

## Postmodern Allegory of Adolescence:

Daniel Handler and Maira Kalman's *Why We Broke Up*

Certain terms are slippery. We believe we have a sense of what they mean and then, when called upon to define them, they elude us. A situation like this occurs in the movie *Reality Bites* (Stiller, 1994) when Winona Ryder's character is asked by a newspaper editor to define irony. She is able only to produce a string of incoherent attempts culminating in her yelping: "I know it when I see it!" as the elevator doors close on her prospective career in journalism. *Postmodernism* is one of those elusive terms. We recognize it intuitively in certain films (the movies of Christopher Nolan), advertisements (Robert Pattinson for Dior Homme), and public spaces, as Baudrillard (1994) and Eco (1986) point out in the landscape of Las Vegas (e.g., the full-scale reproduction of a Venetian canal within a mega-hotel/casino), but the word itself remains relatively intangible.

For purposes of this discussion, I will employ the understanding conveyed by Fredric Jameson (1997) in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson explains postmodernism as an expression of a technological and economic shift ("capitalism's third stage") that initiated new forms of communication, commerce, and socialization, as well as a tandem aesthetic in the arts (p. xx). This shift becomes important for cultural critics such as Jameson in that it establishes a specific style identifiable as postmodern in diverse mediums such as films, literature, art, and architecture, as well as a postmodern milieu or setting that informs scholarly meditation on the social and ethical implications of the historical transition noted above.

Daniel Handler and Maira Kalman's (2011) illustrated novel *Why We Broke Up* is a postmodern "mash-up" of narrative, visual imagery, and pop-cultural references that might be understood through Jameson's (1997) notion of pastiche—the hallmark of postmodernism recognizable as a kind of collage of "allusions" and "styles" (p. 18). Through detailed analysis of pastiche, Jameson proposes that specific texts bear a metaphoric relationship to postmodernity. My contention in this article is that young adult literature, by virtue of qualities reflective of the technological, economic, and social transformations described by Jameson, may be considered similarly. Therefore, a new conversation on postmodern adolescent identity becomes accessible through the signs located in its texts.

Methods utilized to explore the intersection of young adult literature and postmodernity are varied. One thread of the research examines stylistic elements evidenced broadly in postmodern literature and specifically in contemporary young adult literature. These include hybridized and experimental forms of text, as well as acknowledgment of text as a construction (Serafini & Blasingame, 2012); interactive, "intertextual," ironic, and iconoclastic features of postmodern texts (Knickerbocker & Brueggman, 2008, p. 67); and the dissolving of the distinction between "fact" and "fiction" (Head, 1996, p. 30). Another thread of the research examines the way that individual authors of young adult literature demonstrate postmodern style and themes, such as Engles and Kory's (2014) exploration of the problematics of racism and subject-

tivity in the work of Walter Dean Myers and Susina's (2002) description of a fluid and transcendent notion of identity and relation in the youthful characters of Francesca Lia Block, denizens of a fantasy version of Los Angeles. And in a third thread of research exploring pedagogy and audience reception, Groenke & Youngquist (2011) challenge characterizations of youth as naturally attuned to and receptive toward postmodern texts, noting in their findings that students were often confounded by the indeterminate form and content of Myers's *Monster*.

What these diverse studies have in common is the ultimate effect of variously texturizing or giving substance to a contemporary vision of identity and practice in youth culture. It is that tendency I draw upon in order to make sense of Min Green, the protagonist from *Why We Broke Up*. More specifically, this work contributes to the continued exploration of the relationship between postmodernism and young adult literature by offering an explanation as to how the literature contributes to new articulations of adolescent identity and experience against a postmodern backdrop largely mediated by technology and consumerism.

A synopsis of the book is helpful prior to launching into discussion of its philosophical commitments. The narrator, Min Green (named Minerva "[after] the Roman goddess of wisdom" [Handler & Kalman, 2011, p. 18]), is an eleventh grader and would-be film director who, throughout the text, makes extensive reference to admired classic and obscure films. Her point of view is engineered entirely by cinema, as evidenced by her continuous citation of movie plots, directors, actors, and cinematographers of the past. Interestingly, all of the elaborate movie references described in the book are fictional imaginings of the writer, Daniel Handler—a fact that has surprised reviewers due to the extreme level of detail in the descriptions (Chilton, 2012; Edinger, 2011). The precise film plots, however, are less important than what this massive fictionalization represents: namely, the imaginary universe of references comes to have more reality (both for Min and the reader) than reality itself. Put differently, the fiction becomes reality, signifying the postmodern blurring of such distinctions central to the text.

Min Green makes sense of life through pastiche, or a gathering of fragments: samplings from film, food, clothing, music, literature, and other assorted

retro/vintage goods. All of these samples coalesce into an expression of avant-garde style as she imagines it. This reflects Jameson's (1997) conception of pastiche, a term that refers to a "cannibalization of . . . styles of the past [and] the play of random stylistic allusion" (p. 18), which does not reflect historical reality but instead an imagined version of history conveyed through a sense of "pastness" (p. 19). Min nostalgically looks to the past, a period that, although not specifically identified, we might assign as coincident with "Hollywood's Golden Age" (Handler & Kalman, 2011, p. 340), in order to assuage her discontent with the present. The reason Min finds the present dissatisfying (inferred from her extended critiques) is due to the banalities of high school life and the vapid interactions constituting teen sociality. So she evokes another, more glamorous sensibility through immersion in references, objects, and experiences that supplement the perceived lack in the present and, more important, eventually displace reality.

This misrecognition has very specific consequences for Min in that she grossly misreads the intentions of a "player." (Handler engineers this double entendre by casting Min's love interest, Ed Slaterton, as a basketball player and a "player" in the colloquial sense of a Lothario.) Throughout the book, Min imagines Ed as the lead male actor in the fantasy film she is directing. In the end, Min's illusions are deconstructed not only by Ed's duplicity, but also in terms of her relationship to the broader apparatus of popular culture. This epiphany occurs in the moment when Min realizes Ed's betrayal, and she levels the criticism: "This isn't a movie . . . We're not movie stars" (Handler & Kalman, 2011, p. 333). Readers recognize that this has been the problem all along, and the subject of the book shifts from teen romance to how adolescents are hailed by media and consumer culture and how they respond to and resist interpellation.

Therefore, what we ultimately discover in *Why We Broke Up* is a postmodern allegory of adoles-

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cence. I centralize adolescence because, although the situation I have described mirrors the position of the adult subject, Cecilia, from Woody Allen's film *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (in that media images supplant the real), Min is a teenager, and the texture of her world very specifically marks out the territory of the contemporary adolescent (as of course, young adult

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literature does) in order to thematize conflicts specific to youth culture. As such, Min serves as an adolescent representative of one particular experience in postmodernity.

This experience is complicated as the character of Min paradoxically confirms and challenges the view of the adolescent as subject to the seduction of media and consumer culture. I draw upon varied theorists in order to provide an analysis of the

postmodern setting Min navigates in an effort to offer a fresh account of contemporary adolescence poised in a liminal (i.e., transitory, provisional) space located between the hyperreal, Baudrillard's (1994) notion of a constructed world of images indistinguishable from (and effectively replacing) the real, and the real.

### **The Logic of Compilation**

As stated previously, Jameson (1997) argues that pastiche serves as the essential descriptive feature of postmodern texts in their eclectic sampling of "styles" and "allusions" (p. 18), and the book under discussion here liberally demonstrates that tendency. Handler (a.k.a., Lemony Snicket), therefore, arouses curiosity in interviews when he denies drawing from any existing reference base in the composition of *Why We Broke Up*. For instance, when asked why he invented the elaborate network of allusions within the text, Handler comments disparagingly about the hackneyed choices demonstrated by authors in the genre of young adult literature at large:

I always think it's more fun to make up a pop-cultural detail, particularly in books written for teenagers. Now

there's often so much lazy pop-culture references in lieu of making things up that it seems a shame to join that sad parade. (Handler, as cited in Robinson, 2012)

It seems important to question Handler's remarks in light of Barthes's argument concerning the tendency for texts to sample from all other existing texts, a phenomenon he labels as the "inter-text," or "the impossibility of living outside the infinite text" (1975, p. 36).

Applied to Handler's novel, although the majority of the allusions are invented, the text does not emerge out of nowhere; it partakes, however flirtingly, in the discourse of film. That is why it's possible to locate instances of indirect quotation within Handler's narrative of other narratives, like John Hughes's (1986) *Pretty in Pink*. In a famous scene from the film, McCarthy takes Ringwald to a party hosted by his friends, and she is disrespected for being out of place amidst his social group. The identical thing happens in Handler's book in the bonfire scene for different reasons, but the diegetic treatment of the exclusionary act is the same. Likewise, one could argue that the Min/Ed/Al love triangle in Handler's book replicates the well-known Sheedy/Nelson/McCarthy scenario from Joel Schumacher's *St. Elmo's Fire* (1985) in that the best friend/"secret love" character bides his time and wins the girl in the end. Considering Handler's year of birth (1970) and the historical proximity of the aforementioned references, it would not be hard to guess that the mainstream movie Ed invites Min to see at the vulgar Multiplex (Min patronizes only arthouse theaters such as the Internationale and the Carnelian), titled *Goofballs III*, probably references any one of the following franchises: *Caddyshack*, *Meatballs*, *Police Academy*, *Porky's*, or *Revenge of the Nerds*. By the same logic (and similarity of sound), the head-banging music played by "Andronika" at the "All-City Halloween Bash" to which Ed takes Min may well be Metallica (pp. 222, 258).

This is mentioned not to find fault with Handler's prose, which is delightful, but to reinforce the importance of pastiche in situating a critical reading of this book. Citation texturizes Min's world; it is an integral part of the way that she lives—through a network of allusions (drawn eclectically from film, literature, art, fashion, "foodie culture," retro-collectibles, etc.) that structure feeling and practice. As indicated by Jameson (1997), such references not only propose a logic of aesthetics, but also cultivate a way of seeing and

being in the world. For example, a public park becomes mythical for its namesake Boris Vian, recoding teenage eros as surreal, jazzy iconoclasm (Schwartz, 2014). An expressionistic vampire film reconstitutes the confusion of sexual intimacy as alluring artistic distortion. A baroque, Felliniesque coffee house, Leopardi's, recasts the quotidian teen quest for caffeine as artistic inspiration (e.g., Leopardi's espresso is "deep and dark as the first three Malero films that make the world angled and blinky" [p. 178]). And a regal, elderly woman, Lottie Carson, becomes the focus of Min's new adventure—pursuing this woman who Min believes to be a former starlet, now in hiding, in order to invite her to a party in her honor (p. 36). Min's references, taken in total, offer an idealized vision of life preferable to the real. As if sorting through the dailies of life—an action Min fantasizes doing—she requires that life become equal to the representation until the two have little distinction for her. These references, in the drama of Min's life, diminish empirical fact and amplify instead a *style* of living that has little relationship with reality.

Similarly, ordinary objects are decontextualized and redeposited into romantic narrative through citation. A school pennant "wave[s] in the breeze of the stale vents like when the diplomats arrive in *Hotel Continental*" (p. 108). A tool in a hardware store seems "like a file they use in *We Break at Dawn* or *Fugitives by Moonlight* to run free with the dogs after them and the barbed wire silhouetted against the floodlights" (p. 235). A book of matches is overwritten as a talisman through whimsical allusion to Marc Chagall, and a sugar dispenser is stolen as Ed's ritual initiation into the simulation of cinematic crime drama. The potential for mystification associated with allusion is especially evident in Min's response to Ed's repeated declaration that he is a basketball player, such as when she emphatically asserts, "But today you are a sugar thief" (p. 152). Min casts Ed as the love interest in a film she believes she is scripting, and the fantasy is fortified by shimmering references to the past that give body to the illusion of the present. It seems important to view these instances, in total, not as symptoms of typical adolescent coming-of-age conflict, but more broadly as indicators of a response to a cultural saturation of images.

What does all of this mean? Certainly, the layered citations engineer an aesthetic style, but at the same

time, in the case of Min—representative teen in this drama of youth culture—they highlight the postmodern quandary of supplanting the real with, in the language of Baudrillard (1994), a simulacrum or imitation of reality. The collage of exotic signs throughout the book, considered in total, represents a vision of teenage utopia largely expressed through an assemblage of media experiences and consumer artifacts. But the seductive play of images does something else besides: Min's inability or unwillingness to accurately apprehend reality in the present causes her to misrecognize Ed.

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### **Bluebeard, 2.0**

Conscripted by Min in her romantic quest to arrange a surprise, eighty-ninth birthday party for the supposed film starlet, Lottie Carson, Ed faithfully performs the role of location scout and finds the ideal setting. Together, Min and Ed survey a charming bandstand bordered by "crumbling" statues ensconced in ivy called Bluebeard Gardens. Min studies the collection of stone sentinels comprised of:

Soldiers and politicians, composers and Irishmen, all along the perimeter, angry on horseback or proud with a staff. A turtle with the world on its back. A few modern things, a big black triangle, three shapes on top of one another. (p. 206)

The incongruous grouping matches the mood of the scene, which is marvelous, fragmented, and unaccountable. Min, ever directing herself in the movie of her life, reflects: "I am alone eating . . . pistachios and lining up perfectly the shells in half circles getting smaller and smaller and smaller like parentheses in parenthesis" (p. 204), as if she were a character out of Buñuel. Ed dances a few mysterious beats solo across the empty stage, and Min rhapsodizes that "this is the perfect place for Lottie Carson's eighty-ninth birthday party" (p. 206)—Bluebeard Gardens.

The fairytale allusion is anything but neutral as readers recall that the story of Bluebeard is a hor-

rifying account of a serial wife-killer (not a pirate, as some people imagine, confusing Bluebeard with Blackbeard). Although Ed is obviously not a murderer,

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the irony in the context of the book is significant. Min, who considers herself an intellectual above all else, has fallen for a “lady-killer.” Yet, even in the moment when confronted with this truth, she refuses to accept the evidence, instead preferring a cinematic fantasy.

How does Ed know about this park? We learn, along with Min, that another of Ed’s ex-girlfriends used to live just beyond the

park’s perimeter (thus far in the narrative, the reader has encountered at least two former girlfriends). Ed provides Min with a rapid sketch of their affair: “Amy Simon. Sophomore year. She moved, her dad got transferred. Real asshole, that guy, strict and paranoid. So we used to sneak here,” to which Min replies, “So, I’m not the first girl you’ve gotten naked in a park?” (p. 207). Her flippant comment refers to the particularly passionate scene just prior to this one involving erotic food-play. What is important here is that, instead of thinking seriously about Ed’s remarks and the hastily delivered pledge of love thereafter, Min edits the scene so that it synchronizes with a more agreeable film metaphor (e.g., our love is not a “sequel” but a “remake,” “with a new director and crew trying something else and starting from scratch” [p. 207]).

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard (1994) writes: “Everywhere we live in a universe strangely similar to the original—things doubled by their own scenario” (p. 11). Min inhabits a historical moment in which, according to Baudrillard (1994), technology enables reproduction to the degree that copies become virtually indistinguishable from, and effectively replace, reality (e.g., via film, advertising, news media, and science)—a condition he refers to as hyperreality. At this point in the narrative, Min is complicit in and uncritical of the seduction of images by preferring a simulation of life to reality . . . to her

peril. In this sense, the book acts as a critique of a society that indulges so liberally in fantasy.

Linking back to adolescence, Min’s retort, “So, I’m not the first girl you’ve gotten naked in a park?” has the appearance of irony, as if she is in control and participating in a form of witty film banter. Elsewhere in the book, she confesses to having this fantasy when she praises Ed for his supposed adoption of cinematic vernacular: “You were getting better at talking like this with me, the bounce-bounce dialogue that’s so good in all the *Old Hat* movies” (pp. 224–225). However, it is apparent that their brief relationship is only a play of surfaces: Min does not know Ed; there is no human yardstick by which to measure, and so anything is possible. Bluebeard kept a bloody closetful of dead wives (Perrault, 1889/1965), and Ed maintains an expanding list of female conquests or trophies. It would probably seem inconceivable to Min that Ed could be capable of constructing a simulation of romance equal to or better than a movie. It is precisely this condition that the book renders artfully: the potentially perilous quality of being an adolescent in a moment mediated by gloss and spectacle.

### **Dramas in Non-Place**

The aesthetics of the place Ed takes Min (the Dawn’s Early Lite Lounge and Motel) on the symbolic occasion she has chosen to lose her virginity are important. Like the description of most every other place in the book, interior design signs to another time, but this is a style other than the one Min admires, as the motel décor suggests a retro version of Las Vegas kitsch. Min describes the garish signage comprised of “three arrows taking turns illuminating so the arrow is moving” and a bizarre display in the motel lounge involving “taxidermy birds” and a mechanical butterfly moving to the simulated sounds of nature (p. 293). The absurd theatricalization and resultant parody of nature presages the unsettling events that will occur in the motel room.

Min quickly recognizes that, contrary to her requirements for this significant event, the motel room is “not extraordinary” (p. 294). This is evident in the sordid quality that permeates the artifacts Min selects to symbolize the experience, represented by Kalman’s artwork: a motel door hanger, a comb, and two condom wrappers—objects different from the romantic

ones she'd selected previously to symbolize their love. These items hold little imaginative appeal for Min, as they are purely utilitarian, fixed in use-value—like the motel room. The small collection signifies the obverse of fairytale logic in which everyday objects morph by enchantment into romantic accomplices (Heiner, 2012). Instead, these ordinary items signify only the pragmatics of sex.

Focusing more closely on the motel room, it mirrors the attributes of non-place described by Augé (2008) in *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* as places lacking in the “identity,” “relation,” and “history” (p. 63) of anthropological place and, therefore, reality. Augé catalogues non-places to include “airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets, and . . . the complex skein of cable and wireless networks that mobilize extraterrestrial space” (p. 64). Drawing on this characterization of space, the motel room represents one of many non-places or “intersection[s]” reified, however briefly, by the impersonal logic of commerce (Augé, 2008, p. 64). The motel room technically exists only within the “contractual” (Augé, 2008, p. 82) time for which it is rented; this, in turn, structures the temporality of relations that occur within non-place, for Min and Ed break up shortly after their stay.

The break-up ostensibly occurs in the next chapter due to the discovery of Ed's unfaithfulness. However, one could argue by virtue of the discussion above that the beginning of the end occurs in the motel scene when Min hides in the bathroom, mortified, as Ed casually receives a take-out order. Min recognizes in Ed's banter with the delivery person that he'd “done it all before” (p. 306), and the notion of a rerun is repellant. Ed's blasé attitude is a confirmation that he is a “player,” just as the motel room is a stop-gap and duplication of the many times it has served exactly the same purpose. In terms of the allegorical dimensions of the motel scene toward characterization of postmodern adolescence, the content works as commentary on the transience of young people's relationships mediated by the logic of commerce, just as the previous section texturized the precarious experience of adolescence mediated by a culture of images. The question now becomes: How does the adolescent subject resist the processes of “derealization” (Sartre, as cited in Jameson, 1997, p. 34) depicted in the book?

## Between the Real and Hyperreal

So far, the characterization of Min makes her appear only as a dupe, powerless against a culture of media and consumer spectacle concurrent with the generationally held stereotype of adolescence described by Hagood, Stevens, and Reinking (2002). In fact, for the greater part of the book,

Min does appear estranged from a sense of reality through her absorption in a superficial world of images, objects, and experiences that mask social conditions she would prefer not to acknowledge, such as a school caste system gauged by status that authorizes certain identities and invalidates others.

This is the authentic allure of Ed Slaterton whose legitimacy, in terms of the social sorting mechanism of school culture, constitutes his aura. Following the break-up, Ed recedes from view in the narrative, seemingly reassuming his place in the social hierarchy, while Min is consigned to the periphery with the “drama and art” set (p. 222).

It is at this point that one version of adolescence ends and an alternative adolescent identity is proposed. Min, by the novel's end, is still powerfully committed to film; however, she is altered by her experiences, and her interior relationship to the medium seemingly shifts. This change effectively challenges the stereotype of teens as beguiled by and submissive to media images and points instead to another vision of teen sociality that is savvy and playful.

First, Min reports that she intends to host another glamorous dinner party with her friends, this time, “in honor . . . of nobody” (p. 353). In practical terms, this means that she is now able to see past the effects of simulation, whereas before, the seduction of cinema encouraged only deeper withdrawal into fantasy (exemplified by her party plan for the imaginary starlet and her misrecognition of Ed). Min demonstrates discernment in her comment regarding giving a dinner “in honor of nobody”; it is a sign that she has gained the distance necessary to critically negotiate the allure of representation.

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Next, Min insists upon returning the box of artifacts documenting her and Ed's relationship, a radical gesture in terms of its refusal of the sentimental, mystifying effects of nostalgia (Jameson, 1997) evident in the classic movies she admires. To summon the

courage to do this, she invokes the character of "La Desperada" (p. 346), which enables her to brazenly deposit the collection of mementos on Ed's porch, along with her book-length break-up letter. Although this action (invoking La Desperada) seems to oppose the progress or character growth described above, it is not a sign of

regression or slippage back into what Baudrillard (1994) has referred to as the hyperreal or space indistinguishable as a simulation. The tone of the gesture is different from her attitude previously, betraying a critical sensibility and sense of agency. Min "thinks" the box by the door "with a Desperada gesture" (p. 354), signifying role-play as opposed to simulation. The action is performed with full cognizance of the adoption of a persona.

This variety of performance seems reminiscent of the kind seen in live action role-playing games (LARP), an eclectic pastiche of pop-cultural reference, storytelling, and theater popular with communities of young people and depicted in Westerfeld's (2009) short story "Definitional Chaos" from *Geektastic: Stories from the Nerd Herd*. In Westerfeld's account of LARPing, young people shift seamlessly between invented and actual identities in an intellectual game that destabilizes the dichotomies of past/present, real/imagined, and good/evil. The youthful narrator of Westerfeld's story comments insightfully on this provisional form of identity and play by characterizing it as a style of living "in game and out" (p. 60). In the context of Westerfeld's story, this is a commentary on the status of youth culture (specifically, "geek" attendees of ComicCons) inhabiting fictional and real worlds simultaneously.

Henry Giroux (1994), drawing on the theories of Paulo Freire and Edward Said, writes extensively on what he calls the "border identity" inhabited by young

people in an increasingly mobile and heterogeneous society in which distinctions such as race/ethnicity can no longer be thought of in the absolute terms imagined previously (p. 77). This is an expression of liminality, a transitory, contingent space between the presumably fixed coordinates of race, class, gender, and nation (Giroux, 1994). At the same time, Giroux (1992; 1994) alludes to other kinds of "border crossings" facilitated by globalization and a burgeoning technology useful for understanding the liminal form of adolescent identity proposed in Westerfeld's story and *Why We Broke Up*. For example, in the final pages of Handler and Kalman's (2011) book, Min recounts an intensely detailed description of a cooking sequence from an art film, filled with the kind of sensual detail that holds specific allure for her. Lush description of the meal prepared onscreen seamlessly fuses with the description of the actual items that she and her friends plan to serve at an elegant New Year's supper. The liminal space carved out in the hybridized detail, situated midway between the real world and the hyperreal world of cinema, is a textural expression of postmodern adolescence. The oneiric qualities of art lead Min to a more personal, intimate apprehension of the real. This is not a distortion of reality or an escape from it, like the earlier sections of this essay suggest, but instead it represents a complex expression of life lived in the enigmatic interstices that technology affords.

## Implications for Educators

Thus far I have described an experience of youth culture in which adolescents (through their fictional proxies) submit to *and* resist the enticements of media-dominated consumer culture. Additionally, I have located postmodern adolescence as a liminal space, reflecting Poster's (2001) characterization of the "second information age . . . constituting a simulational culture" in which reality and subjectivity are apprehended "as unstable, multiple, and diffuse" (pp. 616, 618). However, as Garcia (2013) would argue, the conversation remains theoretical until applied pragmatically.

Some scholars situated at the intersection of young adult literature and critical theory whose work might be broadly identified within the field of Cultural Studies (Connors, 2008; Garcia, 2013; Latrobe

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& Drury, 2009; Miller, 2014) advocate for a pedagogy consisting not only of textual scrutiny through various theoretical perspectives (e.g., Deconstruction, Feminism, Marxism, Psychoanalysis, etc.), but also through a form of analysis that positions students as interpreters of broader cultural values and practices observable through the prism of young adult literature.

As we move away from insular forms of textual study and toward methods of reading and composition organized around inquiry, young adult texts acquire revised utility. For example, Shanahan (2014) proposes a multiple-text, problem-driven strategy for composition requiring that students read across numerous, related sources in order to cultivate the skill of researched argument. Expanding on this idea, ELA teachers could select a constellation of genre-diverse and perspective-varied sources, including one young adult text, that would enable students to explore social theory and become authors of cultural criticism. For instance, if I wished to study the relationship between youth culture and “the entertainment and information technology industries” (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 29), then Handler and Kalman’s (2011) *Why We Broke Up* might be key among the sources selected for its ability to contextualize the subject. In such a unit, students would be the ultimate arbiters of the practices and effects of postmodern culture (i.e., students would negotiate the specific uses to which they put media and consumer artifacts as well as the constraints or freedoms of identity and relation that postmodern culture entails).

*Why We Broke Up*, although ostensibly a story about love and relationships, is *not* a story about love and relationships, or at least that is the last reason why it is interesting. Drawing on Min’s beloved area of film studies, the book offers readers a panoramic shot of something larger than the individual drama. It narrativizes social forces that would otherwise be very challenging to represent, and it engages young people in critical meditation on media-dominated consumer culture, ultimately offering a progressive vision of postmodern adolescence.

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