Nora **Peterman**

Franchised Fictions:

Youth Navigating Social and Parasocial Readings across Branded Young Adult Literature

Children's and young adult (YA) literature has always been marketed and sold for profit. However, the scale and scope of franchised adaptations of literature, tie-ins, and commodities have exponentially increased in the past few decades (Mackey, 2011). Positioning J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books as paradigmatic, Taxel (2011) argued that "the Potter phenomenon" represents a comprehensive transformation of the publishing industry in which books are branded and merchandised in a self-replicating cycle of consumerism: book series promote associated films, television programs, and merchandise, while films, television programs, and merchandise promote the associated books (p. 282). The publishing of young adult literature is now characterized by the production of series and sequels, cross-media merchandising, and even the branding of authors themselves (Taxel, 2011). These YA franchises are comprised of a variety of print, media, and material texts, all of which contribute to and reflect the commercial "brand" while developing the larger storyworld (Sekeres, 2009).

For example, Suzanne Collins's Hunger Games series (2008—2010) is associated with blockbuster films generating millions of dollars in revenue, as well as a vast array of commercial products that adolescents (and their parents) may purchase. A Hunger Games fan might signal her affiliation with the series by brandishing mockingjay jewelry, wearing a "Team Gale" t-shirt, or purchasing limited edition Capitol-themed makeup and nail polish. School supplies are another large market for YA franchise merchandising, with items such as branded backpacks, notebooks, binders, pens, and mobile phone and laptop computer cases available for purchase.

Despite its immense popularity, we know relatively little about how adolescent readers are navigating and valuing the range of commercial texts that are increasingly part of their reading experiences. There currently exists a complicated combination of forces influencing the proliferation of branded young adult fiction, as youth buying power shapes the publishing industry, and that industry markets to youth. Are adolescents passive consumers of fortune, or are they savvy in their choices based on critical reviews of the market? What is the "value" of these books to the adolescent reader, and what ideological work is performed between branded YA fiction and the readers who engage with these texts?

In this article, I examine how a group of Latinx high school students read between and across the varied print, media, and material (such as related merchandise) texts in popular YA fiction franchises. I explore the ways in which these students positioned themselves as both readers and consumers of commodified young adult literature through social and parasocial transactions with these texts, and I consider the ethical and pedagogical implications of their engagement.

Market Values and the Commodification of Young Adult Literature

It is helpful to situate current trends in YA publishing within the broader industry context. The proliferation of branded young adult fiction is reflective of wider

e16-28-ALAN-Fall19.indd 16 10/8/19 1:37 PM

economic shifts in the marketplace. Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, independent publishers began to merge with larger publishing houses as well as transnational conglomerates such as the News Corporation, Disney, Viacom, and Bertelsmann. As these conglomerates gained control over the "culture industry," the practices of serialization, spin-offs, and merchandising of young adult fiction became common in order to maximize profits through transmedia production (Martens, 2010; Taxel, 2011). Diana Sekeres (2009) defined these texts as "branded fiction"—a genre including books that are created and sold as one of many products under a single brand name (p. 400). This recursive relationship is similarly described by Hade (2001), who has suggested that "publishers understand that they are not in the book business; rather they sell ideas they call "brands," and they market their brands through "synergized" goods designed to infiltrate as many aspects of a child's life as possible" (p. 159).

Although fans of branded YA novels welcome the myriad products and opportunities for interacting with these texts, many teachers and researchers have expressed concerns that publishers prioritize the earnings potential of franchised young adult fiction over literary quality (see Bullen, 2009 Erzen, 2012; Johnson, 2010; Taxel, 2011). Zipes (2001) has cautioned that while the publishing industry is progressively more "driven by commodity consumption," it "at the same time sets the parameters of reading aesthetic taste" (p. 172). These two purposes are not easily reconciled in transmedia branding—profitable young adult literature properties require the rapid production and launch of multiple products, and the integrity of an individual text is less important than its capacity to expand the potential audience and strengthen the total franchise-brand awareness (Aarseth, 2006). Reflecting the new industry norms, Sekeres (2009) argued that:

> Publishers and marketers also want children to be consumers as well as readers. Therefore, in marketing terms, a book that is a stand-alone product is valuable for its intrinsic purpose, but a book that is tied in with many other products has added value—it can enhance brand awareness, dispose children to want to buy other products in the brand, and promote a broader conception of story and character through all the brand products. (p. 403)

The market-driven logic of transmedia branding has thus amplified fears that rampant commercialization of young adult literature repositions reading as an act of consumerism, rather than an intellectual or imaginative endeavor (Garcia, 2013; Taxel, 2011).

However, it is also important to note that despite persistent assumptions to the contrary, the commodification of children's narratives is hardly a new phenomenon. One of the earliest manifestations of "spin-off" merchandising occurred in 1744 when children's publisher John Newbery sold his book, *A Little Pretty Pocket-book*, alongside toys, including balls "for Little Master Tommy" and pincushions "for Pretty Miss Polly" (Bernstein, 2013, p. 459). Widely recognized for his pioneering role in constructing the notion of children as a distinct market, Newbery specified that both the book and attendant toys were "Intended for the Instruction and Amusement" of children and supported moral development (Bernstein, 2013; Sekeres, 2009).

The market-driven logic of transmedia branding has thus amplified fears that rampant commercialization of young adult literature repositions reading as an act of consumerism, rather than an intellectual or imaginative endeavor.

While Newbery thus defined children's literature in relationship to play, many other well-known authors subsequently explored the possibilities of branding their stories and characters. Popular children's literature commodities included Elsie Dinsmore paper dolls; Lewis Carroll's approval of a *Wonderland* Postage-Stamp Case (Mackey, 1998; 2011); the myriad products of Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* franchise, such as a plush Peter Rabbit doll, Peter Rabbit wallpaper, and Peter Rabbit games; and Kewpie dolls and wallpaper associated with Rose O'Neill's comic strip (Sekeres, 2009). L. Frank Baum further extended the commercialization of children's narratives by adapting and re-telling *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in a stage musical and hand-colored film, in addition to marketing toys and games as related tie-ins (Hearn, 2000; Mackey, 2011).

Although this historical context has been largely overlooked in addressing more recent developments in the commercialization of children's literature, Robin

e16-28-ALAN-Fall19.indd 17 10/8/19 1:37 PM

Bernstein has called for a reconceptualization of the field of children's literature that acknowledges and foregrounds this fundamental relationship between children's literature, material culture, and the actions of playing. Bernstein (2013) argued that "the history of children's literature exists not in opposition to but in integration with the histories of children's material culture and children's play" (p. 459). Ahistorical beliefs ignoring this triangulation ultimately erect arbitrary and counterfactual barriers that dangerously mask the market-driven powers that influence the publishing and distribution of this literature.

However, this erasure of difference becomes even more pronounced when these texts are commodified and transmediated into television, film, and commercial merchandise. The overwhelming majority of branded young adult fiction franchises feature conventionally attractive, white, straight, cis-gendered teenagers in either suburban or uber-wealthy urban settings

Bernstein's position is especially salient given both the increasing commodification of young adult literature and the relationship between hyper-commodification and hyper-homogenization in popular culture and media (Wee, 2010). Western capitalism is inexorably intertwined with white supremacy and patriarchy (hooks, 1997), and these intersections influence the production and distribution of popular young adult literature. The lack of diversity in YA publishing is a pervasive and well-documented issue. Numerous scholars have examined the persistent disparities in representation of diverse cultural identities in young adult literature, as well as the continued institutional exclusion of authors and editors of color by publishing houses (e.g., Bickmore, Xu, & Sheridan, 2017; Brooks & Cueto, 2018; Garcia, 2013; Larrick, 1965; Thomas, 2016).

However, this erasure of difference becomes even more pronounced when these texts are commodified and transmediated into television, film, and commercial merchandise. The overwhelming majority of branded young adult fiction franchises feature conventionally attractive, white, straight, cis-gendered teenagers in either suburban or uber-wealthy urban settings (Wee, 2010). This is not accidental—young adult franchises are produced for specific demographic markets, aimed at maximizing profitability by targeting audiences with purchasing power. Within this system, youth of color and LGBTQ youth are underrepresented (or misrepresented) in these texts by design, yet due to what Garcia (2013) terms "the machinations of capitalism" and the saturation of the market, these same youth actively read and consume these texts.

As a teacher and researcher, I questioned what this means for youth whose cultural identities are portrayed problematically or excluded altogether. How does this wide range of print, media, and material texts collectively shape a teen's reading universe, and how might living and engaging with branded products influence how they make sense of the associated stories and the characters?

Conceptualizing Adolescent Literacies, Reading, and Identity

In order to investigate these questions, I drew from critical, sociocultural perspectives of literacy that conceptualize reader and text as broadly construed. This includes scholarship aligning with New Literacy Studies and theories of multimodality (Gutiérrez, 2008; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress & Street, 2006) that conceptualize *texts* as symbolic resources or signifying practices with varying affordances, as well as from Pahl and Rowsell's (2010) theory of artifactual literacies, which materially situates literacy, multimodality, and culture. Reading within this framework is participatory, collaborative, and distributed, and the interconnectedness between novels and their accompanying texts creates an immersive world in which each aspect recursively informs the others.

This intertextual framework of young adult branded fiction draws heavily from bodies of scholarship on transmediation and transmedia entertainment. Transmedia as a stand-alone term literally means "across media," referring broadly to the range of textual relationships that exist within an entertainment franchise (Jenkins, 2013). Jenkins (2006) theorized "transmedia

e16-28-ALAN-Fall19.indd 18 10/8/19 1:37 PM

storytelling" is a narrative approach that is distributed and participatory, and entails systematically spreading the elements of a story across multiple media platforms of varying interactivity for the purpose of creating a "unified and coordinated entertainment experience" (par. 3). Jenkins argued that each of these texts reflects the unique affordances of its respective medium in order to contribute to the development of the larger storyworld. For the purposes of this article, I use the terms *branded young adult fiction, young adult fiction franchise,* and *commodified young adult literature* interchangeably. However, it is important to note that although branded fiction can be understood as a transmedia franchise, the reverse is not true: Per Sekeres (2009), the term *branded fiction* signals the inclusion of books within its intertextual genre. However, many transmedia franchises do not include printed texts, nor are books required of transmedia storytelling.

In order to understand how participants were responding to branded texts, I drew from transactional theories of reader response (Rosenblatt, 1983) that examine the social practices of youth engaging with these texts, as well as the social conditions underlying these reading processes (e. g., Brooks & Browne, 2012; Cai, 2008; Lewis, 2000). Rosenblatt (1994) characterized reading as "at once an intensely individual and an intensely social activity, an activity that from the earliest years involves the whole spectrum of ways of looking at the world" (p. 1089). These social readings are necessarily mediated by culture and by identities that are multiple, mutually constitutive, and intermeshing (Lugones, 2014). Anchored by bell hooks's conception of "homeplace" (hooks, 1990), Brooks and Browne (2012) theorized a culturally situated theory of reader response that examines how "responses are overlapping, transient and often revised" (p. 83), representing a reader's multilayered cultural identity and shifting positions. Within this framework, the identity work that adolescents are performing in their textual engagement is a socially mediated and embodied practice of interpersonal authorship, continually written and rewritten across various interactions and histories of participation (Lewis & del Valle, 2009; Moje & Luke, 2009) and shaped by intersecting systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991).

My understanding of "social reading" thus stems from scholarship that encompasses contexts (e.g., the ways in which the intersecting social, cultural, and political positionings of an individual influence their construction of meaning) as well as activities (e.g., a social activity that communally constructs meaning), cohering with the work of scholars including Dressman (2004), Dressman and Webster (2001), Park (2012), and Twomey (2007). This is also situated in conversation with communication and media studies that examine parasocial relationships between readers/viewers and characters/actors (e.g., Calvert, Richards, & Kent, 2014; Giles, 2002; Gola, Richards, Lauricella, & Calvert, 2013; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Jennings & Alper, 2016). Parasocial relationships can be understood as short- and long-term emotional connections and intense, wishful identification that youth construct with popular media. The capitalist structure of the media industry ensures that popular YA characters are ubiquitous in the lives of youth, as cross-media promotions elicit these responses by saturating the market with commercial texts and positioning actors as branded commodities for youth to consume (Johnson, 2013).

Framework, the identity work that adolescents are performing in their textual engagement is a socially mediated and embodied practice of interpersonal authorship, continually written and rewritten across various interactions and histories of participation and shaped by intersecting systems of oppression.

Methods of Inquiry

This qualitative study draws from intersectional, feminist, research traditions (Calderón, Delgado Bernal, Huber, Malagón, & Vélez, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Ellsworth, 1992) that attends to the ways in which systems of power intersect with multiple and multilayered identities, value the experiences and identities of research participants, and collaboratively generate knowledge. Throughout the study, I attempted to adopt an inquiry stance that was both perspectival and conceptual (Cochran-Smith &

e16-28-ALAN-Fall19.indd 19 10/8/19 1:37 PM

Lytle, 2009); therefore, central to this project was a privileging of uncertainty and improvisation in developing relationships and learning in shared dialogue with students.

I conducted my research at Unidos Academy (all names are pseudonyms), a public charter high school in a large Northeastern city that served a primarily Latinx student body. I had previously worked as a substitute teacher at this school, and I had longstanding personal relationships with some teachers and administrators. These relationships facilitated my (re) entry into the building, this time as a researcher, and I drew from these individuals' emic understanding of the context to design a study that would allow me to participate in the fabric of the school and contribute meaningfully to the learning community. I began my research as a participant-observer in ninth-grade Advisory class and English Seminar classes. My role within these classes was somewhat fluid—I provided literacy support to individuals and groups of students and occasionally led instruction, but did not grade or otherwise evaluate or manage students. I also participated in the school's "Homework Zone" twice a week, working with students who attended an open study hall held during last period and after school in the library.

I continued this participant-observation during the second phase of my research, which began after the winter break. In this phase, 11 ninth-grade students voluntarily participated in a weekly after-school group in which we collectively engaged in an inquiry into branded young adult fiction. One participant self-identified as male, and the remaining 10 students self-identified as female. All of the focal students self-identified as Latinx or Hispanic, with varying Puerto Rican, Dominican, Mexican, and Brazilian heritages (see Table 1 for additional details).

I did not define any specific practices or dispositions that "counted" as reading or engagement with branded young adult fiction, instead choosing to invite students to construct (and reconstruct) their own understandings of these terms as part of our collective inquiry. As such, participants' own perspectives and questions drove this inquiry, which took place over

Table 1. *Inquiry group members and their self-identified race/ethnicity and fandoms*

Name	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	YA Brands
Marilyn	Female	14	Puerto Rican & Brazilian; Latina	The Hunger Games; Divergent; Harry Potter; The Fault in Our Stars; The Maze Runner
Rosa	Female	15	Puerto Rican	Twilight; The Fault in Our Stars
Marena	Female	15	Hispanic; Mexican & Puerto Rican	The Vampire Diaries; The Fault in Our Stars; The Hunger Games
Lucy	Female	14	Hispanic; Puerto Rican	The Fault in Our Stars; The Hunger Games; Twilight; Divergent; The Maze Runner
Anna	Female	14	Hispanic	The Hunger Games; Immortal Instruments; Divergent; The Maze Runner; The Perks of Being a Wallflower; Marvel Avengers
Sophia	Female	14	Hispanic; Latina	Divergent; The Vampire Diaries; The Fault in Our Stars; If I Stay; The Hunger Games
Inez	Female	14	Hispanic; Puerto Rican	The Hunger Games; The Fault in Our Stars; Harry Potter; Teen Wolf
Brooklyn	Female	14	Latina; Dominican & African American	The Fault in Our Stars; If I Stay; Twilight; The Hunger Games
Tiffany	Female	15	Hispanic; Dominican	If I Stay; The Fault in Our Stars; Twilight; The Vampire Diaries; The Hunger Games
Cassia	Female	14	Latina	The Vampire Diaries; The Hunger Games; Divergent; The Perks of Being a Wallflower
Xavier	Male	14	Puerto Rican	The Maze Runner; The Hunger Games; Divergent; Marvel Avengers; Twilight

e16-28-ALAN-Fall19.indd 20 10/8/19 1:37 PM

six months. I tried to position myself as a resource and helper in these spaces in order to gradually develop more equitable, reciprocal relationships with students (hooks, 1990). However, I also remained aware of the automatic power and privilege stemming from my identity as a white, cis-gendered adult, and from my education status and role as a researcher. As a white woman working with Latinx youth, there existed an inherent challenge not to replicate patterns of oppression within the inquiry group that my research was intended to resist (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Collins, 2015). Rather than attempting to ignore or diminish the significance of my own identity, I endeavored to continually interrogate the implications of my positionality on my relationship with participants, and to ethically and transparently question my assumptions and perceptions of our interactions, as well as the limits of my understandings (Mohanty, 2013). Our collective inquiry centered students' experience, knowledge, and values. I shared content and discussion prompts during our meetings, but primarily served as a facilitator so that participants could explore the questions and topics that were personally important to them, even if these diverged from my own intended purposes for that week (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Our meetings took place within the school library and lasted approximately one hour each. Members of the after-school inquiry group also participated in focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews in the first and last months of the study. I collected additional data through participant-observation in these students' English Seminar and Freshman Advisory classes, surveys, and documentation of student artifacts (including personal possessions, artwork, and media texts), as well as a group Tumblr page co-created by participants during the school year.

Triangulated data was intended to provide multiple dimensions of understanding in examining how branded fiction was taken up by participants over time and across contexts; reflexive review and inductive coding of the data was ongoing throughout the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I also invited students to provide member checks in the form of follow-up discussions and group review of coding and analysis (Maxwell, 2013). In this article, I draw primarily from transcripts of inquiry group meetings, class sessions, and interviews to focus on the social behaviors of participants, drawing "telling cases" (Mitchell, 1984) of their engaged positions and positionings.

Findings

Students entered this study expressing their affinity for the most popular branded young adult fiction franchises in the marketplace, including The Hunger Games, Divergent, and Maze Runner series (dystopian fiction), the Twilight, Harry Potter, and The Vampire Diaries series (supernatural fiction), and *The Fault in Our Stars, Paper Towns,* and *If I Stay* (romantic fiction). As a group, participants engaged with almost all of the most successful and widely recognized young adult fiction brands in circulation at the time of the study. Our collective inquiry revealed that in contrast to popular notions of reading as an individual activity, participants engaged in embodied and material transactions with a range of branded YA texts to build and negotiate social and parasocial relationships. While many of their practices ascribed to conventional expressions of fannish devotion (Jenkins, 2006; Stein, 2015), students' transactions also revealed possibilities for transgression and resistance against hegemonic narratives, challenging binary or teleological characterizations of critical agency and subjectivity.

Whether reading a novel, watching a film or television series, or interacting around material artifacts, students' responses to YA texts primarily served to signal their affinity and brand commitment to other members of their friend, family, and digital communities.

Forming Social Connections in/through Emotional Responses

Whether reading a novel, watching a film or television series, or interacting around material artifacts, students' responses to YA texts primarily served to signal their affinity and brand commitment to other members of their friend, family, and digital communities. One of the most frequently shared responses were embodied performances of high emotion, defined by Louisa Stein (2015) in her research on millennial fandoms as a combination of intimate emotion and high performa-

e16-28-ALAN-Fall19.indd 21 10/8/19 1:37 PM

tivity. This response was especially common among the girls in the inquiry group, who were all in decisive agreement that sharing extreme emotional response in both face-to-face and digital contexts served as a defining characteristic of "true" fans. For example, Marilyn characterized her responses to branded texts as one of two extremes, saying that she would "rant when I'm upset and fangirl when I'm happy. There's no in-between." Marilyn shared her "rants" with friends, teachers, and on her personal Tumblr blog, where she described "pages and pages of ranting" about various plot developments and characters. In contrast, she shared that "fangirling" included activities such as:

Crying served as an identity marker for participants, connoting particular understandings and orientations toward the brand that are shared with other fans, thus establishing and reasserting their belonging in particular social milieus.

> Cry and happy cry, and be like "Oh my God, this is so great!" And just talk about how it's so great, about dumb little things, like, "God, it's so great!" And just kind of repeat and repeat. Repeat all over the floor, eat cookies, and cry and question your life.

Whether "ranting" or "fangirling," Marilyn's responses reflect the high performativity that is integral to insider participation within a "culture of feels" (Stein, 2015, p. 134). She valued YA texts that elicited extreme emotional responses, especially crying. Other participants echoed similar sentiments. Nearly all of the girls had read and/or watched John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, and frequently brought it up in conversation during their individual interviews, inquiry-group meetings, and informal conversations throughout the school day. In nearly every instance, participants repeatedly mentioned crying in response to the text in order to illustrate the depth of their commitment to the brand. For example, Lucy stated that *The Fault in Our Stars* was her favorite movie because "It really made me cry. Like even when I put it on now, it just makes me cry". Moreover, she was not interested in *Paper Towns*, another branded John Green novel and film, because she thought it would "not really make me cry." Similarly, Anna both read and watched *The Fault in Our Stars*, and when asked to share her thoughts, she responded, "I liked it. I mean, I cried for a long time." Inez also shared a similar response while watching the movie with her mother and her best friend after first reading the novel:

> Oh my God, so much tears. I was already fangirling soon as he said, "The fault is . . . ." I was like, "Oh my God!" Me, my mom, and my best friend went to watch it and when we went in, there was a couple of girls beside her. She was like, "Oh my God, did you read the book?" She was like, "I hope I'm not weird. Like don't find it weird if I touch you or anything," because she was fangirling too. She was like, "Oh my God, did you read the book?" And then she was crying, mascara running off her face.

Like Marilyn above, Inez characterized her response to *The Fault in Our Stars* (as well as the response of the girls sitting nearby) as "fangirling," and her description of this experience suggested an implicit expectation for readers to demonstrate an intense, visible reaction. In fact, it was through their shared demonstrations of high emotion that Inez and these girls formed an immediate social bond. Crying was thus understood as a communal activity, serving as social currency both in the moment of transacting with the text or afterwards in recounting the experience.

At one point, I wondered whether it was even possible for someone to be considered a *TFIOS* fan if they did not cry. This question was indirectly raised during an inquiry-group conversation about *The Fault in Our Stars*, when Rosa shared that she had recently seen the movie. Although she initially stated that she "doesn't really cry at a movie," Rosa reentered the conversation after other group members shared their own emotionally driven transactions with the brand, emphatically stating that she wanted to read the novel:

> **Nora:** Why do you want to read those?
>
> **Rosa**: 'Cause I've seen the movie, *The Fault in Our Stars*.
>
> **Nora:** So you would read the book after seeing the movie?
>
> **Rosa**: Yeah, I want to cry . . . I'm emotional. Like really, really emotional.
>
> **Nora:** Was *The Fault In Our Stars* something that you were crying over? Or something else?
>
> **Rosa**: I didn't really cry when I was watching the movie, but I'm gonna read the book, and then, I'm gonna cry. [...]

e16-28-ALAN-Fall19.indd 22 10/8/19 1:37 PM

Brooklyn: You can't not cry.

Rosa's deliberate intention to read and cry, and Brooklyn's affirmation of her approach to these texts reflected the importance of affective economics (Jenkins, 2006) at work in their intertwining of emotional commitments and consumption. Brooklyn expected Rosa to cry because it was a collectively shared expectation for affirming (and reaffirming) fannish devotion. I compare this response to Stein's (2015) discussion of fan reblogging practices on Tumblr, which she characterized as "individual collective affirmation" (p. 155). Like Tumblr blogging, crying, and then talking or writing about crying with others, was a way for participants to make visible and celebrate communally shared emotion. These emotional commitments were sedimented through repeated enactment of these transactions in public, participatory locations. Crying served as an identity marker for participants, connoting particular understandings and orientations toward the brand that are shared with other fans, thus establishing and reasserting their belonging in particular social milieus.

On the surface, participants' heightened and highly performative emotional responses might appear to reflect a passive and uncritical consumption of YA franchises. Their aesthetic responses in many instances may also reflect the emotional intensity of the novels themselves, leading to a shared readerly intimacy. Such perceptions are also gendered, as teen girls are considered especially likely to engage in a "fantasy crush" or "celebrity worship" (Murray, 2007). Yet the exchange between Rosa and Brooklyn illustrates their consciousness and intentional navigation of the "rules" guiding the performance of emotional transaction, as well as the social benefits of cultivating this intense vulnerability. Berlant (1998) has suggested that "intimacy builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relations" (p. 282). In such instances, it seems important to note that emotional amplification does not necessarily signify unqualified acceptance or approval, but rather access to social currency and intimate belonging within a particular context of relations.

Forming Parasocial Connections through Immersive Engagement

In addition to emotionally driven social interactions with their peers, inquiry-group participants highlighted the possibilities for teen fans to immerse themselves within a branded YA series using material artifacts, joining and interacting with their favorite characters. Describing these parasocial transactions, students shared that they desired, purchased, and used products associated with branded YA novels "to feel like I could be somewhat closer to the book while reading it, to feel a part of it," contradicting depictions of adolescent consumption as merely fad or fashion (Brooks, 2008). They also characterized their engagement with products such as t-shirts, jewelry, make-up, and technology accessories as a form of "grown" or "more mature" play, a way for teens to defictionalize a brand and make it feel real. Xavier made this distinction while discussing Hunger Games merchandise:

In addition to emotionally driven social interactions with their peers, inquiry-group participants highlighted the possibilities for teen fans to immerse themselves within a branded YA series using material artifacts, joining and interacting with their favorite characters.

> "People say like, 'Oh, like, um, I feel like I'm in the movie *Hunger Games*.' Or like everyone does the pointing thing and they'll be like [enacts the District 12 salute and whistles], like on the *Hunger Games*. [Laughs] . . . So people do it so they can pretend that they're in the movie then. Or pretend that they're in the books if they're fans of the books, I guess. They do it to show other people that they like it.

Other participants similarly owned and/or desired products that allowed them to live with, and live within, their favorite branded storyworlds, emphasizing the importance of products that reflected something that was personally meaningful to them in the novel, film, or television show. Inez shared that she especially wanted t-shirts, a phone case, or a wall decal with the "tribe tree" or a quote that she would "want to be part of my life," something that would remind her "that's what I love . . . and then it gives you imagery to live with it, too, and you're just mind-blown." Anna also shared that when she read a book and it impacted her, having the shirt or necklace "keeps that impact . . . ; it reminds me of something important,"

e16-28-ALAN-Fall19.indd 23 10/8/19 1:37 PM

while Marena explained that branded material texts "have to be like a saying or something, like a little thing that they had said that was meaningful and stuff like that."

These comments reflected a negotiated identification by participants in which they explored transactive approaches for positioning themselves in relation to and with the storyworld (Murray, 2007). While their identities and lived experiences were excluded from "official" narratives, these material texts allowed students to adopt and adapt elements of the storyworld into their lived experiences and to make them their own. This identity work was further complicated by participants' affinity for multiple YA brands. Few participants would exclusively purchase branded products associated with a single novel, instead transacting with and entangling multiple brands and storyworlds.

This perspective was taken up within the inquiry group during a conversation about Hunger Games merchandise. In the first novel of The Hunger Games series, Katniss wears a pin in the shape of a mockingjay (a fictional bird) as her "tribute token" in the arena. Over the course of the series, her pin takes on increasing significance as the mockingjay becomes the symbol of the rebellion against the Capitol. In the following excerpt, Anna shared a necklace with a similar mockingjay charm that she found online.

> **Anna:** I like it. I don't know, 'cause it's cool. I saw this online, it's like a necklace with a mockingjay bird.
>
> **Marena:** I was gonna say that, too!
>
> **Anna:** And it's really pretty.
>
> **Marilyn:** Especially stuff like that, it can make you feel like you're part of it. Like, merchandise like that, I think it makes you feel like you're a part of it, like you're part of the rebellion.
>
> **Nora:** Would you ever buy something like that?
>
> **Anna:** If I had the money.
>
> **Marena:** But you wouldn't, 'cause you're broke. [Marena and Anna laugh]
>
> **Nora:** Would you ask for it as a gift?
>
> **Anna:** Yeah, yeah definitely.
>
> **Marena:** I think it's cool that it's a necklace. Just like the pin that she has, that's a necklace.
>
> **Anna:** I don't know, it's pretty. But it's also like you have her actual pin, so you've joined in. You've joined the rebellion. [Marena nodding.] They have it online.
>
> **Marilyn:** Yeah, like a part of the big rebellion. You get to be in that world, which makes you love it even more, then, because you make it the way you want. Like with choosing Gale and not Peeta.
>
> **Xavier:** I don't buy merchandise. What am I gonna to do with it?
>
> **Lucy:** Wear it?
>
> **Rosa:** Look. I have almost everything. Wait—yeah, almost everything Twilight. I have the poster board, I have the t-shirt of Jacob that my grandmother buys me, I have a necklace that says "I love werewolves." I have all of that for Jacob. So I can be with him.

Unlike other texts that feature a branded logo or reproduce specific phrases or images, Marilyn suggested that this type of product invites an especially desirable engagement with the story by making a reader feel "like you're a part of it, like you're part of the rebellion." Her position was affirmed by Marena and Anna, both of whom pointed out the resemblance of the necklace to Katniss's "actual pin" and their potential for feeling like they "joined in the rebellion."

However, these students did not only seek to enter a fictional universe, but to revise and remake it as well. By positioning themselves within this imagined context, students were resisting their narrative erasure and asserting their interpretive authority over the brand. This is illustrated in Marilyn's suggestion to "make it the way you want," in which she challenged the resolution of the central love triangle (and the conclusion of the series) by "choosing Gale over Peeta." Similarly, Rosa listed the many Twilight-themed products that she owns, noting that "I have all of that for Jacob. So I can *be with him*" (emphasis mine). Given the liminal boundaries between readers and branded fiction texts, transactions with these material products may be understood as a parasocial practice in which adolescents perform and play with marginalized storytelling identities; by manipulating the material texts of branded fiction, participants were negotiating their understanding of the anchor story and inserting themselves into its overarching narrative. While students in this instance did not offer an explicit critique of cultural (mis)representations within the storyworlds, their confidence in revising the narratives reflects their resistance and transgression of interpretive authority.

e16-28-ALAN-Fall19.indd 24 10/8/19 1:37 PM

Resisting Narrative Erasure through Social and Parasocial Connections

It is unlikely that adolescents who purchase a mockingjay necklace believe that this will actually transport them into a rebellion, yet this product allows the reader to become more immersed in the Hunger Games universe, to blend the physical and imaginative worlds so that the reader becomes a character within the narrative. Such parasocial activities reflect an ongoing "becoming" in relation to the text(s), a commitment to "the playing of the game . . . . being lost in the text, then, is finding oneself hidden in the play of the text. Paradoxically, it is the playing, the hiding, the losing, that allows one to be sought and eventually found" (Sumara, 1996, p. 69). For example, during a conversation about characters in the Twilight and Vampire Diaries series, Marena asked:

> **Marena:** What if this was about Hispanic vampires, imagine we'd be like . . .
>
> **Marilyn:** [laughter] I feel like Hispanic vampires, like we would always be getting together and calling each other cousins and stuff . . . watching out for each other.
>
> **Lucy & Marena:** [shouting in unison] Prima!
>
> **Anna:** [shouting] Primaaaa!! [group laughs]

While Marilyn, Marena, and Sophia were all enthusiastic consumers of both the Twilight and The Vampire Diaries series, this exchange illustrates the ways in which their consumerist practices may coincide with a critical interrogation of culture, diversity, and racial and ethnic inequality. When Marena directed the other group members toward a conversation about Hispanic vampires, she discursively included herself and her peers in this category by asking her fellow group members to "imagine *we'd* be like . . . ." Marilyn subsequently supported this positioning, suggesting, "*We* would always be getting together and calling *each other* cousins and stuff" (emphasis mine). Lucy, Marena, and Anna all affirmed Marilyn's statement while concomitantly signaling their own belonging in this community. They were laughing as they loudly shouted "Prima!"—a Spanish term for cousin and popular form of address among friends at Unidos Academy—doubly confirming their shared, contextual understanding of a Latinx identity.

Adapting semiotic elements of the branded texts, students were performing a creative recontextualization that connected storylines and characters to their individual and shared cultural identities. In this context, "the story itself is no longer discrete or sequential because there are many other voices and intentions populating its pages and many other products that add to it," and this fluidity thereby creates spaces for individual appropriation and repurposing of texts that may subvert the intentions of publishers and merchandisers (Sekeres, 2009, p. 412). Their identities were performed and produced, not transmitted, through their consumption of popular culture for specific purposes—purposes that may serve multiple and contradictory roles in the identities and positioning of these youth by dominant forces (Baudrillard, 1970/1998). From this perspective, forming parasocial connections through commercially branded products may in fact create opportunities for marginalized readers to challenge hegemonic texts, rewriting themselves and their identities into a more culturally conscious narrative.

Forming parasocial connections through commercially branded products may in fact create opportunities for marginalized readers to challenge hegemonic texts, rewriting themselves and their identities into a more culturally conscious narrative.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings provide insight into the ambiguous positioning of print novels within YA franchises, contest traditional notions of reader, author, and interpretive authority, and suggest pedagogical opportunities for conceptualizing engaged reading and reader response as embodied and materially situated. We can therefore understand students' transactions with commodified literature through McRobbie's (2005) concept of agency as a reinventing of identity(ies) through multiple discourses, as students' formation of social and parasocial connections illuminates the fluidity of agency and subjectivity informing their literacy practices. As students engage with commodified literature, their negotiations offer new understandings of the agency enacted by youth as they, through their entangle-

e16-28-ALAN-Fall19.indd 25 10/8/19 1:37 PM

ment with popular culture and prevailing consumerist forces, take critical positions, audition different identities, and create and inhabit multiple worlds.

However, I note that these interactions do not suggest an unproblematic engagement with commodified texts. For example, textual accuracy was not the only consideration voiced by students when constructing the value of Anna's necklace. Despite their enthusiasm for tangibly entering the world of the Hunger Games, none of the students expressed a desire for a reproduction of the original mockingjay pin or for creating their own version of this object. Rather, they wanted something that was sufficiently authentic as well as something "cool." As such, Marena specifically drew attention to the fact that this product was a necklace instead of a pin, while Anna repeatedly emphasized that that necklace was "really pretty." In addition, this type of play required the purchase of a specific commodity, rather than encouraging individual creativity and invention.

Whether reading YA fiction for private or public purposes, adolescents' embodied experiences with commodified literature can be self-transformative, creating new imagined selves and recreating their relational experiences with others.

This mindset echoed warnings by Linn (2008), who cautioned, "fans of the Harry Potter books don't have to make the imaginative effort to transform sticks into magic wands when detailed replicas are available at toy stores . . . . The underlying message is that children will actually be unable to play without them (pp. 33–34). Similarly, Hannaford's (2012) practitioner research on the "popular-culture literacy space" of free Internet game websites documented how experiences with these commoditized fantasy narratives influenced the creative play of her students, while Hill (2011) argued that an aggressive commodification of childhood is occurring unabated in "North American communities." Hill described youth as being immersed in a "buy and consume modality" that connects the ideologies and behaviors of material consumption to the development of identity and self-image. Hill cautioned that this has especially insidious effects on girls, who are inundated with marketing designed to connect femininity with consumerism—in effect, the feminine ideal is something that girls must purchase as part of the performance.

Nevertheless, the data revealed youth transactions that defied straightforward classifications as "good" or "bad" engagement with texts. Students were clearly susceptible to the marketing campaigns and commercial products that are central to branded young adult fiction franchises. However, their passions and intentions also shaped their participation in this community, and it would be dangerously reductive to imagine that youth are merely passive "dupes." Adolescent reading is connected to the broader social and cultural contexts in which these texts are situated, spaces in which norms and values can be reproduced, as well as agentively resisted and renegotiated. Whether reading YA fiction for private or public purposes, adolescents' embodied experiences with commodified literature can be self-transformative, creating new imagined selves and recreating their relational experiences with others. They negotiate meaning on their own terms, interacting with branded products in order to adopt, imitate, contest, or expand available worlds. Exploring transmediated and branded young adult literature deepens our understanding of the rich practices through which teens are engaging with texts across real and imagined locations and enacting critical agency in (re)constructing identity, their lived contexts, and youth culture.

Dr. Nora Peterman *is an Assistant Professor of Language and Literacy at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Her research concentrations include children's and young adult literatures, digital literacies, and the cultural, political, and intergenerational dimensions of youth literacy and language learning.*

YA Literature Cited

Collins, S. (2008–2010). The hunger games trilogy. New York, NY: Scholastic Press

Dashner, J. (2009–2016). The maze runner series. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.

Forman, G. (2009). *If I stay*. New York, NY: SPEAK.

Green, J. (2008). *Paper towns*. New York, NY: Penguin.

Green, J. (2012). *The fault in our stars*. New York, NY: Penguin.

Meyer, S. (2005–2008). Twilight series. New York, NY: Little, Brown.

Meyer, S. (2010). *The short second life of Bree Tanner.* New York, NY: Little, Brown.

e16-28-ALAN-Fall19.indd 26 10/8/19 1:37 PM

Roth, V. (2011–2014). Divergent series. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
Roth, V. (2014). *Four*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
Rowling, J. K. (1998–2007). Harry Potter series. New York, NY: Scholastic.
Smith, L. J. (2007). *The awakening and the struggle* (Vampire Diaries series, #1–2; Rpt. of 1991 ed.). New York, NY: HarperCollins.
Smith, L. J. (2007). *The fury and dark reunion* (Vampire Diaries, #3–4; Rpt. of 1991 ed.). New York, NY: HarperCollins.

References

Aarseth, E. (2006). The culture and business of cross-media productions. *Popular Communication*, *4*, 203–211.
Baudrillard, J. (1998). *The consumer society: Myths and structures* (C. T., Trans.). London, UK: SAGE Publications. (Original work published 1970)
Berlant, L. (1998). Intimacy: A special issue. *Critical Inquiry*, *24*, 281–288.
Bernstein, R. (2013). Toys are good for us: Why we should embrace the historical integration of children's literature, material culture, and play. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, *38*, 458–463.
Bickmore, S. T., Xu, Y., & Sheridan, M. I. (2017). Where are the people of color?: Representation of cultural diversity in the national book award for young people's literature and advocating for diverse books in a non-post racial society. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, *16*(1), 39–54.
Brooks, K. (2008). *Consuming innocence: Popular culture and our children*. St Lucia, Australia: University of Queensland Press.
Brooks, W., & Browne, S. (2012). Towards a culturally situated reader response theory. *Children's Literature in Education*, *43*, 74–85.
Brooks, W., & Cueto, D. (2018). Contemplating and extending the scholarship on children's and young adult literature. *Journal of Literacy Research*, *50*, 9–30.
Bullen, E. (2009). Inside story: Product placement and adolescent consumer identity in young
adult literature. *Media, Culture & Society, 31*, 497–507
Cai, M. (2008). Transactional theory and the study of multicultural literature. *Language Arts, 85*, 212–220.
Calderón, D., Delgado Bernal, D., Huber, L. P., Malagón, M., & Vélez, V. N. (2012). A Chicana feminist epistemology revisited: Cultivating ideas a generation later. *Harvard Educational Review*, *82*, 513–539.
Calvert, S. L., Richards, M., & Kent, C. (2014). Personalized interactive characters for toddlers' learning of seriation from a video presentation. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 35*(3), 148–155.
Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs*, *38*, 785–810.
Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2009). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research for the next generation*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
Collins, P. H. (2015). Intersectionality's definitional dilemmas. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *41*, 1–20.
Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*, 1241–1279.
Delgado Bernal, D. (1998). Using a Chicana feminist epistemology in educational research.
Harvard Educational Review, *68*, 555–583.
Dressman, M. (2004). Dewey and Bakhtin in dialogue: From Rosenblatt to a pedagogy of literature as social, aesthetic practice. In A. F. Ball & S.W. Freedman (Eds.), *Bakhtinian perspectives on language, literacy, and learning* (pp. 34–52). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
Dressman, M., & Webster, J. P. (2001). Retracing Rosenblatt: A textual archaeology. *Research in the Teaching of English, 36*, 110–145.
Ellsworth, E. (1992). Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myth of critical pedagogy. In C. Luke & J. Gore (Eds.), *Feminisms and critical pedagogy* (pp. 90–119). New York, NY: Routledge.
Erzen, T. (2012). *Fanpire: The Twilight saga and the women who love it*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
Garcia, A. (2013). *Critical foundations in young adult literature*. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
Giles, D. C. (2002). Parasocial interaction: A review of the literature and a model for future research. *Media Psychology. 4*, 279–305.
Gola, A. A. H., Richards, M. N., Lauricella, A. R., & Calvert, S. L. (2013). Building meaningful parasocial relationships between toddlers and media characters to teach early mathematical skills. *Media Psychology, 16*, 390–411.
Gutiérrez, K. (2008). Developing a sociocritical literacy in the third space. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *43*, 148–164.
Hade, D. (2001). Curious George gets branded: Reading as consuming. *Theory into Practice, 40*, 158–165.
Hannaford, J. (2012). Imaginative interaction with Internet games. *Literacy*, *46*, 25–32.
Hearn, M. (2000). Introduction. In L. F. Baum, *The annotated Wizard of Oz* (Centenniel ed., pp. xiii–cii). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
Hill, J. A. (2011). Endangered childhoods: How consumerism is impacting child and youth identity. *Media, Culture & Society*, *33*, 347–362.
hooks, b. (1990). *Yearning, race, gender, and cultural politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
hooks, b. (1997). *Cultural criticism and transformation* [Video transcript]. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation. Retrieved from: https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Bell-Hooks-Transcript.pdf.
Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction. *Psychiatry, 19*, 215–222.
Jenkins, H. (2006, June 19). Welcome to convergence culture [Blog post]. Retrieved from http://henryjenkins.org/2006/06/welcome_to_convergence_culture.html.
Jenkins, H. (2013). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture* (Rev. ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

e16-28-ALAN-Fall19.indd 27 10/8/19 1:37 PM

Jennings, N., & Alper, M. (2016). Young children's positive and negative parasocial relationships with media characters. *Communication Research Reports*, *33*, 96–102.
Jewitt, C., & Kress, G. (Eds.). (2003). *Multimodal literacy*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
Johnson, D. (2013). *Media franchising: Creative license and collaboration in the culture industries*. New York, NY: NYU Press.
Johnson, N. R. (2010). Consuming desires: Consumption, romance, and sexuality in best-selling teen romance novels. *Women's Studies in Communication, 33*, 54–73.
Kress, G., & Street, B. (2006). Foreword: Multi-modality and literacy practices. In K. Pahl & J. Rowsell (Eds.), *Travel notes from the new literacy studies: Instances of practice* (pp. vii–x). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
Larrick, N. (1965). The all-white world of children's books. *Saturday Review, 48*(37), 63–65.
Lewis, C. (2000). Critical issues: Limits of identification: The personal, pleasurable, and critical in reader response. *Journal of Literacy Research*, *32*, 253–266.
Lewis, C., & del Valle, A. (2009). Literacy and identity: Implications for research and practice. In L. Christenbury, R. Bomer, & P. Smagorinsky (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent literacy research* (pp. 307–322). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
Linn, S. (2008). *The case for make-believe: Saving play in a commercialized world.* New York, NY: The New Press.
Lugones, M. (2014). Radical multiculturalism and women of color feminisms. *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, *13*(1), 68–80.
Mackey, M. (1998). *The case of Peter Rabbit: Contemporary conditions of literature for children*. New York, NY: Garland.
Mackey, M. (2011). Spinning off: Toys, television, tie-ins, and technology. In S. A. Wolf, K. Coats, P. A. Enciso, & C. A. Jenkins (Eds.), *Handbook of research on children's and young adult literature* (pp. 495–507). New York, NY: Routledge.
Martens, M. (2010). Consumed by Twilight: The commodification of young adult literature. In M. A. Click, J. S. Aubrey, & E. Behm-Morawitz (Eds.), *Bitten by Twilight: Youth culture, media, and the vampire franchise* (pp. 243–260). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
McRobbie, A. (2005). *The uses of cultural studies*. London, UK: SAGE.
Mitchell, C. J. (1984). Typicality and the case study. In P. F. Ellen (Ed.), *Ethnographic research: A guide to general conduct* (pp. 238–241). New York, NY: Academic Press.
Mohanty, C. T. (2013). Transnational feminist crossings: On neoliberalism and radical critique. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *38*, 967–991.
Moje, E. B., & Luke, A. (2009). Literacy and identity: Examining the metaphors in history and contemporary research. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *44*, 415–437.
Murray, S. (2007). I know what you did last summer: Sarah Michele Gellar and crossover teen stardom. In L. Parks & E. Levine (Eds.), *Undead TV: Essays on Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (pp. 43–55). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Pahl, K., & Rowsell, J. (2010). *Artifactual literacies: Every object tells a story*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press
Park, J. Y. (2012). Re-imagining reader response in middle and secondary schools: Early adolescent girls' critical and communal reader responses to the young adult novel *Speak*. *Children's Literature in Education, 43*, 191–212.
Rosenblatt, L. M. (1983). *Literature as exploration* (Rpt. of 1938 ed.). New York, NY: Modern Language Association.
Rosenblatt, L. (1985). Viewpoints: Transaction versus interaction—a terminological rescue operation. *Research in the Teaching of English, 19*, 96–107.
Rosenblatt, L. M. (1994). The transactional theory of reading and writing. In R. B. Rudell, M. R. Rudell, & H. Singer (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (4th ed.; pp. 1057–1092). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
Sekeres, D. C. (2009). The market child and branded fiction: A synergism of children's literature, consumer culture, and new literacies. *Reading Research Quarterly, 44*, 399–414.
Stein, L. E. (2015). *Millennial fandom: Television audiences in the transmedia age*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press.
Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
Sumara, D. J. (1996). *Private readings in public: Schooling the literary imagination*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
Taxel, J. (2011). The economics of children's book publishing in the 21st century. In S. A. Wolf, K. Coats, P. A. Enciso, & C. A. Jenkins (Eds.), *Handbook of research on children's and young adult literature* (pp. 479–494). New York, NY: Routledge.
Thomas, E. E. (2016). Stories still matter: Rethinking the role of diverse children's literature today. *Language Arts*, *94*, 112–119.
Twomey, S. (2007). Reading "woman": Book club pedagogies and the literary imagination. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 50*, 398–407.
Wee, V. (2010). *Teen media: Hollywood and the youth market in the digital age*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
Zipes, J. (2001). *Sticks and stones: The troublesome success of children's literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*. New York, NY: Routledge.

e16-28-ALAN-Fall19.indd 28 10/8/19 1:37 PM