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Selling the Performance:

Unpacking the Relationship between Media Representations, Eating Disorders, and *Wintergirls*

It is fall semester in my adolescent literature course. Students come to class having read Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls* (2009), a fictional yet realistic account of two friends, Cassie and Lia, both struggling with eating disorders. Cassie succumbs to the illness, and Lia is in danger of following close behind. Anderson tells the story through Lia's perspective, shedding light on her inner struggles with body image and personal relationships, among other factors. During in-class discussion, it is evident that students are having strong reactions to this book:

"I don't think I would ever teach this book."

"*Wintergirls* reads like a how-to manual for how to have an eating disorder."

"*Wintergirls* made me miss my eating disorder."

As a literature instructor and teacher educator, I cannot get these comments out of my head. At first, I think I am struggling with my choice of text. Perhaps it was not the right selection for this particular group of students. However, I believe I cannot teach a course that addresses contemporary adolescent literature without including Laurie Halse Anderson. In addition to my own admiration of Anderson and her work, students need to know she is an award-winning tour de force in the field. When I asked previous students what topics they believed an adolescent literature course needs to address, eating disorders were at the top of the list. I know I am justified in choosing *Wintergirls* as a whole-class read, but I cannot dismiss my students' comments. I am struggling with how to respond, especially to the student who bravely—and hauntingly—shared, "*Wintergirls* made me miss my eating disorder."

Upon further reflection, I know I am not struggling with my choice of text. I am struggling with the role of eating disorders, and disordered eating, in American society. So was Anderson. She wrote *Wintergirls* in response to reader requests. As she notes on her website (Anderson, 2016), doctors encouraged Anderson to write this book to help "educate people and bring much-needed discussion to the topic." That fall semester, we were definitely discussing the topic of eating disorders, and as so often happens in teaching, my students educated me. They talked about counting calories, like Lia does in *Wintergirls*. They shared stories of visiting the hidden blogs Lia references in *Wintergirls*. They recounted stories of feeling targeted by the media. As a teacher researcher, I felt an obligation to delve further into the stories my students were sharing. I needed to give another layer of voice to what I was hearing. I kept coming back to one particular excerpt from *Wintergirls*: "because I don't need a muffin (410), I don't want an orange (75) or toast (87), and waffles (180) make me gag" (p. 5). All of the students in our adolescent literature course knew what the numbers in parentheses meant. Many (myself included) admitted that is how they, too, think about food. It is not about nutrition or enjoyment; it is about calories.

As a result of our in-class conversations, I designed a qualitative research study to help me learn more about the extent to which obsession over

calorie consumption and/or experience with an eating disorder were/was a part of adolescent life for study participants and to what extent this experience (or the lack thereof) helped position them for adulthood. Ultimately, I wanted to learn something about what is feeding our American cultural obsession with food. My central research question was: To what extent have media representations that participants have encountered in novels, magazines, films, etc. served as a contributing factor to their understanding of the role of eating disorders as a performance of adolescence? Eating disorders seem to have become a central part of American culture, so in this article, I offer a bounded examination of this phenomenon and how media representations play a role in how people experience and/or perform gender in adolescence.

Selling Eating Disorders to Adolescents: An Exchange of Values

Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (2012) define culture as "an invisible web of behaviors, patterns, rules, and rituals of a group of people who have contact with one another and share a common language" (p. 3). People who suffer from eating disorders engage in a tangled web of behaviors. They engage in repetitious acts of deprivation, indulgence, and/or purging. In a society "that continues to prize thinness even as Americans become heavier than ever before, almost everyone worries about their weight at least occasionally. The American Psychological Association notes people with eating disorders take such concerns to extremes, developing abnormal eating habits that threaten their well-being and even their lives" (2016). Eating disorders have become an intricate part of the web of American behavior patterns, especially for teenagers.

Media Representations and Adolescents as a Target Demographic

Media representations, including books, magazines, movies, etc., rely upon identifying and feeding behavior patterns. Such media representations are also an integral part of the cultural landscape for American teens, and adolescents are a primary target for advertisers (Calvert, 2008, p. 206). The United States is a capitalist society, and Americans have a large population base to which businesses can market goods and services, but marketing is about more than selling goods and services; it is about transmitting cultural values. Evans (2008) describes, "At its core, marketing is about an exchange of value between the marketer and consumer. If the marketer can promote a product or service to make the consumer perceive sufficient value, the consumer is more likely to purchase it" (p. 182). Advertisers involved with print and-digital media know how to promote a product or service to a target demographic, and in many ways, they help to shape the ways a consumer will find value in that product or service. For example, teenagers find value in identifying with their friends. Advertisers market products in ways that maximize this idea of affiliation, of being like everyone else, while still maintaining individuality.

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This is particularly significant when considering how much contact the average adolescent has with media representations in a given day. According to a Kaiser Family Foundation Study (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010), the average 8- to 18-year-old has over 10 hours of exposure to media every day, including TV (over four hours), computers (one and a half hours), print (38 minutes), and movies (25 minutes). Advertisers definitely use media as a way to reach potential consumers, including adolescents, through targeted ads (called psychographics) catered to an individual's demographics or lifestyle (AdAge, 2003). What adolescents encounter during those 10 hours of media exposure has an impact on their overall health and well-being. Kilbourne (1999) asserts, "Advertising supports more than 60 percent of magazine and newspaper production and almost 100 percent of the electronic media" (pp. 34–35). This means adolescents are potentially exposed to over 10 hours of advertising influence via Facebook and other media sources every day.

The results of three studies by Williams, Schimel,

Hayes, and Usta (2014) indicate that advertising has a greater impact on some individuals than on others. The researchers exposed participants to advertisements containing idealized body images. They found participants who had a higher extrinsic contingency focus (ECF), or those participants who tended to derive self-esteem from social as opposed to personal norms, tended to engage in behaviors, such as disordered eating, to attain the ideal body images in the media. Those participants who had a lower ECF, who located self-esteem in personal as opposed to social norms, tended to resist the ideal body images. This indicates that some adolescents are more prone to being affected by advertising and the media than other individuals.

While adolescence is a time when young adults' bodies are experiencing myriad physical changes, we, as a culture, rarely openly discuss those changes.

Body Image, Gender Performance, and Eating Disorders

The work of Williams et al. resonates with Butler's work with performance theory. Butler (2007/1990) asserts that the action of gender requires a performance that is "a stylized repetition of acts" based on a conception of gender as "a constituted social temporality" and that has "the appearance of substance," a constructed identity (pp. 191–192). Adolescents are in the process of crafting their identity, which involves honing a stylized repetition of acts, certainly involving body image. Eating disorders are frequently part of an attempt to achieve an idealized body image, part of a social temporality, as Williams et al. concluded. The participants in the studies conducted by Williams et al. found the appearance of substance either within the social norms of advertisements or in the personal norms within themselves. Calvert (2008), Williams et al. (2014), and Butler (2007/1990) contribute to an understanding of how seeking or resisting a marketed ideal body image can be a significant part of how individuals perform gender in adolescence.

Body Image and Eating Disorders in Young Adult Literature

Not enough scholarly work has been conducted about body image and young adult literature. This may be, in part, because, as a culture, America still holds many subjects as taboo—too sensitive to be addressed at all, especially in public schools. While adolescence is a time when young adults' bodies are experiencing myriad physical changes, we, as a culture, rarely openly discuss those changes. Younger (2003) argues that we, as a society, particularly try to avoid discussing female bodies. She points out, "Because Young Adult fiction reflects social anxiety about female bodies, texts that are popular among young adults are often censored or challenged by librarians, teachers, and parents" (p. 45). The point here is that companies are publishing texts about female bodies, and young adults are reading those books. However, instead of engaging in conversation with young adults about the issues these books raise, the trusted adults in their lives are removing the books from circulation altogether, implying that if we, as a culture, remove references to female bodies from the shelves, we do not have to address our cultural anxiety about female bodies. Out of sight, out of mind.

Every year, the American Library Association publishes a list of the Top Ten Challenged Books, the books Younger references as being censored or challenged. Of those on the 2016 list (American Library Association, 2017), nine were challenged due to being sexually explicit. This supports the view that as a culture, our web of behaviors includes an unwillingness to examine adolescent sexuality and body image. Yet, young adults are exposed to explicit media representations of body images—from magazine covers to feature films to best-selling novels—on a daily basis. As a result, young adults, particularly adolescent females, get the message that their bodies are there to be judged and measured against societal standards. A blog entry (Blog, 2018) on the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) website points out, "Throughout history, women's bodies have been routinely criticized, commodified, and objectified." The blogger explains, "According to renowned trauma expert Timothy Brewerton, women who report sexual trauma exhibit higher rates of both PTSD and eating disorders." As a society, rape, sexual harassment, and

eating disorders are topics we tend to avoid, both in and out of the classroom. It is not that young people have not experienced these life-changing events; it is that we do not talk about them.

Anyone who has suffered from a traumatic experience, such as an eating disorder, is prone to triggers. Medical expert Jennifer Rollin (2016) defines a trigger as "something that sets off cravings in recovering individuals." A craving here is synonymous with a behavior. Being exposed to a trigger can cause an individual to revert to a particular behavior. For example, a media representation, such as a character or an event in a young adult novel, can trigger a desire in a reader who is recovering from an eating disorder to behave in a particular way. If we do not talk about rape, sexual harassment, or eating disorders, we cannot understand potential triggers. Young adult authors like Laurie Halse Anderson explain why this is problematic. During a *New York Times* (Tanenhaus, 2009) book review podcast, Anderson shared:

> When we submitted [*Wintergirls*] to the experts for the final reviews, that was the first question. Are there things in this book that will trigger unsuspecting people? And if so, what do we do about that? . . . Their response was . . . that we have a culture that glamorizes this. The docs say, yes, the book is going to trigger people. Turning on the television triggers people—looking at billboards, going to the computer, walking past a magazine rack. But the challenge in the book they felt I had met was to show the entire story. There is nothing glamorous or lovely about an eating disorder. It's horror.

The next question is, "What do we do about it?" One solution is exposing young adults to media representations that address taboo subjects and triggers head on, and then engaging with students in critical dialogue about the messages they are encountering. Emma Giordano (2017), a communications intern for the NEDA, wrote on the organization's blog, "Fiction, known to offer many an escape from reality, has also developed into a way for individuals to see themselves in literature. We are so lucky the literary world has moved beyond just entertainment to a place of identification and comfort for so many with unique experiences." She is optimistic that because more authors, like Anderson, are publishing brave works about body image and eating disorders, we, as a culture, might be able to engage in the kinds of conversations that could move us forward.

Even though much has been written independently about media representations, body image, eating disorders, and adolescent literature, there is a gap in the research related to how these cultural factors intersect and influence one another, if at all. I was unable to find other relevant research that addresses how exposure to media representations, including adolescent literature, have influenced whether or not an adolescent develops an eating disorder. I designed this study to help fill this void.

Methodology and Data Analysis

My research stemmed from in-class discussions with students in an upper-division adolescent literature course at a Western university. I requested and was able to interview 10 university graduate and undergraduate students who had read young adult literature and popular magazines (such as *Seventeen*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Teen Vogue*) in my efforts to understand the extent to which these texts have informed their understanding of and their experience with calorie consumption and/or eating disorders.

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Due to the sensitive nature of the data, I wanted to transcribe all of the interviews myself, so I needed to keep the number manageable, thus allowing me to give my full attention to the participants and their responses. I sent a recruitment email to 60 former adolescent literature students. Nine of the students who ultimately agreed to participate (8 female, 1 male) had previously taken my adolescent literature course. The tenth student volunteered following a conversation I had with her about her graduate thesis. Because I had requested and received 10 participants, I did not need to turn anyone away. After participants signed an IRB-approved consent form, I scheduled a one-hour, semi-structured interview with each individual participant.

My data sources consisted solely of these interview transcripts.

For the purposes of this article, I am focusing on two participants, using their self-selected pseudonyms. I interviewed both students early in the data collection process, beginning with background questions that focused on what they read as adolescents and what drew them to participate in this research study, then moving toward the extent to which they believe eating disorders are a part of adolescence in general and for them, personally. I developed interview questions to help me uncover the origins of participants' thinking about media representations (what they watched, what they read) and body image (how what they watched and read affected their sense of self).

Through the interview questions, I invited participants to articulate their working definition of adolescence. I asked them to describe their personal experience with eating disorders, and I challenged them to think about who, if anyone, should be reading texts about eating disorders, like *Wintergirls*.

Amelia Maria was a third-year undergraduate college student majoring in English Education. She planned to teach middle school. She was a student in my adolescent literature course, and she was one of the students who was adamant that Anderson's *Wintergirls* reads like a how-to manual for how to have an eating disorder. I am including her voice here because she was representative of a range of voices I heard during in-class discussions. While she believes some readers may have body image issues before reading a text like *Wintergirls*, she definitely believes such a text can put ideas into adolescents' heads. Amelia self-identified as having suffered from binge eating disorder (BED), though she did not discuss having had a clinical diagnosis. She confessed she would choose to be bulimic, but she does not have a gag reflex, which leaves her unable to purge after her binges.

Rachel Smith was a first-year graduate student preparing to be a middle school or high school English teacher. She, too, was a student in my adolescent literature course. Rachel was clinically diagnosed with both anorexia nervosa (AN) and bulimia nervosa (BN). She was hospitalized for her eating disorder, and she continues to undergo therapy. At the time of our interview, she considered herself in recovery. She memorably said that reading *Wintergirls* made her "miss" her eating disorder. Since this is one of the comments that initially sparked this study, she is included as a focal participant here.

In terms of data analysis, I used thematic coding, outlining basic descriptive categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 179), including social influences (family, friends) and media influences (books, films). Through the interview questions, I invited participants to articulate their working definition of adolescence. I asked them to describe their personal experience with eating disorders, and I challenged them to think about who, if anyone, should be reading texts about eating disorders, like *Wintergirls*. This allowed me to reflect on the data and to code for themes such as adolescence, media, and performance. By conducting content analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 179), I was able to examine the frequency of statements related to performing gender in adolescence (the extent to which eating disorders were/were not a part of adolescence for participants) and the impact of media representations (books/films/magazines/websites) that have influenced each participant's own performance of gender in adolescence. The more interviews I conducted and the more data I coded, the more fascinated I became with the idea that eating disorders have become a way for young people to perform adolescence. Repeatedly, I heard participants describe the ways in which American media—including books, films, television, and magazines—market a very specific way of performing gender in adolescence. I started to question just how embedded eating disorders are in American culture.

Amelia and Rachel both believe that media representations such as books, magazines, and films are selling eating disorders to today's adolescents. They both described how these representations taught them specific ways to perform their gender as adolescent females.

Amelia Maria: "*Wintergirls* is a guide on how to have an eating disorder."

Amelia described four specific forms of media representation that have contributed to what she, as a female member of the cultural landscape, is buying: fitness apps, including LoseIt and MyFitnessPal; blogs, such as Tumblr and FiTblr; adolescent literature, specifically *Wintergirls,* Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2011), and Donna Cooner's *Skinny* (2012); and her sorority.

From the time she was very young, Amelia's mom suffered from multiple sclerosis. She contracted an infection and refused treatment, which amounted to committing suicide in Amelia's eyes. She died in September of Amelia's eighth-grade year. Technology was already an integral part of Amelia's daily life, and by the end of that school year, Amelia had started counting calories. She discovered an app called LoseIt, but she wasn't clear on how she was supposed to use it. She explained, "What was supposed to happen is that [LoseIt] gave you a set number of calories, but it was somewhere like 900, so obviously lower on the spectrum. What you were supposed to do is you were supposed to eat your 1200, 1500 depending on how tall, gender, etc., science-y stuff, and then work out to get down to that number, but it wasn't very clear in expressing that." Fitness apps like LoseIt are an influential form of media representation. They teach adolescents ways to control their bodies and their caloric intake—and output—to achieve a particular body image.

For Amelia, the fitness apps were a precursor to blogs. Amelia was drawn to blogs originally because she liked the photography and the images that people would reblog. Tumblr played a significant role in her development, though she remarked, "I hate Tumblr, for many reasons, but one of the reasons is that it romanticizes self-harm, suicide, depression, and most of all, eating disorders." She described how she quickly noticed that images about the "thigh gap"—"when you put your feet together and your thighs don't touch"—were really popular; they were part of the "shrieking chorus" that Lia refers to in *Wintergirls* (p. 175). In the novel, Lia describes how she read posts by young women on secret blogs dedicated to supporting other young women with eating disorders, "hungry girls singing endless anthems while our throats bleed and rust and fill up with loneliness" (p. 175). The "songs," or blog posts, included messages such as, "I need a text buddy for fasting tomorrow" and "Only ate a bowl of cereal today which is good" (p. 175). Amelia was very familiar with these secret blogs.

Later, in college, Tumblr led Amelia to FiTblr, or fitness blogs. I was not familiar with FiTblr, so Amelia elucidated: "So the whole guise of the blog was health, like Blogilates, that YouTube channel, is guised toward health, but it gets perceived into starving yourself." She expounded, "And it gets interpreted differently as a 15-, 16-, 17-year-old with self-esteem *this* small." While these blogs were supposed to be positive and inspirational, providing food and exercise tips, for Amelia, like Lia, they were like going down the rabbit hole; these blogs made her conscious that she did not look like the women featured on the screen.

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Around this same time, at the age of 15, Amelia read *Wintergirls* and *Thirteen Reasons Why* for the first time. A friend had recommended *Wintergirls* to her; she read and liked it. She confessed that she is drawn to stories of teenage drama, or "angst-y stuff," as it serves as her own personal way of dealing with her own "tragic life backstory." As a reader and as an adolescent, *Wintergirls* scared her because "a lot of [Lia's] habits were similar to mine. Not that I started emulating Lia, but that my habits were similar." In the novel, Lia discusses her lack of control, describing how, if she starts eating, she fears she won't be able to stop. "One bite, ten bites, the whole tray would pour down my throat" (p. 184). Amelia had this same struggle with binge eating. A lot of people she knew who read this book started to develop disordered eating habits. In fact, this was the first time the words "eating disorder" became a part of

Amelia's vocabulary. It was the first time she realized "[t]hat this was a disease. That it was harmful. That it was going to kill me if I continued, and something needed to happen. I don't know what. I don't know what that something was because obviously I didn't get help." In *Wintergirls*, Lia's best friend, Cassie, does, indeed, die from her eating disorder. This was a lightbulb moment for Amelia; Cassie helped her understand that people can—and do—die from this disease. The book served as a media representation that taught Amelia about the possible consequences of her actions. It was a powerful realization.

Amelia was definitely aware that, as a teacher, she is selling certain aspects of culture to students by virtue of the texts and other media representations she chooses to include in and exclude from her classroom.

Given the fact she had such a strong reaction to *Wintergirls*, I asked Amelia if she would ever teach this book. She considered how the book could be both helpful and detrimental, but ultimately, she responded, "This is a very graphic book. It *is* a guide on how to have an eating disorder. I feel like this book in particular puts ideas into people's heads that weren't there before." Take, for example, Lia's "rules" for having an eating disorder, from consuming no more than 800 calories per day, preferably 500, to starting the [eating] day at dinner (p. 103). As a teacher, this is something she needs to weigh carefully.

Amelia was definitely aware that, as a teacher, she is selling certain aspects of culture to students by virtue of the texts and other media representations she chooses to include in and exclude from her classroom. Amelia understands that teaching a book is a political act. Students could construe teaching a book about eating disorders as condoning those behaviors. If Amelia recommends the text, she could be, in some students' views, recommending what the text presents to some readers; ergo, she is selling a how-to manual about eating disorders to students by virtue of recommending that students read the text. This made me stop and think about the number of students in our adolescent literature course who confessed to me that they (re)visited blogs about eating disorders and/or needed to seek out counseling after reading *Wintergirls* for class. It made me reflect on what I was selling to those students, and I could definitely understand Amelia's point of view.

This is exactly why *Skinny* is problematic for Amelia as well. She was bothered by the fact that the main character, Ever, gets gastric bypass surgery as a teenager. When a classmate—an adolescent—who the narrator describes as 20 pounds overweight, asks Ever about the surgery, considering it for herself, Amelia was outraged. She asked, "What does that do to an adolescent?" What bothered Amelia was that the author never addresses why Ever is overeating. She relates: "It's her mother's death. There's something going on there that needs to be addressed, and she's using food to cope. And Lia is using lack of food to cope, and nobody is addressing that. Nobody's helping them." That is what bothers Amelia the most about texts and other media representations: nobody addresses the root causes of eating disorders, and nobody helps those who are suffering.

This is a cultural pattern that Amelia continues to see in college—as a whole and in her sorority. She and her sorority sisters are trying to start a conversation about the causes of body image issues by participating in activities like Fat Talk Free Week, where they focus more on "this is how you keep yourself in good health," not "this is how you lose weight." For that one week, they refrain from fat shaming, skinny shaming, and negative talk. Instead, they seek to celebrate, "You are who you are, and that's great." That may be only one week out of the year, but Amelia feels its effects beyond that week. For her, the conversations about body image that she engages in with her sorority sisters, including those experienced during Fat Talk Free Week, have a positive impact on her sense of self. Amelia has this in her life because of the cultural influence of her sorority. What about other women who do not have such a sisterhood in their lives? What about women like Rachel?

Rachel Smith: "*Wintergirls* made me miss my eating disorder."

Rachel also outlined four specific forms of media representation that have had an impact on her: maga-

zines, specifically *Teen Vogue;* TV and film, especially the reality TV show *The Swan* and two films—one a documentary and the other *Black Swan* (Avnet and Aronofsky, 2011); blogs similar to those Lia discusses in *Wintergirls*; and adolescent literature, such as *Wintergirls*. In Rachel's view, her culture is decidedly selling her eating disorders, including anorexia (AN) and bulimia (BN), through these media representations.

Rachel was able to clearly articulate how magazines helped her to buy into the allure of an eating disorder. During our interview, she discussed how she consumed *Teen Vogue* like an instructional manual. This magazine was selling an image to Rachel, and she was definitely buying. In high school, she used *Teen Vogue* as her stylist; she used it to determine what to buy and how to dress. She liked the way the clothes looked on the slim models, and she longed to look like the models she saw on the pages of the magazine. She earned attention for how she looked when she followed this manual, and she liked this kind of attention.

Rachel was aware that in elementary school, students came to school with full sandwiches, but by high school, people brought a half of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and some carrots. She noticed that other people around her were eating considerably less than she was, so she felt she must be eating too much. It did not occur to her that perhaps the others were eating too little. She found herself negotiating, "What is the socially acceptable amount of food to be eating to fit in with this group of people?" Her eating habits at school changed dramatically, but at home, she continued to eat "normal, balanced meals."

By her junior year of high school, Rachel realized she was "very unhappy" and that she had "really bad body image issues." She took a class in high school dedicated to body image. The objective of the class was to learn how to select and wear clothes that were the best for your body type. The teacher graded students for putting on an outfit, standing in front of the class, and subjecting themselves to critique. The teacher's idea was that students needed to know how to dress appropriately for the job market. For someone like Rachel, who had had body image issues since age nine, this class compounded existing problems. At the end of the course, the teacher showed a documentary film on eating disorders. This was a turning point for Rachel. She remembers watching the film and thinking, "Oh, God, there's an answer to what I'm feeling. There is a solution to this problem." On one hand, she knew that she was supposed to watch the documentary and think, "Eating disorders are bad," but on the other hand, she thought it seemed "like a really smart solution to the problem I was having."

This was when her eating became less regular. She started feeling worse about her body. Like Lia in *Wintergirls,* she started using laxatives (p. 184). She didn't have a clinically diagnosed eating disorder until her freshman year of college, but this documentary definitely planted some fertile seeds. For a young woman who already had a disposition toward eating disorders, viewing a documentary film on eating disorders in high school helped her understand how she could look like the models in *Teen Vogue,* a form of media representation that told Rachel how to perform adolescence.

This documentary was not the only film that proved significant for Rachel. She remembers the film *Black Swan* as being pivotal for her as well. Rachel reflected, "I remember after I saw it, I just Googled pictures of [Natalie Portman] and I would just stare at her and I would feel so bad about myself and I wanted to look like her." This led Rachel to make a fascinating connection.

RS: I was so drawn to that movie, and I thought she was so skinny, and so fascinating, and weird and dark, and I just related to that, and I wanted to *be* that character. I wanted to be miserable and skinny and interesting.

PC: And you equate those three [miserable, skinny, interesting]?

RS: Absolutely.

PC: What drew you to the combination of those three. Do you remember?

RS: Hmm . . . I don't know where the miserable really comes from, but I've always wanted to be skinny, and I've always equated skinny with interesting because I got a lot of attention when I was very young for being small, and it became, um, what every adult commented on, and it became so ingrained in my identity, so I've always equated

being small with being interesting. And it's not something I have wanted to lose, still to this day, because it's so ingrained in who I am.

Rachel equated being miserable, skinny, and interesting. She told me about how reality TV shows, such as Fox's *The Swan* (Hanson, 2004), reiterated the cultural value of being small, of conforming to a cultural standard of beauty. In the show, contestants would agree to undergo a makeover, transforming from an ugly duckling into a beautiful swan. Rachel and her sister watched this show without any adult supervision, and it, too, contributed to her identity. Feminist scholar Douglas (2010) critiqued the show, commenting how "it made all too explicit the narrow physical standards to which women are expected to conform, the sad degree to which women internalize these standards, the lengths needed to get there, and the impossibility for most of us to meet the bar" (p. 223). Indeed, *The Swan* helped Rachel to internalize these physical standards, and she took pride in the lengths it took her to achieve this standard.

[Rachel] confessed she was only able to read the first 30 pages [of *Wintergirls*], and while she is personally against censorship, she struggled with whether or not this book should be censored in some way.

For Rachel, texts like *Teen Vogue,* movies like *Black* Swan, and reality TV shows like *The Swan* are selling this enticing combination of being skinny, interesting, and miserable. Digital media is selling this combination as well. As Rachel was practicing her eating disorder—learning how to eat less and less food—she discovered blogs dedicated to eating disorders, similar to the blogs Lia visits in *Wintergirls*. Looking back now, she can see how those blogs are "horrible" and "disgusting," how they serve as places where people "are reinforcing each other's bad decisions and picking up tricks for continuing to engage in that disordered eating." She described how the human body does not want to have an eating disorder; it fights the ritualistic behaviors. The blogs help you "cheat the system," sharing ways you can "cheat the very strong messages that your body is sending you." Rachel learned a great deal from those blogs, and that is why she had such a strong reaction to reading *Wintergirls*.

Rachel read the book for the first time as a graduate student in our adolescent literature course. She confessed she was only able to read the first 30 pages, and while she is personally against censorship, she struggled with whether or not this book should be censored in some way. She shared that if she had read *Wintergirls* in high school, it would have helped piece together some things for her. While the documentary film gave her some seeds about how to have an eating disorder, *Wintergirls* would have filled in a lot of the blanks; it would have told her how to get where she wanted to go—and this made her angry. She felt vehemently that Anderson was "giving away" a lot of secrets that she, personally, had worked so hard to attain. For example, Anderson describes how Lia sewed quarters into the pockets of her robe on days when she had to weigh in in front of her stepmother, Jennifer, to prove that she was "above trouble." When Lia steps on the scale, she notes that she is "107.00 fake pounds" (p. 47). She is cheating the system, thereby protecting her eating disorder. Rachel conveyed, "I just remember thinking, 'Who is this woman to give away those secrets?' You know, I earned that based on my special club, and I worked really hard to get this, and this book is giving away all of those secrets." She found this "shortcut" approach to eating disorders unfair and wrong.

Cause and Effect: Media Representations and Eating Disorders

It is difficult to argue against Amelia's and Rachel's experiences that American media representations are selling eating disorders. On her website (2016), Anderson describes how she struggled with writing this book and the way it speaks to a particular performance of gender. She acknowledges that disordered eating was a part of her experience of adolescence as well. She felt compelled to write *Wintergirls* because of her personal experience, because of letters from readers, and because of a request from a friend who was a doctor. In other words, the wider public was saying that eating disorders are issues that need to be addressed. Anderson did her research, including visit-

ing the blogs that Lia, Amelia, and Rachel all discuss.

Do people have eating disorders because of *Wintergirls*? Amelia and Rachel would say yes. Does that mean that Anderson is selling eating disorders? That was certainly not her stated intention. Anderson cautions, "When you buy into the message that your self-worth should be measured on a scale, then you give up your power. You hand it over to people who will prey on your insecurities. Advertisers work very hard to make you feel bad, so you will buy whatever it is they are selling" (Anderson, 2016). Females like Amelia, who kept track of every calorie she consumed on an app on her phone, and like Rachel, who weighed herself five times per day, definitely gave up their power. Books, movies, blogs, and magazines—a whole range of media representations—preyed on their insecurities. On one level, they thought their eating disorders gave them control, but ultimately these young women surrendered power over their own bodies. They let apps and scales and a whole range of rituals and behaviors control them instead.

Anderson hoped that writing *Wintergirls* would "lead to discussions of why we give our power about body images over to the people who are hired to make us hate ourselves" (2016). Amelia read the book twice, and she sees the power of discussing this text with individuals. Rachel could not even finish reading the text once. Neither Amelia nor Rachel would ever teach this text, as they believe the book is dangerous. If a teacher puts this book in the hands of an adolescent reader, the teacher needs to be prepared to support the student throughout the reading experience. Giving a reader a book about a sensitive topic without such support could have disastrous consequences. As Rachel pointed out, if she had read *Wintergirls* in high school, particularly on her own, without the guidance of a teacher, she believes she would have "connected the dots" earlier and developed her eating disorder earlier.

By the same token, a teacher needs to be professionally and personally prepared to support the reader. Interestingly, both Amelia and Rachel expressed feeling unprepared as teachers for the kind of discussion it would take to counter body image issues. While neither participant advocates censorship, both believe a book addressing sensitive cultural issues, like *Wintergirls*, requires more scaffolding and support than they feel qualified to give. In addition, Amelia and Rachel struggled with articulating who should read this book—and under what circumstances. We cannot deny eating disorders are a part of the larger picture of how American culture (dys)functions. What we can do is acknowledge that reading books like *Wintergirls* can be a part of our culture's way of being, knowing, and understanding.

Eating Disorders as a Performance of Gender in Adolescence

Currently, eating disorders affect predominantly, though certainly not exclusively, girls and women (American Psychological Association, 2016). For Amelia and Rachel, eating disorders were a way for them to perform their identity as adolescent females. Butler (2007/1990) asserts that the action of gender requires a performance that is "a stylized repetition of acts," one that requires a conception of gender as "a constituted social temporality" and that has "the appearance of substance," a constructed identity (pp. 191–192). Both Amelia and Rachel engaged in this performance.

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In *Wintergirls*, Anderson describes how Cassie learned to perform her female adolescent identity, ironically at drama camp, where every girl in Cassie's cabin forced herself to throw up. Cassie learned her bulimia at drama camp. Lia describes how Cassie had "turned pro" at bulimia by the time she was in eighth grade, "color-coding the beginning of her binges either Doritos orange or blueberry purple so she'd know when the job was done. Her favorite puking finger was lined with scratches that never healed" (p. 147). For Cassie, and for Rachel, bulimia was a stylized repetition of acts—not just a one-time performance, but a way to repeatedly perform her female adolescent identity. For both Cassie and Rachel, bulimia was an integral part of stylizing the body and maintaining gender. Rachel noted how this repetition of acts brought her closer to her ideal, the image of the young

women in *Teen Vogue* and *Black Swan*, media representations that helped her learn what a female can and should look like.

Butler (2007/1990) notes that this performance requires a conception of gender as situated in social temporality, which is to say gender is a verb, not a noun, and that it can change. Lia is not automatically a "wintergirl"; she becomes one over time. After Cassie's death, Lia's eating disorder continues to progress, making her weaker and weaker, physically, mentally, and emotionally. As Lia reaches 93.5 pounds, she notes she barely weighs enough to push down on the accelerator in her car. She is paranoid, and she is having hallucinations from lack of nourishment. She envisions Cassie in the aisles of a pharmacy as she is looking for laxatives and diuretics. Cassie tells Lia, "You're not dead, but you're not alive, either. You're a wintergirl, Lia-Lia, caught in between the worlds. You're a ghost with a beating heart" (pp. 195–196).

If I do not include difficult texts like *Wintergirls* in my classroom, I am avoiding a valuable learning experience, an opportunity to engage students with challenging, important conversations about issues that affect their health and well-being.

Lia is in the process of changing, moving from adolescent female to adolescent wintergirl, and soon, to deceased female. Amelia and Rachel experienced similar performances of gender—Amelia through her binge eating and Rachel through her anorexia and bulimia. Their gendered identities changed over time as they performed the acts involved with disordered eating. For Amelia, fitness apps, blogs, and books served as significant media representations, teaching her how to perform her identity as a female. For Rachel, magazines, films, and books helped guide her toward her changing performance of gender, moving her from a healthy girl to a battling woman.

For Butler, the performance of gender involves the appearance of substance as a constructed identity. For Lia in *Wintergirls,* this culminates in being labeled medically stable after an all-too-brief stay in the hospital while awaiting a bed at a treatment facility. Yet Anderson lets the reader see how Lia constructs her identity: "I failed eating, failed drinking, failed not cutting myself into shreds. Failed friendship. Failed sisterhood and daughterhood. Failed mirrors and scales and phone calls. Good thing I'm stable" (p. 227). For Lia, her identity is so wrapped up in her eating disorder, she is not sure who she is without it. To those around her, her doctors and her family, her identity has the appearance of substance, the appearance of stability. For Lia, who has so carefully constructed her identity through her eating disorder, she is less convinced. She observes, "I don't know what I'm supposed to look like anymore" (p. 228). She has relied so heavily on media representations to tell her who and what to look like that, once she can no longer construct that identity, she is not sure who she is.

This is why Amelia's and Rachel's words haunt me as a teacher. When Amelia said that *Wintergirls* is basically a how-to manual for how to have an eating disorder, I had to ask myself, "Is this a media representation I want influencing adolescent readers in my classroom?" I realize that, as a teacher, I do not get to choose which media representations will have the most influence on students. If it is not *Wintergirls*, it will be blogs or films or magazines. We cannot protect our adolescents from all of the media influences that could potentially sell them an eating disorder. However, while that is true, as a teacher educator, I am keenly aware of the state standards as well. I know that by the end of twelfth grade, we need students to be able to read and comprehend texts independently. Students need practice and guidance as they learn how to make sense of texts for themselves. If I do not include difficult texts like *Wintergirls* in my classroom, I am avoiding a valuable learning experience, an opportunity to engage students with challenging, important conversations about issues that affect their health and well-being.

By including *Wintergirls* on my reading list, I am giving students the opportunity to share their interpretation of a text as a how-to manual, and then taking that conversation to the next level. What do you, as a reader, do with this knowledge? If a text *can* function as a how-to manual, how do you make sense of that text? Are there other readings of that same text? We can use this as an opportunity to practice critical literacy skills, working together to unpack questions

such as: What does this text mean to me? How would *Wintergirls* be different if Lia had died from her illness? What is Anderson really trying to say? Instead of leaving a reader to grapple with these questions alone and unsupported, I can help students better understand how *Wintergirls* can function as a cautionary tale. We can learn to push back against the how-to model. And then there is Rachel, who said *Wintergirls* made her "miss" her eating disorder. Like Lia, her eating disorder had become an integral part of her identity. Her anorexia and her bulimia were how she performed adolescence. What other media representations can we offer to adolescent females that would provide a healthier how-to manual for how to not only perform but to be an adolescent female in the world?

Reading Is Not Enough

As I noticed in my adolescent literature course, reading was not enough. We, as teachers, cannot just place a book in a student's hands and think our job is done. Indeed, most of us understand that is where our job begins. We can use media representations—like books, films, and blogs—to begin a close reading of the role of gender in performing adolescence and to begin a critique of what these media representations are selling to adolescents that influence this performance.

We can begin by supplementing students' reading with counter-narratives through research articles, nonfiction works, and informational texts. The National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) offers a wealth of research-based support materials on its website (https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org), and the American Psychological Association (APA) offers a network of support resources as well (http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/eating.aspx). Marya Hornbacher's (2006/1997) gripping memoir, *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia,* provides a firsthand account of one woman's battle with eating disorders, while Daniel Becker's (2005) cautionary tale, *This Mean Disease: Growing Up in the Shadow of My Mother's Anorexia Nervosa,* offers insight into how eating disorders affect those around someone afflicted by the disease. Informational texts can help provide support for readers as well, including the APA publication *My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions and Eating* (Schechter, 2009), winner of the Moonbeam Children's Book Award for Health Issues, and Costin and Grabb's (2011) *8 Keys to Recovery from an Eating Disorder: Effective Strategies from Therapeutic Practice and Personal Experience*, co-written by a therapist and her former patient.

We can build upon this important reading by engaging students in critical dialogue. Authors in professional journals have offered myriad ideas for critical dialogue over the years, from dialogue journals to Socratic seminars. My recent experiences have encouraged me to look at interdisciplinary approaches to critical dialogue. Higgins and Begoray (2012) offer a framework for critical media health literacy (CMHL), which they define as "a right of citizenship [that] empowers individuals and groups, in a risky consumer society, to critically interpret and use media as a means to engage in decision-making processes and dialogues; exert control over their health and everyday events; and make healthy changes for themselves and their communities" (p. 142). Their approach to critical dialogue integrates work from critical health literacy and critical media literacy. They advocate for a curriculum founded on the beliefs that

We, as teachers, cannot just place a book in a student's hands and think our job is done. Indeed, most of us understand that is where our job begins.

- education can result in social change;
- learners can act on problems of importance to themselves and the community;
- curriculum can facilitate an awareness of power dynamics;
- conscientization can take place among learners; and
- learners can challenge current social norms (p. 144).

In my adolescent literature course, I am considering revising the curriculum to include attention to critical health literacy, since so many issues in young adult literature are related to health, including eating disorders.

Taylor, Diamini, Khanyile, Mpanza, and Sathiparsad (2012) offer another option: role play. In their

article "Exploring the Use of Role Play in a School-Based Programme to Reduce Teenage Pregnancy," these authors describe how they use role play in a Life Skills course, a required component of the high school curriculum, as a way to examine gender norms, to understand cultural influences, and to change potentially destructive behaviors. They report, "Our experience of role play in a classroom situation suggests that it is effective in providing information, modelling behaviour, developing learners' inter-personal skills, and increasing their self-efficacy" (pp. 446–447). Imagine how we, as teachers, could use role play as a way to examine the pressures on young men and women to perform adolescence in a particular way.

When I recommend that students read a book like *Wintergirls*, I have an obligation to pay attention to what I do with this media representation. I need to pay attention to the performance it encourages and perhaps requires of some readers. I need to be aware of what values I am exchanging with students.

Many teachers already engage in critical media studies with students in an effort to better understand cultural influences. I am thinking about ways I can bring this into my adolescent literature course, using media, including books like *Wintergirls*, to engage students in role play about ways to interrupt and change potentially destructive behaviors, including disordered eating. Taylor et al. (2012) advocate for the use of role play, explaining, "Social change programmes invariably face major obstacles. Although the role plays introduced learners to a variety of perspectives, they live in environments where patriarchy is dominant. Role plays can challenge these perspectives and offer learners a different viewpoint but, of course, intentions do not necessarily translate into behaviour, especially if the modelling behaviour is not reinforced" (p. 447). This encourages me to ask: What are the perspectives I want to challenge in my classroom? How can I best challenge them, especially if I hope to change behaviors?

Roofe, Brinegar, and Seymour (2015) offer another promising approach: service learning. They examine how interdisciplinary service-learning projects can benefit communities and students alike, focusing on a service-learning project about eating disorder prevention. In their work, they included students majoring in nutrition, art, and psychology at a public university. Participants took an Eating Attitudes Test and then took part in community events related to eating disorders. This work has me thinking about offering students in my adolescent literature course the opportunity to work with eating disorder specialists throughout the community, from nutritionists to physicians to counselors. Service learning offers the outward application piece—the opportunity for students to act in positive ways on the critical dialogue and role play we engage in within the classroom.

Closing Thoughts

This article is not intended to be a critique of Anderson or of *Wintergirls*. Instead, it is a shared call to arms to everyone who cares about young adults. As educators, we need to be aware of the messages the media is marketing to adolescents. We want to place important, relevant books, like *Wintergirls*, in the hands of readers. Since marketing is all about identifying and feeding behavior patterns, we need to be aware of what behavior patterns we are and are not identifying—and how we are feeding them. When I recommend that students read a book like *Wintergirls*, I have an obligation to pay attention to what I do with this media representation. I need to pay attention to the performance it encourages and perhaps requires of some readers. I need to be aware of what values I am exchanging with students.

Anderson concludes *Wintergirls* with Lia describing her recovery. "I am spinning the silk threads of my story, weaving the fabric of my world. The tiny elf dancer became a wooden doll whose strings were jerked by people not paying attention" (p. 277). I need to be someone who *is* paying attention. I set out to learn about the extent to which the media representations that participants have been exposed to (novels, magazines, etc.) served as a contributing factor to their understanding of the role of eating disorders as a performance of gender in adolescence. I learned that my literature choices—what I choose to include in and to exclude from my classroom—have a profound

effect on how students learn to perform gender in adolescence. Eating disorders are not going away any time soon. Therefore, I will continue to teach *Wintergirls*, but I will be even more aware of what I *do* with the text. As Anderson concludes, "There is no magic cure, no making it all go away forever. There are only small steps upward" (p. 278). Supporting materials, critical dialogue, role play, service learning, and young adult literature can help me exchange important values with students. They can help me help students take small steps upward—and that is something worth selling.

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