

Becoming Mockingjays:

Encouraging Student Activism through the Study of YA Dystopia

There is a pivotal moment early in *Mockingjay* (Collins, 2010), the final book in The Hunger Games trilogy, when the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, comes to fully appreciate her value as the Mockingjay, a symbol of resistance that gives hope to those who toil under the Capitol's oppression. Having accepted that performing this role will allow her to speak over the Capitol's oppressive policies and, in so doing, contribute to the betterment of her society, Katniss commits to what is, in effect, a political course of action when she declares, "I'm going to be the Mockingjay" (Collins, 2010, p. 31).

At a time when intolerance of all kinds—from racism to xenophobia to misogyny to classism to heterosexism—threatens the fabric of our democratic society, educators would do well to ask how they can support students in following Katniss's example. To this end, I have found young adult (YA) dystopia—a genre that participates in the project of social criticism (Booker, 1994) and that often (though not always) imagines adolescents as empowered figures capable of fighting oppression and transforming their society—a valuable teaching resource. YA dystopia is not without problems, however.

Some critics argue that works of dystopic fiction, such as Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010) and Roth's *Divergent* series (2011, 2012, 2013), articulate an ideology that privileges the individual at the expense of the social collective (see, for example, Morrison, 2014). Like other forms of young adult literature, dystopian novels for adolescents can also reify normalized expectations about race, class,

gender, sexual orientation, and so on, thereby marginalizing some readers. Even when a novel aspires to impart progressive ideologies, its paratext (Genette & Maclean, 1991)—the material beyond a story that allows people to recognize a book as a "book"—may impede its ability to do so, thus communicating conflicted messages to readers.

In this article, I advocate for engaging students in activist work that builds on the political themes expressed in YA dystopian fiction, a genre whose popularity has grown exponentially since *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) was first published and adapted for film. To begin, I argue that while works of YA dystopia appear to position protagonists as empowered figures capable of working for change, their paratext can circumvent that reading by imparting ideologies that marginalize, or even oppress, some readers. Next, I describe a critical inquiry assignment that required students in a college elective that I designed and taught on YA dystopian fiction to visit local bookstores with the goal of examining how dystopias for adolescents are packaged and marketed to readers. After investigating the books' paratext and identifying related social justice issues, the students then composed short notes in which they highlighted issues that concerned them. They then returned to the same bookstore and left their notes in copies of those titles with the goal of raising future readers' consciousness about those issues. By creating opportunities for students to use their literacy to speak over potentially oppressive ideologies, I argue that teachers can invite them to become Mockingjays—empowered agents

capable of using reading and writing to act on, and transform, the world.

Power, Agency, and Ideology in Young Adult Dystopia

Trites (2000) identifies power as a defining characteristic of literature for adolescents. In much the same way that young adult fiction portrays adolescents interacting with social institutions that enable and repress them, Trites argues that young adult literature is itself an institution, one that is designed to teach adolescents their place within the social power structure. Because YA dystopias feature adolescent protagonists resisting authority and battling oppression, however, Trites's argument about teaching adolescents their place may not appear to apply at first glance. Ames (2013), for example, argues that in dystopian fiction for adolescents, it is "young people—willing or not—who must confront [their] fears and ultimately solve the problems that spawn them" (p. 6). In this sense, dystopian fiction for adolescents acknowledges teenagers' agency by portraying them as figures capable of working for change.

For Thomas (2014), power is a central concern of YA dystopian fiction. She regards the genre as offering readers "a kind of wish fulfillment; not as the life we wish to overcome, but as the power and influence we wish we could have" (para. 2). Like Hintz and Ostry (2003), who argue that YA dystopias appeal to adolescents' desire for "power and control" (p. 9), Thomas (2014) interprets the genre as a metaphor for adolescence. She notes that YA dystopias are often set in "worlds full of rules, where all choices are taken away" (para. 4). Moreover, she notes that these stories take place in societies that "dictate everything about the protagonists' lives, from what they eat and wear to who they marry, how many kids they have, and what careers they pursue" (para. 4). If these storyworlds are undesirable, however, "they can also be changed" (para. 3). Like Sambell (2004), Thomas (2014) argues that YA dystopias ultimately offer readers "hope that we will overcome the restrictions placed on us" (para. 7).

Campbell (2010) believes that dystopian fiction for adolescents invites readers to "look critically at the power structures that envelop and seek to construct them" (p. 2), though he cautions that the genre also

manipulates readers to accept particular ideologies. He consequently encourages educators to support students in reading dystopias critically with the goal of asking how they interpolate (or position) them as subjects. Hintz and Ostry (2003) also credit works of dystopian fiction for adolescents with inviting "people to view their society with a critical eye, sensitizing them or predisposing them to political action" (p. 7). As Thomas (2012) notes, however, these books also have the potential to communicate "dangerous messages and old-fashioned, bigoted stereotypes wrapped up in dystopian packaging" (para. 2). A theme that concerns all of the aforementioned critics has to do with the value of creating opportunities for students to examine dystopian fiction for adolescents critically. The genre might appear to acknowledge adolescents' agency, but individual novels can invite readers to accept potentially oppressive ideologies that marginalize some people.

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Attending to Paratext

Attesting to the value of inviting students to read literature for adolescents critically, Hollindale (1988) distinguishes between a text's surface ideology, wherein an author's personal beliefs and values are communicated to readers through explicit ideological statements made by a narrator or character in a story (pp. 10–11), and passive ideology, which is communicated implicitly via an author's unexamined assumptions (p. 12). Writes Hollindale, "A large part of any book is written not by its author but by the world its author lives in" (p. 15). Amending Hollindale's assertion slightly, one might argue that a part of any book is written not by its author but by the multitude of people who contribute to its material production. Among others, this includes literary agents, who may encourage an author to modify her creative vision for the purpose of selling publishers on a book; editors who, in responding to an author's work, might ask her to revise (or rewrite) portions of a story; and the

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people involved in designing and marketing a book for consumption by readers. In this article, I am interested in the how the latter group's contributions work to communicate passive ideologies to readers.

Genette and Maclean (1991) argue that a "text rarely appears in its naked state, without the reinforcement and accompaniment of a certain number of

productions, themselves verbal or not, like an author's name, a title, a preface, [and] illustrations" (p. 261). In making this argument, they direct attention to what literary critics refer to as paratext, "the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public" (p. 261). Simply put, the term paratext refers to any of the material, beyond a story, that allows readers to recognize a book as a "book." This includes (but is not limited to) an illustrated book cover, a title page, a plot synopsis on the rear jacket, an author biography, and blurbs from people who reviewed the book. Read-

ers may take a text's materiality for granted, but as Genette and Maclean note, a text (or narrative) is not easily divorced from its paratext. Quite the opposite, they propose that readers experience paratext as *part of a text*, which in turn shapes their interpretation of it. To demonstrate this point, Genette and Maclean ask a deceptively simple question: "[R]educed to its text alone and without the help of any instructions for use, how would we read Joyce's *Ulysses* if it were not called *Ulysses*?" (p. 262).

Morrell (2002) defines critical literacy "as the ability not only to read and write, but also to assess texts in order to understand the relationships between power and domination that underlie and inform those texts" (pp. 72–73). Messages about power and domination are not limited to the narratives readers en-

counter in books, however. As educators, we (like our students) might assume that a narrative "is the kernel of value and significance while the rest is merely a protective husk" (Yampbell, 2005, p. 348), but this assumption can blind us to the important role that paratext plays in shaping the ideological messages a work of literature imparts to readers. By inviting students to ask how YA dystopias (and other texts, for that matter) are packaged and marketed—that is, by encouraging them to attend critically to their paratext—teachers can support their understanding of how these books position them as subjects and how they reify ideologies that marginalize some people. Moreover, because close reading of the sort that I am proposing requires that students attend to multiple modes—for example, images, words, and colors—with the goal of understanding how they work together to convey meaning, it encourages them to participate in the multiliteracies that many writers argue are characteristic of 21st-century communication (e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996; Serafini, 2014).

In the section below, I describe a critical inquiry assignment that asked undergraduates taking an elective that I taught on the *The Hunger Games* trilogy and YA dystopian fiction to visit local bookstores with the goal of investigating how these books are packaged and marketed to readers. By encouraging students to adopt a critical stance and attend closely to the paratext that surrounds works of dystopian fiction for adolescents, the assignment challenged them to explain how paratext can reveal assumptions that publishers hold about the audience that reads these books.

Random Acts of Revolution: A Critical Inquiry Assignment

Located in the mid-South, the university where I work is attended by predominantly White students. Many (though by no means all) of the students that I teach come from what I would describe as conservative backgrounds, and it is not uncommon for them to experience feelings of tension when they participate in class discussions and activities that call the social and economic privilege they enjoy as members of the dominant culture into question. As a critical educator, I am interested in understanding how I can create space in my classroom for students who occupy posi-

tions of power “to dialogue about how their power positions affect other people” and “how their lives and actions, even if unconsciously, oppress others” (Kuby, 2013, p. 19). Like Kuby, this has led me to grapple with a series of difficult questions, including:

How do we help students . . . of privilege understand systematic oppression? How do we help students respond to or possibly overcome entitlement thinking? How do we help students not feel guilty, but use their new understandings about oppression to fuel activism and justice for others? (Kuby, 2013, p. 20)

The critical inquiry assignment described in this article grew out of my own ongoing efforts to answer these questions for myself and to design meaningful instruction that encourages the students I work with to use their reading and writing in the service of working for social justice.

The “Random Acts of Revolution” assignment required students in an undergraduate elective, “The Hunger Games and Young Adult Dystopian Fiction,” to investigate the paratext (Genette & Maclean, 1991) that surrounds dystopian fiction for adolescents with the goal of answering the following inquiry questions: “What conclusions can we draw about how YA dystopias are packaged and marketed to adolescents, and what social justice issues does this raise?” To complete the assignment, the students (all of whom were White and most of whom came from middle-class backgrounds) were instructed to visit a local bookseller (for example, Barnes and Noble, Target, Walmart, as well as independent bookstores) and devote time to examining the visual and verbal rhetoric of YA dystopian book covers with the goal of understanding: 1) how the genre (defined broadly to include science fiction and post-apocalyptic fiction) is packaged; 2) what audience(s), as evidenced by its paratext, the genre is marketed to; and 3) what assumptions about race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so on these books’ paratext suggests publishers make about the audience reading dystopian fiction for adolescents. In the end, the vast majority of the students chose to visit chain rather than locally owned bookstores for a pragmatic reason: the YA dystopia section in corporate bookstores like Barnes and Noble and Target tend to include a greater number of titles to examine. That said, teachers could just as easily invite students to visit public or school libraries, an issue that I address later in this article.

To frame the students’ investigation of the paratext that surrounds YA dystopian fiction, I highlighted a series of questions for them to consider. In doing so, I sought to avoid calling their attention to specific social justice issues, though the questions I encouraged them to reflect on admittedly steered them to think about how constructs such as race, gender, sexual orientation, adolescence, and so on are implicated in the design and marketing of these texts. Still, by leaving the questions open-ended, my expectation was that students would draw their own conclusions about how the paratext surrounding dystopian fiction for adolescents can normalize social expectations about these constructs (see Fig. 1). As they conducted their observations, I encouraged the students to document titles of books that exemplified the social justice issues their investigation led them to identify. Later, when they presented their findings and reflected on their implications in a formal written paper, the students

- What do the covers of YA dystopias seem to emphasize, and how does their design work to accomplish this?
- What patterns (or commonalities) do you recognize when people (or parts of people) appear on the covers of YA dystopias? Who is represented? Who is absent?
- Based on the covers you examine, what can you infer about how publishers market YA dystopias to female readers? Male readers? Mixed-gender audiences? What specific evidence in the paratext of the books you examine allows you to make these fine-grained distinctions?
- What assumptions about gender, race, class, and/or sexuality do the covers you examine communicate, and how do they reinforce or subvert normalized expectations about these constructs?
- What do publishers emphasize in the plot synopses offered on the back cover of YA dystopias? Having read a sufficient number of synopses, what generalizations can you draw about the characters in these books? What qualities do they share?
- Based on the book covers you examine, what assumptions do publishers seem to make about adolescents? In making these assumptions, what groups of adolescents do they overlook or ignore?
- Based on your investigation, how do YA dystopias reinforce normalized expectations about adolescence/ts?

Figure 1. Questions to guide critical inquiry assignment

embedded images of book covers in their paper with the goal of illustrating their analyses.

Booker (1994) argues that “[t]he modern turn to dystopian fiction is largely attributable to perceived inadequacies in existing social and political systems” (p. 20). Similarly, Trites (2014) notes that dystopian fiction has historically been popular with readers during periods of political and economic instability (p. 26). As Simmons (2012) demonstrates, educators can capitalize on the popularity of YA dystopian fiction and use it as a foundation to tap into and build on the concerns that many adolescents already have about social justice issues. With that in mind, the second phase of the critical inquiry assignment invited students to “become Mockingjays” by using their literacy to speak back to problematic ideologies that their investigation of the paratext surrounding YA dystopian novels led them to recognize.

Having written a formal paper in which they examined three social justice issues that their analysis of YA dystopias led them to identify, the students next composed short notes in which they each highlighted a single social justice issue that troubled them. To do so, they used specially made notecards emblazoned with the image of a hand with three fingers raised,



Figure 2. Notecard graphic

a gesture that in the context of Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy is understood to signify resistance to oppression. Beneath the image, which graduate student Logan Hilliard designed and painted, was an appeal encouraging readers to “Join the Resistance” (see Fig. 2). Having written their notes, the students then returned to the booksellers where they conducted their initial observations and took photographs of their notes alongside YA dystopias whose covers illustrated the social justice issues they addressed. To encourage their activism, the students were given the option to leave their notes inside books for future readers in order to raise those readers’ consciousness about the issues, something they all elected to do (see Fig. 3). Self-reports the students shared in class upon completing the assignment suggested that these “random acts of revolution” led them to experience a sense of empowerment, an implication that I discuss later in this article.

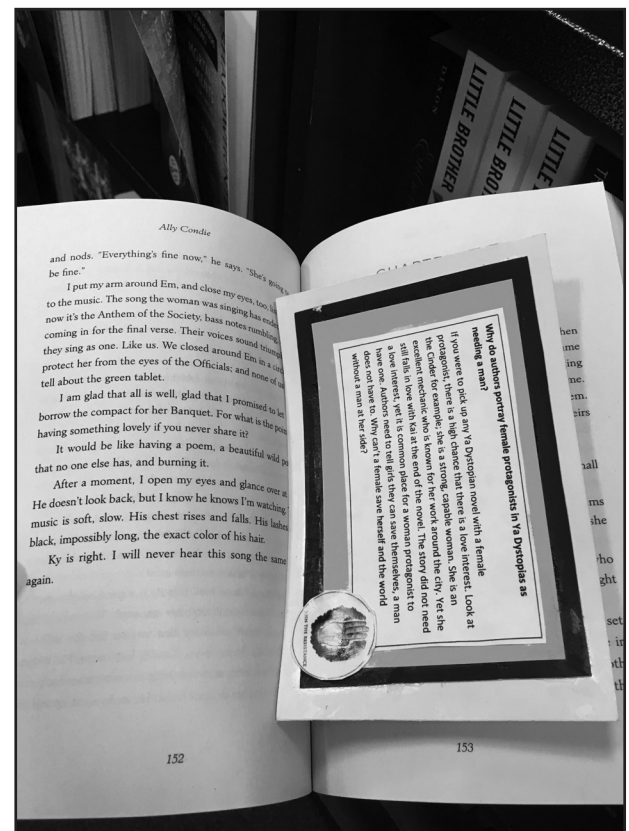


Figure 3. Consciousness-raising activity

Recurring Themes in the Critical Inquiry Assignment

Below, I examine three social justice issues that a thematic analysis of the students' papers and notecards suggested they discussed most frequently. Though not the only issues addressed, these issues tended to receive attention across the majority of the papers I read. As will be seen, the students interpreted the paratext associated with the YA dystopian novels they examined as marginalizing some readers by reinforcing normalized expectations about race, sexual orientation, and gender. In each instance, I include images of the notecards they left in books for future readers in their effort to raise readers' consciousness.

Whiteness and Young Adult Dystopias

Not all of the YA dystopias that students examined depicted people on their covers. A number of books showcased gloomy dystopian settings, as well as objects and figures that took on symbolic relevance in the context of a story. By refraining from depicting people on their covers, the students speculated that publishers may have intended for these books to target a crossover audience comprised of females as well as males, and adults as well as adolescents. When people, or parts of people (for example, a foot, arm, or head) did appear on the covers of YA dystopias, however, the students noted that they were most often female and almost exclusively White (see Fig. 4).

Discussing this finding, Genevieve (real first names used with permission) explained that of the 38 book covers she examined, "36 depicted a White person, two depicted a Black person, and only one showed a Hispanic person." Troubled by this, she wondered why publishers neglected to give teenagers from other racial and ethnic backgrounds opportunities to see people like themselves represented on the covers of YA dystopias (or other books marketed to adolescents). In her paper, Genevieve asked, "Why does this happen? Is it just coincidence that these authors are all writing about White adolescents? Can these characters only be White to properly fill their role in the storyline?" Rejecting the latter pos-

sibility, she concluded that the preponderance of White people on the covers of books, whether intentional or not, normalizes the idea that one race is superior to others. Presenting the problem in even stronger language, Marina called for covers that acknowledge "the broad range of youth and adults that read these books," as opposed to reinforcing an ideology of "White privilege and superiority." Stating her belief that a work of literature "can change a person's life," she wondered why publishers don't make more of an effort to market books to adolescents from other racial and cultural backgrounds.

In a class discussion that took place after the students had completed the critical inquiry assignment,

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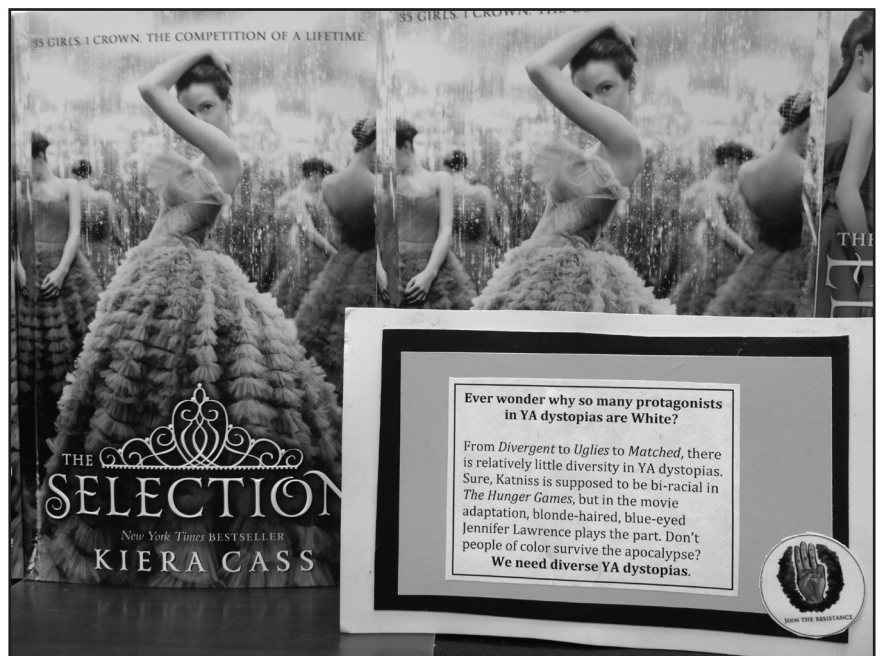


Figure 4. Whiteness in YA dystopias

everyone expressed their surprise at the frequency with which White people appeared on the covers of YA dystopias and other books marketed to adolescents. Moreover, they explained that even when a protagonist in a novel was described as biracial, the representation of that character on the cover suggested otherwise. As a case in point, they described the movie tie-in cover for Collins's (2013) *Catching Fire*. Though Collins herself describes Katniss as having olive skin and dark eyes, the book cover features a recognizably White Jennifer Lawrence in the role, even though her hair and eye color were altered to suggest otherwise. When people of color did appear on the cover of a book, students noted that they seldom occupied as prominent a position as their White counterparts, leading Joseph to speculate that perhaps publishers meant to downplay race in these instances.

Asked why they thought they hadn't noticed this prior to completing the inquiry assignment, one student, Macie, cited the problem of White privilege. "We're so accustomed to seeing people like ourselves represented in the media," she explained, "that it comes to seem natural. We become blind to the problem, and so we don't even think to question why people from other races aren't depicted more often on book covers." Macie's comments call to mind

Banfield's assertion that "in a racist society children's trade books and textbooks must be viewed as one of the most effective tools of oppression" (quoted in Schieble, 2012, p. 212). In this way, her claims point to the value of creating opportunities for students to view otherwise taken-for-granted material—in this case, book covers—through fresh eyes.

Heteronormativity and Young Adult Dystopias

A second theme that students identified during the critical inquiry assignment addressed the role of dystopian novels' paratext in normalizing heterosexual relationships. A number of scholars and social media bloggers have commented on the pervasiveness of the romance trope in dystopian fiction for adolescents (see, for example, Scholes & Ostenson, 2013; Vail, 2013), including Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy, which famously positions Katniss as an object of desire for both Peeta and Gale. As the students discovered, however, these relationships invariably featured heterosexual characters. Commenting on this, Macie argued, "The existence of heterosexual individuals in YA dystopias is not the problem per se; the absence of any other sexuality is the problem."

To demonstrate how the paratext accompanying YA dystopian fiction can reify heteronormativity, students again focused on these books' illustrated covers. Several students noted that when a female and male appeared together on the covers of YA dystopias, they were often positioned in ways that hinted at the possibility of a romantic relationship. Macie, for example, described covers on which characters "reached out to each other against a background of a dazzling galaxy of stars," or stared longingly at each other. She concluded that these "picturesque images romanticize the very idea of teen romance and normalize the relationship as something primarily between a female and male."

Describing plot synopses offered on the rear cover of dust jackets, the students recognized that publishers also use language in ways that reinforce the assumption that heterosexual relationships are the norm. Jamie, for example, noted that several of the book covers she examined

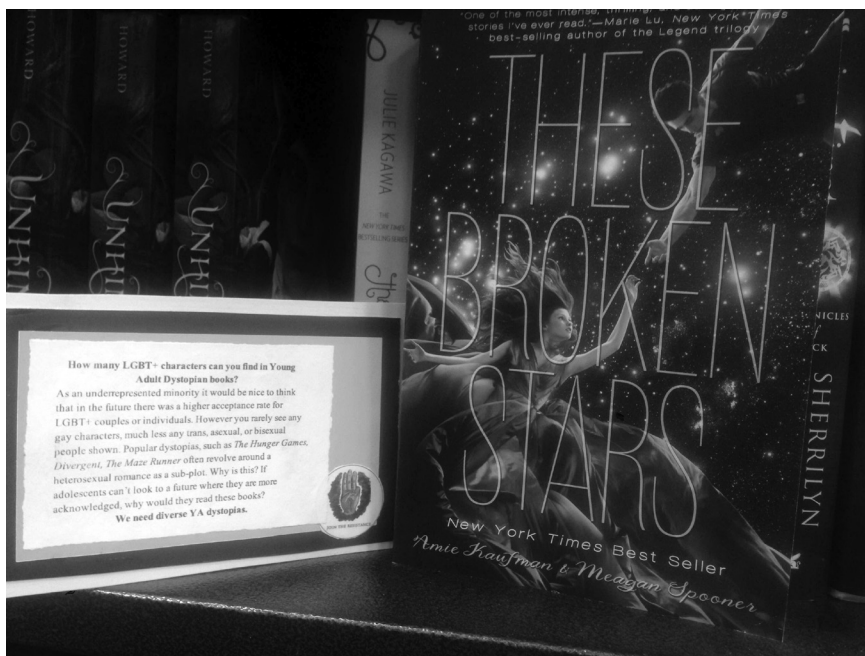


Figure 5. Heteronormativity in YA dystopias

described “a heterosexual couple fighting to save the world,” and she wondered how LGBTQ teenagers browsing for books were likely to experience this. Likewise, Rebecca concluded that, much as they do by privileging Whiteness, publishers marginalize a sizeable number of readers, in this case “all but leaving out the LGBTQ community” (see Fig. 5).

As their comments suggest, a number of students expressed their concerns about the role that YA dystopian fiction potentially plays in marginalizing teenagers who don’t identify as heterosexual. Foregrounding the “broad range of queer identities” that are available to people, Macie wrote, “It seems as though in dystopian books, which are most commonly set in the distant future, sexuality would not be the issue that it is today, and therefore [dystopian books] present the perfect platform to validate the existence of other sexualities.” Noting that this is seldom the case, however, she decided that “these books exist in the service of bolstering the notion of heteronormativity.” She wondered, “If LGBT teenagers look to a future where their identities are still not unquestioningly accepted, and if they have no basis to infer that they ever will be, then what do they have to look forward to?”

Problematic Representations of Girls in Young Adult Dystopias

It is not uncommon for scholars who write about dystopian fiction for adolescents to celebrate these books’ portrayal of so-called “strong girls.” Fritz (2014), for example, argues that contemporary YA dystopian novels such as Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010), Westerfeld’s *Uglies* series (2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007), and Young’s *Dust Lands* trilogy (2011, 2012, 2014) draw on discourses of “girl power” and “girl activism” to construct empowered “female protagonists [who] are catapulted to the center of their societies’ attention because they dare to test their boundaries by fighting against the laws and norms of their deeply flawed worlds” (p. 18). As a result of investigating the paratext that surrounds YA dystopias, however, students in my class concluded that, in many instances, it works to counteract the latter reading.

All of the students commented on the frequency with which females appear on the covers of YA dystopias, leading them to speculate that publishers regard girls as the primary audience for these books.

Although Elena found that female protagonists are not always sexualized on book covers, she nonetheless argued that images of them often “conform to idealized standards of beauty.” Moreover, she noted that publishers, through their use of language in plot synopses, often position female protagonists as passive. Elena explained that while many of the YA dystopias she exam-

ined purported to present “strong female characters,” their paratext more often than not positioned those characters as dependent on males. She was “alarmed,” for example, to encounter the following statements on the back covers of books she examined: “A boy with a secret of his own offers Jin the only chance she has . . .” (Graudin, 2015, *The Walled City*); “All that changes when she encounters a beautiful boy . . . with a secretive past” (Lyga et al., 2015, *After the Red Rain*); and “he promised to keep them both safe” (Young, 2013, *The Pro-*

gram). Her analysis led her to conclude that while YA dystopias “are making progress by depicting girls as powerful figures, there is still a normalized standard that a girl must have a male figure to either love or let lead her, even if she is the ‘leading lady.’”

Like Elena, Chelsea was also surprised to discover that, though many YA dystopias feature a lone, powerful-looking female on their front covers, the plot synopses that await readers—and in some cases, the illustrated covers of future installments in a series—emphasize her desirability to a male. Though she regarded YA dystopian novels as aspiring to represent adolescence as an “empowering time . . . when young adults discover their agency,” Chelsea ultimately concluded that, in the case of female protagonists, a second ideological statement, conveyed implicitly through a book’s paratext, counteracted that message by suggesting that girls gain worth as a result of their desirability to males. This led her to conclude that by

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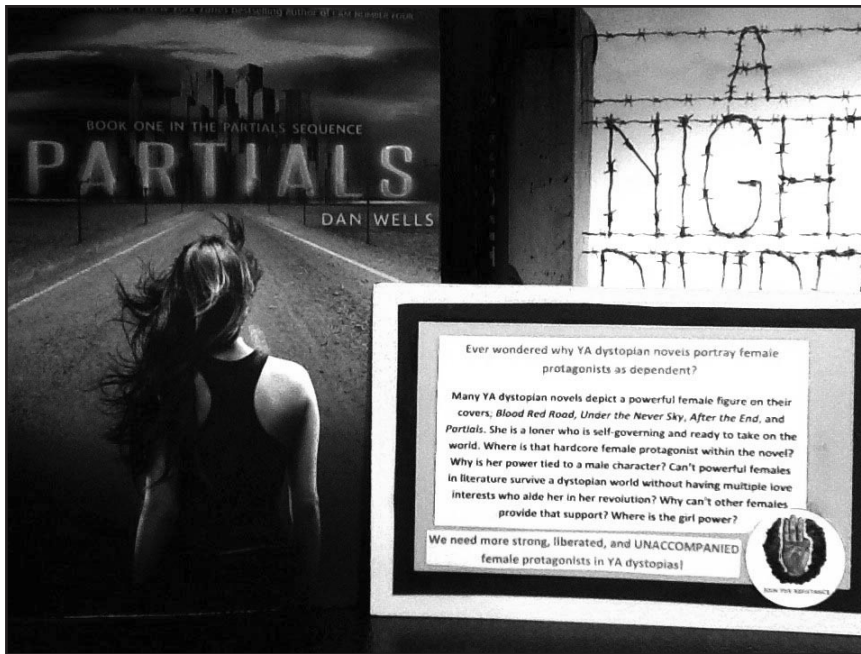


Figure 6. Representations of females in YA dystopias

“assuming that romance will appeal more to female readers than female empowerment,” publishers marginalize girls like herself who would prefer to “read about a singular, influential female character.” In the closing sentence of the note she left for a future reader in a copy of a YA dystopian novel (see Fig. 6), Chelsea argued, “We need more strong, liberated, and UNACCOMPANIED female protagonists in YA dystopias!”

Conclusion

We are arguably experiencing the Golden Age of young adult literature in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Today, teachers and students have access to a host of well-written dystopian novels for adolescents that explore complex social and political issues in thoughtful ways. At the same time, as Thomas (2012) observes, there are also young adult dystopias that perpetuate oppressive ideologies and outdated stereotypes. While emphasis is understandably placed on reading narratives critically in school, a book’s paratext can also communicate problematic messages about race, sexual orientation, gender, and so on. When readers take a book’s materiality for granted, they neglect to consider how features, such

as book covers, plot synopses, and reviewer blurbs, interpolate them as subjects, making the dissemination of these messages all the more problematic and all the more insidious.

Much has been written about the pedagogical value of creating space for students to read YA literature from a critical perspective. Inviting students to critically examine the paratext surrounding YA dystopian fiction, or any other genre of YA literature, is an equally profitable exercise. The students in my class were troubled by the oppressive messages about race, sexual orientation, and gender they encountered in the paratext of the dystopian novels they

examined. Notably, the knowledge that these issues escaped their notice prior to completion of the critical inquiry assignment bothered many of them. As Rebecca, describing her experience with the assignment, wrote, “I had never really paid much attention to the covers of books, for whatever reason. After spending an afternoon staring at the book covers of YA dystopias, though, I think . . . it’s sad and irritating that one of the most popular forms of fiction, especially for young adults, alienates and marginalizes so many readers.”

Although the majority of the students in my class chose to conduct their analyses of YA dystopias at corporate bookstores like Barnes and Noble and Walmart, the assignment described in this article is not limited to those settings. Rather, as one reviewer noted in response to an early draft of this paper, the assignment could just as easily ask students to examine YA dystopias in public or school libraries. The point of leaving notes in books for future readers is, after all, not to dissuade them from purchasing a book (something that I suspect most teachers, myself included, would be loathe to do). Rather, it represents a consciousness-raising activity designed to heighten people’s awareness of social issues that they might not otherwise have considered. In the event that students were to discover that the books in their school libraries failed

to satisfactorily reflect the diversity of their schools, they could petition school leaders to rectify the issue or work with the school librarian to recommend titles they would like to see ordered and shelved. Activities of this sort create additional opportunities for students to become Mockingjays by positioning them to work for change in their communities.

In the context of Collins's trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010), the image of the Mockingjay is a powerful symbol, one that ultimately inspires a political revolution that topples a totalitarian government. To be clear, leaving notes in books for other readers does little (if anything) to address the institutional and structural inequities that produce and sustain problems such as racism, poverty, gender inequality, and so on. It does, however, create the conditions necessary for students to use reading and writing to engage in political work, and in so doing, to see themselves as agents capable of fighting for a more just, more equitable world.

Teachers could build on the activity described in this article by involving students in writing letters to their local newspapers to address issues that affect their communities or by working with them to organize and advertise food and clothing drives designed to support people experiencing poverty. An assignment that I introduced later in the same course required students to read an additional YA dystopian novel beyond those they read for class with the goal of identifying a social justice issue it addressed. After doing so, they researched that issue to deepen their understanding of how it impacts people in the world beyond the text. Each student then produced a short video essay that included a brief introduction to the novel and highlighted the social justice issue addressed, after which they shared research findings concerning how the issue impacts people in the real world. To conclude, the students called on their audience to become Mockingjays and highlighted a series of manageable steps people could take to combat the social justice issues they addressed in their video essays. In addition to screening the students' video essays in class, I published them online in order to share their work with a larger audience.

Describing the benefits of capitalizing on YA dystopian fiction's potential to promote student activism, Simmons (2012) argues that "social-action projects require students to take their learning into the community to benefit the greater good through the use of

their learned skills" (p. 25). Similarly, Morrell (2002) argues that students are "[m]otivated and empowered by the prospect of addressing a real problem in their community" (p. 76). Crucial to the success of the critical inquiry assignment described in this article was the opportunity it afforded students to use their literacy to engage in social action. A number of students described the enjoyment they found in completing the assignment, noting that it allowed them to exercise their voices, something they felt they were unaccustomed to in school (a disturbing comment) and that they experienced as empowering. They were especially enthusiastic about the prospect of other people reading the notes they left in books at the different booksellers, and they were curious to know how their audience responded to the issues they raised.

"Even if it makes them angry," Chelsea remarked, "at least we helped bring these issues to people's attention."

From a teacher's perspective, a rewarding aspect of this assignment was that it opened students' eyes to social justice issues many had not previously considered. When they spoke about their findings in class, for example, several students did so with a tone of genuine conviction. I attribute this to the fact that the inquiry assignment encouraged them to discover these issues for themselves. As a result, any tensions they might have experienced had I called their attention to these issues was mitigated by their involvement in the assignment. To learn something for oneself is, it seems, a powerful thing. That said, it is also important that teachers create opportunities for students to process the social justice issues they explore by talking about them with others in the context of class discussions. Race, sexual orientation, and gender are complex issues, and they warrant careful examination. Throughout our time together, my students and I continually asked how issues like those discussed in this article were implicated in the novels we read. This experience led me to conclude that the opportunity

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to hear opposing viewpoints, both expressed in class discussions and read during our carefully selected course readings, complicated students' understanding of these issues.

The Mockingjay metaphor that I have worked with in this paper is not without limitations. For example, in positioning Katniss as the Mockingjay, the

adults in Collins's trilogy essentially treat her as a pawn in a larger political game, something that we would not want for our students. Still, the opportunity to teach a course that focused explicitly on Collins's trilogy led me to appreciate the extent to which many young people look up to the character of Katniss as a source of inspiration. Several of the students in my class recalled reading *The Hunger Games* series and aspiring to emulate Katniss by standing up to injustices they encountered. Others recalled sharing the books with younger siblings in

hopes that they would be motivated to do the same. As teachers, we can tap into the passion and enthusiasm that many students feel for characters like Katniss and use them as a basis for helping students appreciate the fact that they have a voice and are capable of speaking out against injustice.

Arguing for the important role that young adult literature can play in social justice education, Glasgow (2001) wrote:

In an increasingly abrasive and polarized American society, social justice education has the potential to prepare citizens who are sophisticated in their understanding of diversity and group interaction, able to critically evaluate social institutions, and committed to working democratically with diverse others. (p. 54)

Written more than a decade ago, Glasgow's characterization of American society as "abrasive" and "polarized" almost seems quaint by today's standards.

If schools are, as John Dewey (1916/2005) argued, crucial to the preservation of a democratic society, then it is imperative that educators engage students in thinking about how texts position them as subjects and how they invite them to view others. This is not enough, however. As educators, we must also create opportunities for students to use their literacy to act on the world.

Writes Wolk (2009), "No longer is the curriculum simply the novel or the facts to be learned but, rather, the students and their teacher together using books, other authentic resources, and their own opinions and experiences to create the 'living curriculum' as a true community of learners" (p. 666). When we approach the teaching of literature in this way, designing instruction that encourages students to interact with books that they are excited and passionate about and creating opportunities for them to participate in inquiry assignments that are designed to foster civic engagement, we prepare them (should they so choose) to become Mockingays, people capable of speaking out against oppression in its myriad forms and willing to work in support of equity and justice for all people. In doing so, perhaps they will create a world in which the odds are in all people's favor.

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