book in the YA genre can offer the potential for social transformation when engaged in classrooms and with students in ways that push beyond the expectations of publishers. It is up to us–as professionals that work with young people–to challenge the YA genre and challenge our students.

NOTES

[1] Portions of this section are adapted from exploratory posts on my blog, The American Crawl (www.theamericancrawl.com).

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