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.