

FUTURE GIRLS:  
REVOLUTIONARY ADOLESCENCE  
IN YOUNG ADULT DYSTOPIAN FICTION  
(2005-2018)

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses Young Adult Dystopian Fiction (YADF) published between 2005 and 2018. It develops a theory of the female protagonists featured in these texts, identifying them as a recurring literary type which I name ‘the dystopian girl’. I define the dystopian girl as encoding the hegemonic ideologies of this time period, particularly postfeminism, post-racial colour-blindness, and neoliberal subjectivity. My reading is enacted against the grain of the texts, which project the dystopian girl as a revolutionary hero, and intervenes in critical debates which have either lionised this figure as a feminist icon, or disparaged YADF as an inferior form of the dystopian genre.

This thesis argues that the dystopian girl is an intrinsically ambivalent and latently utopian figure, who encodes an understanding of girlhood as a site of political agency, and who occasionally undermines normative narratives of adolescent development. I argue that YADF is an important site of contemporary political imagining, and that the dystopian girl encompasses a contradictory range of social and political desires. I also trace how delineations of this figure have shifted over the course of a decade, in a manner which registers the re-emergence of feminism and social justice movements in the western cultural mainstream.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### CHAPTER

#### INTRODUCTION

A Revolutionary Fad.....	1
The Dystopian Girl.....	3
Generic Identity and Literary Criticism.....	16
Text Selections.....	27
Chapter Outlines.....	31

#### ONE: THE DYSTOPIAN GIRL AS POSTFEMINIST SUBJECT IN *THE HUNGER GAMES*, *UGLIES* AND *DIVERGENT*

Introduction.....	35
Future Girls.....	37
The Katniss Debate.....	45
YA Dystopia as Postfeminist Utopia.....	57
Narrative Endings and Dystopian Womanhood.....	66
Conclusion.....	74

#### TWO: THE NORMATIVE WHITENESS OF THE DYSTOPIAN GIRL IN *THE HUNGER GAMES*, *UGLIES* AND *DIVERGENT*

Introduction.....	76
“A Prettiness Everyone Could See”: Normative Whiteness in <i>Uglies</i> .....	81
Being “Genetically Pure”: Allegorising Whiteness in <i>Divergent</i> .....	92
Fandom, Film and Race in <i>The Hunger Games</i> .....	97
Conclusion.....	108

#### THREE: BECOMING THE DYSTOPIAN GIRL IN *ONLY EVER YOURS* AND *SLATED*

Introduction.....	112
No Girl Power: Growing Down in <i>Only Ever Yours</i> .....	117
Containing Multitudes: Growing Selves in <i>Slated</i> .....	133
Conclusion.....	148

#### FOUR: NEOLIBERAL SUBJECTIVITY IN *THE CARBON DIARIES* AND *THE 100*

Introduction.....	149
Laura, Clarke and Liminality.....	154
How Neoliberal is She, Anyway?.....	160
Between Collectivism and Individualism.....	167
Violence and Political Possibility.....	174
Conclusion.....	185

FIVE: THE LEGACY OF THE DYSTOPIAN GIRL IN *THE SELECTION*, *THE FANDOM* AND *THE POWER*

Introduction.....	188
The Dystopian Romance and the Juxtapolitical.....	195
<i>The Fandom</i> and the Legitimacy of Female Rage.....	202
Dystopian Girl Power.....	210
Conclusion.....	226
THESIS CONCLUSION.....	231
NOTES.....	238
WORKS CITED.....	240

## INTRODUCTION

### A REVOLUTIONARY FAD

In October 2014, Saturday Night Live broadcast a spoof trailer entitled ‘The Group Hopper’. Claimed to have been adapted “from a YA novel written entirely in the comments section of a *Hunger Games* trailer”, the skit portrays a white male protagonist dubbed “Samie” in a terrible place named “Greyworld”. Identified as the predestined “Hero”, Samie develops a romance “rated G for asexual kissing”, is sorted into a nonsensical social category, and told by a pompous tyrant that teenagers are “all the same”. The humour of the skit derives from the audience’s presumed overfamiliarity with the narrative conventions of YA dystopian fiction (YADF). This genre became highly popular during the first decade of the twenty-first century, through a generic model of futuristic setting, embattled protagonist, torrid romance, and serialised narrative. The commercial viability of YADF was established by Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies* trilogy (2005-2007), and the genre exploded in popularity following the success of Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-10). By 2012, when *The Hunger Games* was adapted into a record-breaking film franchise, YA had become saturated with moody covers, windswept revolutionaries, and endlessly barren greyworlds. By 2014, YA had reached ‘peak dystopia’ (Diaz 6), with dozens of titles published, fourteen texts optioned by film companies (Regalado), and several cinematic adaptations released to varying success. ‘The Group Hopper’ identifies the genre’s pervasiveness as evidencing the unoriginality of mainstream cultural production - “[f]rom the director of *Maze Runner*, the producer of *Divergent*, and a casual fan of *The Giver*” - while mocking YADF as hackneyed, facile, and as ludicrously removed from reality as the outfits of the dystopian overlords.

The skit typifies popular criticism of the genre which became rife as it ascended to commercial ubiquity. *New York Times* columnist Joel Stein stated, “I’ll read “The Hunger

Games” when I finish the previous 3,000 years of fiction written for adults”, while in an article opposing the growing prevalence of adults reading YA, Ruth Graham described *Divergent* as “transparently trashy stuff . . . which no-one defends as serious literature”. However, there is something striking about the fact that this latest craze in YA was not concerned with wizards or vampires, as in previous trends instigated by *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, but adolescents who routinely oppose and depose oppressive political regimes. Just over a month after the airing of ‘The Group Hopper’, a Thai cinema chain withdrew the latest instalment of *The Hunger Games* from its theatres. The three-fingered salute which signifies political resistance in the trilogy had become a popular gesture among Thai youth, indicating their opposition to the coup d’état of the Royal Thai Army, and leading the authorities to warn that “anyone raising it in public could be subject to arrest” (Mydans). This led Francis Lawrence, a director of several *Hunger Games* films, to state the franchise had become ““a symbol for people, for freedom or protest””, a development he found both ““thrilling”” and ““troubling”” (Mydans). Suzanne Collins has stated that she wrote the series to encourage readers to explore “issues like the vast discrepancy of wealth . . . the possibility that the government could use hunger as a weapon, and . . . the issue of war”” (Hudson), while the actor Donald Sutherland, who plays President Snow in the films, had speculated that the franchise would ““stir up a revolution”” among contemporary youth (Carroll). Thai students were quick to ascertain the social and political meanings embedded in the narrative, suggesting there is more to YADF than commercial opportunism and trite clichés.

Examples like ‘The Group Hopper’ and the Thai protests indicate the polarised way in which YADF has been defined and received in the twenty-first century, as either a commercial fad or a genre which “has spurred legions of readers towards promoting social justice” (Hentges “Girls”). Although the genre resonates with a ‘troubling’ and ‘thrilling’



political potential, this is countered by its hyper-commercialism and often ambiguous engagement with contemporary life. This thesis is the first academic attempt to engage with the overarching social and political significance of YADF published over the course of the decade in which it became popular, beginning with the publication of the first *Uglies* novel. I read YADF as a new and important form of dystopian imagining which has emerged in response to the conditions of the early twenty-first century, and which engages with hegemonic ideas of gender, race, adolescence, neoliberalism and systemic change. YADF may have failed to inspire the revolution Donald Sutherland anticipated, but this does not make it politically insignificant, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the protagonist it consistently places at the heart of political life.

#### THE DYSTOPIAN GIRL

The rebellious heroine is perhaps the most commonly recurring aspect of YADF published during this period, a trope established by *Uglies* and amplified by the popularity of Katniss, the heroine of *The Hunger Games*. YADF is unique as a mainstream genre which has consistently imagined girlhood as a site of political resistance, and Sarah Hentges has claimed that YADF's potential "for empowering girls . . . could ultimately be [its] most profound and lasting influence" ("Girls"). Yet the dystopian girl's engagement with the political in these texts is often complex and contradictory. Day et al observe that YADF "draw[s] on the seemingly contradictory impulses of turn-of-the-century western culture to understand young women as both strong and vulnerable, both passive citizens and potential leaders" (7). The female protagonist in YADF embodies the wider tension in these texts between the individual and the collective, the utopian and the anti-utopian, and the radical and the conservative.

This thesis will centre on the recurring figure of the female adolescent protagonist in YADF, naming her as 'the dystopian girl'. I identify the dystopian girl as signifying specific

political meanings in the twenty-first century, particularly the intersections of postfeminism, neoliberalism and white supremacy. Rather than reading her as a figure whose ubiquity is attributable to commercial manipulation, my analysis represents the first attempt to theorise the dystopian girl as a figure with specific and recurring characteristics which pertain to contemporary western culture. A key precursor to this thesis is Day et al's essay collection *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction* (2016), the first academic text to focus solely on female protagonists in YADF. The introduction to this volume analyses these characters as reflecting the paradoxical gendered expectations had of young women, but it does not question why or clarify how the dystopian girl has emerged so forcefully within twenty-first century popular culture. Instead, Day et al identify YADF as the direct descendent of the feminist critical dystopias which emerged during the 1980s and 1990s, primarily through works by Marge Piercy, Ursula K. Le Guin and Octavia Butler. This genre evades the didactic enclosure of older, 'classical' dystopias, which end "invariably . . . with the victory of the totalitarian state over the individual" (Baccolini 39), emphasising ambiguity and utopian possibility. In doing so, they seek to explore "the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration" (Moylan xv), providing a space for utopian resistance by those most forcefully oppressed by the dystopian regime. Critical dystopias "open a space of contestation and opposition for those groups . . . for whom subjectivity has yet to be attained" (Baccolini 40) inside and outside dystopia, particularly women, young people, queer people, and people of colour. Day et al justify their tracing of this lineage by identifying the parallels between the open-endedness of the critical dystopia and the liminality of the YADF heroine, claiming both similarly resist patriarchal meanings.

My naming of this character type as a ‘girl’ is designed to register this liminality, as the textual investment in this character is produced by the fact that she has not yet become invested in the dystopian system as an adult.<sup>1</sup> However, my formulation is also a contestation of the claim that she is the direct descendent of the critical dystopia. This thesis identifies the dystopian girl as an entirely new figure, both within the dystopian tradition and in popular culture more generally. As my analysis will show, her liminality is often firmly resolved by the narrative endings imposed upon her by the trilogy format. These endings work to enclose the girl within normative understandings of femininity and adolescence, undermining the notion of her as the daughter of the feminist critical dystopian tradition. Reading the dystopian girl as a feminist figure is further troubled by the lack of consideration of gender inequality in YADF, not to mention the fact that her resistance to the state is so often delineated as being carefully curated and coerced by wiser adult men. This thesis will show that the dystopian girl is manifestly not the protagonist of the feminist critical dystopia of the late twentieth century, but a figure who signifies the postfeminist, postracial and neoliberal assumptions which are hegemonic in early twenty-first century western culture.

Theorising the dystopian girl means recognising her as a figure produced within several literary traditions, as the protagonist of a YA, dystopian and (almost always) romance novel. The divergent expectations of personal growth, political resistance and heteronormative monogamy are therefore simultaneously imposed upon her, rendering her with further complexity and contradiction. Dystopian texts are typically designed to encourage the reader to change and resist the world around them, but the rebelliousness of YA protagonists often works to suggest that the presumed young reader must tame themselves into a certain level of conformity, so that “YA novels teach adolescent readers to accept a certain amount of repression as a cultural imperative” (Trites *Disturbing* 55). The romance

genre also imposes heterosexual romantic partnership as a definitive happy ending, so that the dystopian girl is often developed into acceptance of normative heterosexuality and curtailed political involvement simultaneously, potentially compromising the dystopian function of emancipatory social and political imagining.

The dystopian girl is not only a literary character, but a mediated image of adolescent femininity. The most popular iterations of the character have become the central focus of media franchises, and visual representations of the girl almost always presents her as white, slim, able-bodied, conventionally beautiful, and heterosexual: that is, in much the same way as teenage girls are already presented and idealised in western popular culture. The dystopian girl's role as a media phenomenon is in part attributable to this conventionality, which ensures her prominence does not disrupt normative ideology. As Jack Zipes has claimed, for a text to become phenomenal, it must reiterate rather than challenge dominant norms, maintaining "conventionality, predictability, and happy ends" ("Phenomenon" 292) through a protagonist who is "white, Anglo-Saxon, bright, athletic and honest", "a straight arrow" and a "noble soul" (295). Celebrating the dystopian girl as an iteration of pop-cultural feminism requires ignoring her racial and sexual homogeneity, unless feminism is understood as a movement of white, able-bodied and heterosexual people exclusively. It is important to note here that YADF is not a monolith, and that there are texts which feature female protagonists who are not white or heterosexual, or whose texts register racial or gender inequality as part of their dystopian commentary, but these texts lie on the periphery of the genre. In 2013, *Bitch* Magazine columnist Victoria Law started a blog-series listing and reviewing YADF featuring girls of colour because it was so difficult for her to find such texts for her daughter. Law observes that the growing calls for diverse representations in YA fiction have not been reflected by the "the dystopian and speculative fiction novels that my daughter brings home",

as “[m]ost still have White girls in the starring roles” and “[m]any still have no characters of color”. When I speak of the dystopian girl, I speak primarily of the dominant model of this girl within the commercially orientated trilogy which dominated YADF during this period, as a white, straight, cisgendered teenage girl who remains largely unaware of the privileges these identities afford. Nonetheless, the dystopian girl is both significant and unusual in that she embodies a popular imagining of the girl as a political actor, whose rebellion against oppressive power is largely celebrated and rewarded, and who illustrates that girls are able to command public attention and induce political change. She is divorced from preceding cultural stereotypes of teenage girls which trivialise their subjectivity, defining them as indiscriminate consumers or incorrigible gossips, mean girls or mentally fragile, depictions which Ilana Nash argues “burdens [girls] with behavioural traits that strongly signify immaturity” (11). The seriousness with which the dystopian girl is taken both within the dystopian society and outside it as a literary figure indicates that if “popular culture has always been a primary means of reinscribing the social, sexual, and intellectual subjugation of young girls” (Nash 12), then the dystopian girl moves beyond this in several important ways.

The dystopian girl is not only a protagonist, but often a narrator, whose first person, present tense narrative voice renders her perspective with intensity and intimacy. The experience of others within the dystopian society is largely unknowable, and this means that collectively driven political change is presented entirely through her subjective experience, often with notes of uncertainty, apathy, and a reluctance to participate. For a novel to be considered dystopian, the narrative must be invested in delineating collective experience, as suggested by Sargent’s definition of dystopia as “a non-existent society described in considerable detail . . . that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived” (“Three Faces” 9). In the

significance it accords to the personal life and emotional experiences of the dystopian girl, YADF exhibits less interest in the operation of dystopian power, however, and more in the subjective experience of living within this power structure. Her romantic turmoil and intense interpersonal relationships form an important part of the text, and are often mapped onto her political development. Tom Henthorne observes this quality in *The Hunger Games*, claiming that the series innovation lies in “the way it uses melodrama to give the novel’s implicit social criticism emotional force” (110). If “[d]ystopia’s foremost truth lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic” (Moylan xii), then the dystopian girl reworks this tradition to indicate how systemic evil is subjectively and emotionally experienced.

In contemporary YADF, the dystopian girl typically follows a recurring pattern of development established within the best-selling trilogies, *Uglies*, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*. Beginning in a state of oppression, she expresses discontent with the dystopian system to the reader and becomes prominent in a burgeoning resistance movement despite her residual aversion to doing so. Her desire to oppose the political system becomes compromised as she learns the costs of open opposition, or else realises the unlikelihood of achieving systemic change. Nonetheless, through mentoring by other characters, usually older males more firmly committed to the resistance movement, the dystopian girl ultimately becomes central to the dissolution of the dystopian state, often as the attractive figurehead of revolutionary upheaval. The narrative typically ends on a note of ambivalence, as it is rarely clear what sort of society will follow or how the girl will continue to participate in political life. Her role in the revolution is positioned as a final act of resistance, and she recedes from public view, her political work done. This retreat is often achieved through romantic partnership with a male mentor with whom she has become romantically affiliated. Less

frequently, her recession from public life is achieved through a sacrificial death which enshrines her as a martyr of the resistance, and a symbol of the radical innocence of rebellious youth. This dominant narrative pattern indicates how the political perspective of the dystopian girl is invariably mapped onto her romantic life. Particularly commonplace is the use of a love triangle, in which two potential romantic partners signify oppositional approaches to political life. This allows her choice of partner to be positioned as representing her political stance, indicating how the traditions of the romance novel and the dystopian novel are mapped onto each other. In the *Uglies* trilogy, for example, Tally's decision to live with her political mentor and lover David is projected as representing eco-critical resistance to the growing urbanisation of her environment, while also signifying a refusal to participate directly in political life. Tally eschews the troubling complexity of enacting political agency within the system in favour of adopting a symbolic role of opposition outside its borders. Similarly, Katniss's decision to have children with Peeta at the end of the *Hunger Games* trilogy signifies her decision to retreat from public life, a final gesture of preference for the personal over the political also signified by her rejection of the revolutionary, Gale.

When the dystopian girl first emerged in YA in the mid-2000s, the stereotype of the contemporary adolescent as politically apathetic remained a dominant narrative of western youth culture, so that "[t]he idea that young people are disengaged from politics and civil society, indeed from the entire public sphere . . . has become something of a mantra" (Banaji). In this context, the earliest iteration of the dystopian girl type, presented in Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* (2005), provided a countervailing notion of the girl as an insistently political figure. Westerfeld's imagining of the trilogy's protagonist, Tally, as maturing into ideological opposition to the mainstream politics of her culture, was not only a turn away from media stereotyping of contemporary teens, and especially girls, as disinterested in political life. This

was also a recuperation of the political origins of the notion of ‘girl power’, seeded from third wave feminist activism and sprouted throughout the media landscapes of the late 1990s in a safely commoditised and depoliticised register. The famous clarion call of Kathleen Hanna, the lead singer of riot grrrl band Bikini Kill, calling ‘girls to the front’ of cultural production, had become reformulated within mass culture to encourage girls to step to the front of the queue for consumer products which sold girl power back to them as a form of personal empowerment. In the early stages of YADF’s growth to prominence, the genre’s placement of girls at the centre of political life was an unusual textual manoeuvre, which injected the political back into the girl power narrative. Westerfeld’s Tally rejects narcissistic consumerism in favour of radical opposition to the dystopian state, and her assumption of public prominence is projected as representing hope for utopian transformation.

Sonya Sawyer Fritz reads YADF as a “celebration of the defiant teenage girl”, claiming the genre “render[s] the gendered period of female adolescence as a condition of their protagonists’ heroic political activism” (18). This is in stark contrast to the delineation of female adolescence in the preceding century of western literature and culture, in which girlhood has typically been imagined as a precarious path leading to terminal secondary status. In a study of representations of literary girlhood in American twentieth-century fiction, Barbara White observes the lack of “positive images of growing up female” (173), and the recurring suggestion that “female adolescence is a social state characterised by weakness” (189). Although the dystopian girl is undoubtedly preferable to such imagining, my thesis will challenge Fritz’s overtly positive reading of this figure as “contributing to the development of a new era of feminism” (30), in which girls are celebrated as leaders at the forefront of utopian change. I argue instead that the feminist significance of the dystopian girl is more



akin to the postfeminism which Angela McRobbie has observed as endemic in western neoliberal states.

Postfeminism projects images of confident young women to suggest that feminism has achieved its goals and is no longer necessary, working to silence feminism so that it can never again challenge the hegemony of western patriarchy. It has emerged in the context of neoliberalism, a form of laissez faire economic governance which has “become hegemonic as a mode of discourse” (Harvey 3) in the contemporary west, and which “has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has been incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world” (3). In its emphasis on deregulation, privatisation and the shrinking of central states, neoliberalism has intensified the ideological investment in individualism embedded in contemporary systems of power. Its rise to prominence in the US and UK during the 1980s was accompanied by a widespread discrediting of feminism as a collective endeavour, so that “empowerment and agency -goals that both second wave feminists and postfeminists claim- are envisaged differently, whereby second wave notions of collective, activist struggle are replaced with more individualistic assertions of (consumer) choice and self-rule” (Genz 85). Postfeminism appropriates the feminist rhetoric of ‘freedom’ and ‘choice’ which is also embedded throughout wider neoliberal discourse, and it celebrates individual empowerment within the capitalist system while denying the ongoing relevance of gender inequality. As this thesis will show, the dystopian girl is intimately connected with neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies. The rendering of the dystopian girl as heroic is enacted at the expense of any acknowledgement of gender inequality within the space of her texts, and her public prominence works to suggest that girls are seen and treated equally, so that gender inequality remains emphatically outside the textual frame.

Reading the dystopian girl as an avatar of feminism is further complicated by the centrality of heterosexual romance to her delineation. Sara K. Day memorably describes YADF as a “parade of straight girls who fall in love with straight boys”, so that the genre “reinforces contemporary cultural expectations of young women’s coming of age rather than offering a potential divergence from such gendered limitations” (90). The utopian possibility of the girl as charging to the forefront of political life is countered by the anti-utopian denial of any other form of living or ending outside heterosexual monogamy. This also re-routes her development back into the ancient narrative pattern of western girlhood traced by scholars including Barbara White and Annis Pratt, in which girlish rebelliousness is disavowed to achieve normative subjectivity as a wife and mother. The stark contrast between Day’s and Fritz’s analysis of the same texts indicates the multi-layered contradictions embedded in the dystopian girl figure, simultaneously gendered and post-gender, feminist and post-feminist, novel and conventional, empowered and controlled.

In other words, the generic necessity of imagining “sites of resistance” (Murphy 477) within the dystopian text often only *appears* to be fulfilled by the dystopian girl, who is always placed in opposition to the dystopian state and often succeeds in challenging its claims to power. However, the ideological significance and transformative aspirations of this oppositional perspective are often difficult to discern. In early 2015, the writer and comedian Dana Schwartz opened a popular Twitter account @DystopianYA, which she used to tweet phrases from a non-existent satirical YA dystopian novel to 80,000 followers. Her tweet, “Maybe this radical rebel faction is a little too radical/rebellious” mocks the projected radicalism of the genre as insipid posturing. Implicit in Schwartz’s parody is the suggestion that beneath the genre’s media-friendly delineation of teenage rebellion lies the desire to

curtail and control this rebellion, rendering radicalism unthinkable and rebellion as a white privilege.

The girl signifies rebellion as incendiary and necessary, yet the ideological aims of this revolt are carefully curated so as to protect the ideologies embedded in contemporary neoliberal economies and states. If, as Jack Zipes has claimed, “the general accumulative effect of . . . pop culture is to make consumers out of children, not responsible citizens concerned about the quality of their social life” (*Sticks* 10), then this delineation of rebellion, alongside her rampant commercialisation, indicates how the dystopian girl often reifies rather than critiques contemporary dystopian arrangements. This is heightened by the lack of critique of consumerism within the textual space of YADF, typically set in futures in which consumerism either no longer exists or is unavailable to the marginalised protagonist. The absence of critique combined with the intrinsic commerciality of the trilogy format means YADF often serves as a mouthpiece of western capitalism, even as it also often encodes the desire for alternative social and political arrangements. The hesitancy of the genre’s engagement with the political produces an absence of critique which may slide into an implicitly anti-utopian denial of transformative possibility. The dystopia is usually theorised as being “distinct from its nemesis, the anti-utopia” (Baccolini and Moylan 4) because while the latter encodes “a society . . . that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of utopianism” (Sargent “Three Faces” 9), the dystopia “shares with *eutopia* the general vocation of utopianism that Sargent characterizes as ‘social dreaming’” (Baccolini and Moylan 5). In other words, while the dystopia maintains faith in the possibility of a better society, the anti-utopia negates the idea that society is improvable. In its political vagueness and embedded commercialism, YADF often encodes resignation to the neoliberal anti-utopia rather than challenging its claims to common-sense.

Ultimately this thesis will argue that the dystopian girl signifies a desire to transform dystopian political regimes and, layered beneath this desire, a sense of political exhaustion. Rather than being defined, as Day et al suggest, by her irresolvable liminality, this thesis will show that this liminality often culminates in helpless capitulation to anti-utopian resignation. Her inability to envision transformative change beyond dismantling the existent dystopia is further engendered by the textual reluctance to openly engage with gender and racial inequality. If, as the Marxist feminist Silvia Federici has claimed, “capitalism, as a social-economic system, is necessarily committed to racism and sexism” (17), then the absence of these inequities in YADF works alongside the girl’s investment in individualism and survivalism to produce the genre’s complicity in neoliberal ideology, even as it also registers the ruinous social and ecological consequences of this system of global governance.

The ubiquity and popularity of dystopian narratives within the YA category reflects a broader increase in the perception of the world as dangerous, chaotic and frightening in the twenty-first century west. The many social, political and environmental factors which may have led to what Booker describes as “a dark turn taken by our popular culture and a broader pessimistic turn in the general mood” (*Dystopia 1*) are beyond the scope of this thesis, but what is significant in terms of my analysis is that this pervasive view of the world as inalterably bleak works to disempower individuals and communities. Peter Fitting identifies the preponderance of dystopian narratives in contemporary popular culture as signifying “contemporary political paralysis” (157), stating that these texts reflect the fact that people increasingly see themselves as living in a dystopian world, “yet they remain paralyzed, unable or unwilling to act” (156). The sense that alternatives to the present are impossible to imagine is heightened by the complexity of globalised systems of capital, the impenetrability of the ongoing war on terror, and the veering extremity of political moods in western states. If

dystopia is understood not only as a future possibility but a present reality, then this perception works to suggest that utopian transformation is impossible to achieve: present conditions can only be endured and survived. This is the keynote of what Chandler and Reid name as neoliberal subjectivity, the sense of self engendered within neoliberal ideology which defines the subject through its resilience and vulnerability, rather than its capability and potency.

The dystopian girl registers and communicates this sense of political paralysis, as suggested by the fact that the sociologist Noreena Hertz named girls born between 1995 and 2002 “Generation K” because, “[l]ike Katniss, they feel the world they inhabit is one of perpetual struggle – dystopian, unequal and harsh”. However, Hertz also observes that the perception of the world as dystopian did not produce a sense of defeat in the girls she interviewed, but a greater determination to oppose inequalities and social injustices. Hertz’s naming of this generation after Katniss indicates that, on the surface, the dystopian girl signifies both a perception of the world as dystopian and the desire for utopian transformation, through her determination to oppose corrupt power structures and transform her society for the better. In a treatise on the importance of understanding and utilising mass media spectacles in progressive politics, Stephen Duncombe calls for “a politics that understands desire and speaks to the irrational; a politics that employs symbols and associations; a politics that tells good stories” (29). We might interpret the dystopian girl as one such aperture of possibility, as a symbol of the desire for alternative political realities. The space provided for adolescent participation in the political in YADF, and the heroic register in which this is delineated, represents a fundamental challenge to the message often presented to young people, that “as young people, they are too naïve, uninformed, and powerless to do anything about these problems” (Kligler-Vilenchik 118). The dystopian girl

resonates with the possibility for a politics which is able to channel the irrational and the emotive, which can speak the evolving languages of mass mediation and popular culture, working to empower young women to challenge and change the world around them.

As will be shown throughout this thesis, however, this projection of the girl as an avatar of utopian possibility is often countered by her internalisation of repressive ideologies, and her ultimate decision that the political is irredeemably corrupt. In this sense, the dystopian girl moves from being a nascent ‘political subject’, that is someone “capable of conceiving the transformation of this world and the power relations it finds itself subject to”, into becoming a ‘neoliberal subject’, that is someone who internalises the idea that dystopian realities can only be adapted to, rather than opposed and transformed (Chandler and Reid 4). The dystopian imaginary of neoliberalism suggests the genre may now be complicit in “the (usually conservative) argument that there is no alternative (and that seeking one is more dangerous than it’s worth)”, which Moylan claims “risk transforming what begins as a dystopia into a fully-fledged anti-utopia” (xiii). The dystopian girl begins her narrative in the liminal space of utopian political possibility, and she is often successful in her desire to engender radical systemic change, but her narrative also often resolves by encoding her as a figure of anti-utopian negation.

#### GENERIC IDENTITY AND LITERARY CRITICISM

There has, as yet, been little critical appraisal of YADF as a specific form of dystopian imagining with its own generic identity. Criticism of this fiction often subsumes it within the tradition of children’s literature, or else positions it against the established norms of the dystopian canon, identifying its variation from type as formal failure. This means that YADF has yet to be theorised as a genre in its own right, a failure in part attributable to the relative

newness of the form. Although YA dystopian fiction has been published ever since the YA became prevalent in the late 1960s, with successful precursors including Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993), it was not until the "YA renaissance" (Cart 81) and "the second golden age beginning in 2000" (Strickland) that YADF became a popular and prevalent sub-genre with its own identifiable tradition. One of the first examples of post-millennial dystopian YA is M.T. Andersen's *Feed* (2002), a bleak novel which imagines a future in which the internet is embedded in the brain. This provides its teen characters with unremitting access to social media feeds and purchasing apps which develop alongside their brains. The feed learns what they buy and subsequently encourages them to consider similar products through relentless advertisements which are inseparable from their thoughts. *Feed* envisions how teens might resist this hyper-consumerism through Violet, a strange and intellectual girl who begins a romantic relationship with the novel's protagonist, Titus. Violet refuses to use the feed properly, making deliberately randomised purchases so that it cannot effectively advertise to her. However, this leads her to Violet becoming increasingly psychotic as a result of the inescapable cacophony of advertising she has generated, until she is finally driven to insanity. Her fate sealed when FeedTech refuse to repair her feed because she is not considered a good customer. Violet's implied death adheres to the classical dystopian tradition, both in its presentation of futile resistance as a warning to the reader, and its framing of a female character as significant primarily because of her significance to the male protagonist. However, while in the classical dystopia the female foil is able to "motivate resistance" (Murphy 474) while failing to enact it herself, Andersen presents a bleaker vision. Violet's death signifies the inescapable pervasiveness of consumerism which Titus is also, literally, unable to think outside of or beyond.

*Feed* was widely acclaimed, nominated for and won several literary awards, in part because of its refusal to provide the prerequisite narrative of hope to its presumed teenage audience. In her self-motivated ideological and intellectual opposition to the dystopian culture she has been raised in, Violet is a precursor of later dystopian girls, whilst also embodying the fear of failure which underlies their ambivalence. Violet's death serves as a warning against the dangers of uncompromising radicalism, anticipating the reluctance embedded in popular iterations of the dystopian girl, who is so often imagined as being coerced into political activism and only reluctantly participating in a revolution beyond her comprehension.

Another widely awarded YA dystopian novel published during this time was Nancy Farmer's *House of the Scorpion* (2002), which also adhered to classical dystopian tradition, imagining how a male protagonist might develop into political subjectivity at the expense of a female romantic interest, ultimately killed to engender his development. The explicitly Marxist ideas discussed in this text represent an unusually open consideration of radical political ideas which, as with *Feed*'s critique of consumerism, rarely emerges again in YADF once the genre became commercially successful. *Feed* and *House of the Scorpion* both signify the new literary ambition of the millennial YA novel, and its willingness to engage with social and political life with nuance and complexity.

A central claim of this thesis will be that YADF represents a significant form of political imagining, one enacted against widespread dismissals of the genre, and YA more generally, as inane and unworthy of critical examination. It is important to clarify, however, that in taking these novels seriously, I am not necessarily endorsing their political meanings, nor insisting that the genre must be lauded for its complexity and sophistication. This thesis will occupy ambivalence, rather than lapsing into the polarisation of praise or condemnation which has marred YA criticism throughout its history. This approach draws on the queer



scholar Kadji Amin's suggestion that "scholars might inhabit unease" as a way of cultivating "a wider range of scholarly moods than utopian hope, on the one hand, and critique, on the other" (9-10). The spirit of ambivalence seems particularly appropriate given the contradictory way in which YADF often engages with contemporary political life, and the lack of clarity this often produces. As this thesis will show, the genre's overt projection of the dystopian girl as an avatar of iconoclastic revolt is often contrasted by underlying conservative political meanings. It is important to register and analyse contradictions between explicitly stated purpose and underlying inferences to consider how YADF works "to simultaneously empower readers with knowledge and to repress them by teaching them to accept a curtailment of their power" (Trites *Disturbing* 140). If we assume the genre only produces simplistic political meanings which are easily discernible, or else that it does little more than translate clichés of teen rebellion into gloomy cityscapes, then we fail to register the subtler ways in which YADF projects the girl as a revolutionary figure, while also tacitly undermining the viability of her resistance to contemporary hegemony.

Until very recently, analysis of YA fiction has typically been subsumed within the field of children's literature. As Alison Waller argued during the first UK conference dedicated to the category in 2004, "if children's literature is a 'peninsular' on the edifice of literary academic study, then YA has typically been treated by academics as an outcrop on that peninsular" (Belbin), subjected to even more sweeping generalisations and assumptions and seen as even less worthy of study. Although this is changing, the category's continuing marginality in academia has been particularly pronounced in the case of YADF, the commercial popularity of which seems to have condemned it further. Literary critics have tended to support rather than challenge popular dismissals of the genre as shallow, facile and trivial, even in volumes dedicated to the form. For example, when compiling a bibliography

of utopian literature in the 1970s, Lyman Tower Sargent “decide[d] to exclude juvenile literature” because “very few of the hundreds of books I looked at . . . had any social or political content and those that did were so vague as to be virtually impossible to characterize” (Hintz and Ostry 232). The exclusion of YA from dystopian criticism meant that Hintz and Ostry’s *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults* (2003) was the first attempt at a more sustained analysis of YADF. However, this collection also perpetuated “the practice of relegating teen novels to the final chapter of a scholarly study of children’s literature” which Waller argues indicates, “a lack of confidence in the intrinsic value of young adult literature and an anxiety about how critics should approach it” (13). Similarly, although this volume includes the first annotated bibliography of YA and children’s dystopian novels, this fails to differentiate between them, instead describing the former as a permutation of the latter and displaying “a continued tendency for critics to subsume the newer literature of teenage fiction within a broader spectrum of a more established children’s literature” (Waller 14). When they claim children’s literature to be “an inherently pedagogical genre” (Hintz and Ostry 7), it is implied that this statement can also be made of YA without differentiation. This indicates the wider presumption that YA and children’s literature are essentially the same, rather than separate categories with different histories, narrative strategies and effects.

The origins of YA as a category invented within school libraries and proliferated through American classrooms further perpetuates the idea that it must perform a didactic purpose. The embrace of YA within pedagogy is based on the pragmatic idea that it may encourage reluctant readers to engage with literature, so that the category is often described using a vocabulary of functionality which precludes more complex critical engagement. This is reflected by Virginia Monseau’s observation that “YA scholars focus almost exclusively on

the pedagogical and sociological value of the books rather than examining them critically as pieces of literature” (Blasingame). However, this began to change around the turn of the millennium, during which time YA was becoming both more popular and more critically esteemed. A 1999 *Time* magazine article on the booming popularity of YA observes “stark themes, complex plotlines and ambiguous resolutions . . . are edging out the happy endings and conventional morals” (Spitz) which the writer presumes to have previously dominated the category. The greater recognition of YA’s literary merits occurred in the context of “one of the most exciting trends of the new decade: the emergence of the literary novel for young adults” (Cart 83), a development recognised by the founding of the Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Fiction award in 2000, which recognises “the best book written for teens, based entirely on its literary merit” (“The Michael”). The growing critical praise afforded to YA was also reflected by the first works of substantive literary scholarship on the category. Monographs such as Robyn McCallum’s *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction* (1999) and Roberta Trites’ *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000) formed an early canon of YA literary criticism, in which the genre’s formal complexity and ideological nuances are analysed. Although this means YA is beginning to be taken more seriously, Waller notes that this has also produced a distinction between texts “attractive to the critic because of its complexity, literary intertextuality, and its tendency to be canonised in curriculum reading lists” and the “‘rubbish’” (11) presumed to proliferate within the genre.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given its commerciality, serialisation and blending of popular genres, YADF has continued to be dismissed by literary critics as part of the ‘rubbish’, a genre which is didactic, simplistic, and formally incoherent. In the only chapter dedicated solely to YADF in Hintz and Ostry’s collection, Kay Sambell claims the genre’s ambiguity

means it fails to reproduce the “unequivocally pessimistic denouement” of the canonical dystopian model which she insists is “absolutely crucial” (165) to produce the necessary didactic function. Sambell’s article encapsulates several critical problems which have marred the analysis of YADF. Firstly, her presumption that texts written for children and young adults can be discussed without differentiation leads her to equate the overtly positive endings of children’s fiction with the more ambivalent denouements seen in YA. Presuming open-endedness to represent simplistic triumph, she elides the fact that critical dystopias have already mobilised ambiguity for specific political purposes, “retain[ing] the potential for change and political renewal” (Baccolini 41) in the space of the text. This produces the second problem of her analysis: her presumption that the nihilistic endings of the classic dystopias represent generic absolutes, without which the dystopian text cannot achieve coherence. Rather than analysing the qualities of YADF on their own terms, Sambell insists that YADF must replicate an outdated model of dystopian imagining, produced within entirely different social and political contexts. Her analysis indicates how literary criticism of YADF has often failed to theorise the genre in its own right, insisting on analysing texts in the context of children’s literature, or else critiquing it for its divergence from canonical dystopian tradition.

Similarly, the introduction to the first edited collection of essays on contemporary YADF, *Brave New Teenagers: Young Adult Dystopian Fiction* (2013), describes the genre as exhibiting a didacticism “reminiscent of that of Victorian novels for children” (Basu et al 5). Rather than citing this as evidence of the genre’s inferiority to ‘adult’ dystopian fiction, they identify this quality as “one of the strongest sources of appeal for young adult dystopias” (5), because it ensures that the young reader will apprehend the message of the text with “unequivocal clarity” (5). Their analysis indicates how literary criticism of YA remains

fraught with infantilising discourse, prioritising the careful instruction of a readership presumed to require pre-digested meaning rather than being capable of nuanced engagement with contemporary life. Conversely, in one of the first articles to discuss the boom in popularity of YADF, Laura Miller claims the genre is “routinely *less* didactic than its adult counterpart”. Miller claims this is because the genre is not invested in articulating social criticism or political meaning, but instead uses dystopia as a narrative trope to amplify adolescent angst. Although expressing oppositional readings of YADF’s didactic function, both Miller and Basu et al share the presumption that YADF is an unsophisticated genre which either dilutes or entirely effaces political meaning. This indicates how YA remains “fraught with contradictory expectations . . . expected to impart moral lessons, albeit without being didactic, and yet this same expectation . . . makes it a target for those who question its artistic value” (Connors and Shepard 133).

These examples indicate that “it may not be useful to continue to consider teenage fiction as a sub-genre of either children’s literature or adult literature”, because “[t]he differences become cumbersome and preclude more detailed criticism” (Waller 14). The expectation of didacticism confines YADF to a generic purity the genre does not possess. YADF’s engagement with the contemporary incorporates the textures of fantasy, myth and fairy tale, while also being closely connected to science fiction (sf) and its incitement of “*cognitive estrangement*” (Suvin 4), meaning the registering of present conditions as impermanent and conditional. Cognitive estrangement bears a “potentially powerful political impact” (Booker *Speculative* 5), because it encourages readers to examine and question fundamental assumptions, fostering consideration of how the status quo might be transformed. However, the relationship between the dystopian world and the contemporary is rarely straightforward in YADF. Suzanne Collins famously first imagined the world of *The*

*Hunger Games* when flipping between television stations late at night. The fever-dream juxtaposition of reality television and footage of the Iraq war led to her creation of the world of Panem, in which adolescents fight to the death for the edification of television audiences. Her text is not a prophecy, warning the reader that continuing to enjoy the squabbling of the Kardashians will lead inexorably to the televised murder of children. It is also not *only* a “comment[ary] on a dominant culture wedded to violence and control [which] makes that critique in an obvious way” (Basu et al 5). In fact, the supposed obviousness of the text is belied by the lack of consensus about what the text *is* saying about political life. The advocacy group Odds in Our Favor claims the series invokes contemporary social justice movements invested in “fighting racism, organizing labor unions [and] calling for greater mental health care resources” (“Odds in Our Favor”). Conversely, Jay Michaelson reads the trilogy as an “American conservative’s fantasy”, while Trites claims that “Collins reveals an ideological position very close to Libertarianism” (“Some Walks” 26). That the text is able to sustain each of these readings indicates its aversion to directly articulated political meaning in favour of ambiguity and contradiction.

Antero Garcia attributes the political murkiness of YADF to “the YA model of serialization” which he claims artificially extends narratives, leading to texts which “conclude with few questions answered and little sense of resolution” (31). Commercialisation further obscures dystopian commentary, as when the second Hunger Games film *Catching Fire* was promoted by the release of a Subway sandwich in its honour, leading commentators to marvel that “a story about food shortages [was] inspiration to advertise new lunch sandwich flavours” (Long). The series was also promoted by a fashion collection and cosmetics range, both of which rendered the decadence of the ruling class as aspirational rather than deplorable. It is perhaps unsurprising that, in this context, the efforts of Odds in Our Favour to mobilise fans

into social action largely failed. Kligler-Vilenchik attributes this to the inability of the text's readers to discern its relevance to contemporary life, so that "using it as a blueprint for taking real-world political action was not necessarily consistent with what dedicated fans were taking from the series" (125). The Thai protests remain a singular incident in which the latent political meanings of the text momentarily ruptured its commoditised surface. The lack of clarity which YADF often signifies is heightened by its resistance to generic convention; the barriers enacted between sf, dystopia and fantasy are dissolved within the genre, which incorporates elements of each of these traditions into the fundamentally hybridised form of the dystopian girl.

This thesis will identify the ambiguity of YADF as a central aspect of its engagement with political life. However, it is important to register that this is not quite the ambiguity of the critical dystopia, which is designed to resist the didactic enclosure of the classical dystopia and suggest "it is dangerous to allow one idea to become the only idea" (Baccolini 48). Instead, ambiguity in YADF represents a reluctance to engage with wider systemic issues. Although Basu et al's observation that YADF often expresses social and political criticism in an obvious way is not incorrect, these moments are rarely connected to the more pervasive predicaments of sexism, racism and neoliberal capitalism. For example, the *Uglies* trilogy finishes with an epilogue in which the heroine articulates criticism of deforestation and instructs the reader to "[b]e careful with the world or . . . it might get ugly" (*Specials* 372). Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother* (2008) similarly ends with two 'afterwords' which clarify the political message of the text for those readers presumed to have not fully discerned it: "Trading privacy for security is stupid [. . .] So close the book and go. The world is full of security systems. Hack one of them" (362). These endings make an overtly stated critique of a single issue, but fail to register these problems as produced within wider systemic crises. This

registers the wider political uncertainty of the decade in which the genre emerged, in which the social, economic and ecological destructiveness of neoliberal capitalism is increasingly evident, while viable alternatives to this system remain speculative. The hesitant engagement of YADF with contemporary life is enacted through the dystopian girl, who represents the desire to transform dominant systems of power into more utopian arrangements and the residual fear that this may not be possible. In its obsession with the girl as a heroic individual and its antipathy towards the centralised state, YADF reifies the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideology in contemporary popular culture. However, the dystopian girl also represents a countervailing desire for collectively driven upheaval, so that the genre exhibits resistance towards the very neoliberal logic which the girl often embodies. Registering the complexity of YADF's engagement with contemporary life is essential to developing a literary criticism of the genre beyond assumptions which continue to impede this analysis. Theorising the dystopian girl requires recognising her as a figure far more complex than a disseminator of didactic instruction, or else the latest reformulation of the angst-ridden teen heroine. This thesis considers how the contradictions and paradoxes embodied by the dystopian girl register the tensions of the contemporary social and political arrangements, and the difficulty of imagining beyond them.

This political ambivalence is also produced by the dystopian girl's position as a mass cultural object designed to edify and entertain adolescent consumers. The management of political desires is embedded in the concept of western adolescence, as shown by Jon Savage's history of 'the teenager'. Savage argues that post-war 'teenage' culture worked to ensure that a new generation of adolescents were safely depoliticised by consumerism, which "offered the perfect counterbalance to riot and rebellion: it was the American way of harmlessly diverting youth's disruptive energies" (453). Savage's analysis indicates how



adolescence became institutionalised as a way to induct western youth into acceptance of capitalism and manage their otherwise potentially unruly desires. A question which hovers over the dystopian girl, and which animates each chapter of this thesis, is to what degree YADF attempts to oversee as well as express the resistant energy of youth both inside and outside the text. We should regard YA franchises which claim to inspire and instigate political rebellion with scepticism, even as we must also remain cognisant of Fredric Jameson's reminder that every act of containment of the political impulse is also an inadvertent expression of this desire, so that "these same impulses -the raw material upon which the process works- are initially awakened within the very text that seeks to still them" (*Political Unconscious* 287). The dystopian girl is a figure of both suppression and emancipation, and I attempt to trace how she both articulates utopian possibility, and denies the viability of systemic transformative change.

#### TEXT SELECTIONS

This thesis will conduct close textual and comparative analysis of YADF which articulates the dystopian girl, paying close attention to the ways in which these texts articulate political meanings through this figure whilst precluding others. Although in this thesis I am tracing a conglomerate of similar characteristics in a variety of texts which contribute to an emerging literary tradition, I am not attempting to be prescriptive or totalising in my approach. I am focusing on a specific iteration of YADF which displays an investment in the girl as a political figure, which envisions her participating in a social resistance movement or else attempting to enact her desire to transform the dystopian world she has inherited, and which thereby positions her as a figure imbued with what Bradford et al name as

“transformative utopian possibility” (6), even as this possibility is often compromised, confused or curtailed.

The majority of texts I have chosen are prominent and typical examples of YADF during this era, including Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies* trilogy (2005-2007), Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010), Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* trilogy (2011-2013), Kiera Cass’s *The Selection* trilogy (2012-2014), and Teri Terry’s *Slated* trilogy (2012-2014). Although almost all of these trilogies have produced further materials, including graphic novels, further sequels and film and television adaptations, I have limited the scope of my thesis to the original trilogies with two exceptions. The first is my consideration of the film adaptations of the *Hunger Games* trilogy in chapter two. In this chapter, it was necessary to consider how the racial inferences of the text were visually encoded in the film medium, and I also briefly discuss similar visual adaptations of *Divergent* and *Uglies* to the same purpose. The second exception is my decision to focus solely on television adaptation of *The 100* (2014-present) rather than the literary trilogy written by Kass Morgan (2013-15). This is because whilst the latter features four prominent characters of mixed genders, the series reworks the narrative to focus primarily on Clarke, remodelling this character to adhere to the dystopian girl type. My inclusion of film and television is designed to register how the dystopian girl has become a wider media figure, but my focus on the original trilogies is because sequels and spin-offs tend to expand on the dystopian storyworld outside the framing of the dystopian girl’s perspective.

I have occasionally selected texts which do not fit comfortably into the model of the commercially orientated dystopian trilogy, most obviously Louise O’Neill’s *Only Ever Yours* (2014) and Saci Lloyd’s *The Carbon Diaries* duology (2009-2010). Both of these texts were produced outside the mainstream of contemporary YADF, written by an Irish and English

author respectively, and refraining from reiterating the commercialised format of the trilogy and its attendant rendering of the dystopian girl as an aspirational, super-heroic figure. I have included these texts to indicate that although dystopian girls often share remarkably similar characteristics and narrative trajectories, there are writers and texts at the peripheries of YA invested in complicating the story which she is continually positioned as telling. In tracing how YADF outside the market-driven convention of the trilogy imagines dystopian girlhood, I am able to outline the limitations of this form and its central figure, indicating how she, and the political, might be imagined differently. The *Carbon Diaries*, for example, ends with an explicitly leftist revolution, positioning its dystopian girl as an anonymous participant in collectively driven change, as opposed to the more typical symbolic figurehead of revolutionary upheaval. The text resolves Laura's uncertainty about radical political action without inflecting it with a final note of ambivalence, producing an unusually robust vision of the dystopian girl as a revolutionary figure which is both less complex and more openly utopian than the dominant strain of the dystopian girl's narrative development.

The inclusion of *Only Ever Yours* indicates how this text's imagining of the dystopian girl as implicitly non-white, and her delineation in an explicitly misogynistic dystopian regime, also undermines the prevarications embedded in the mainstream of the genre, producing an iteration of the dystopian girl who is both drastically less empowered within the space of the text, and whose delineation refutes the implication that racism and sexism are no longer relevant concerns. Similarly, in the last chapter, I consider the legacy of the dystopian girl from the vantage point of 2018, when YADF has largely fallen out of favour, replaced by newer trends. Here I analyse Anna Day's *The Fandom* (2018) and Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016) as satirising and criticising the dystopian girl from a position outside

mainstream YADF, while also indicating how they are nonetheless indebted to the model of dystopian transmedia storytelling which this genre instigated.

In my selection of texts to analyse, I disbarred the inclusion of fantastical elements, such as the existence of magic or mythical creatures, as these enfold the text more closely within the fantasy genre, and I was keen to analyse texts which place themselves in greater proximity to the possible and the plausible as dictated by the dystopian tradition. The sole exception is Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016), which I include to show how a novel outside the YA category comments on the dystopian girl trend, positioning this within the wider context of contemporaneous feminist debates. I also decided not to include texts featuring alien life or space travel, as these elements distance the energy of the text from contemporary social life, placing it more closely in the realm of science fiction. Although much of the technology evident in these is far removed from what is currently possible, these are merely exaggerations of the present, such as the extensive bodily remodelling of the *Uglies* series, or the hi-tech televised arenas of *The Hunger Games*. The term 'dystopia' has been used loosely within YA, often used to describe any text set in a dark future, producing several sub-genres including the fantasy dystopia and the romance dystopia, as will also be discussed in the final chapter of this thesis. In order for a text to be defined as dystopian, however, it must be set in a future explicitly connected to the present moment, in accordance with Sargent's definition of the dystopia as being "located in space and time that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived" ("Three Faces" 9). This may be only a few years away, as in *The Carbon Diaries 2015*, or several hundred years, as in *The 100* and *The Hunger Games*, but the text must be set somewhere on Earth rather than another planet entirely, and it must imagine a future which is possible, even if far-fetched, based on present conditions.

## CHAPTER OUTLINES

In the first chapter, I outline how the dystopian girl channels neoliberal postfeminism, meaning the presumption that gender equality has been achieved within western neoliberal regimes. Focussing on the trilogies which have been most essential in popularising this figure, *Uglies*, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, I consider how these texts frame the girl protagonist in a manner analogous to what Anita Harris has termed the ‘Future Girl myth’ circulated in neoliberal states. I register the absence of gender in these texts as a quintessentially postfeminist silence, drawing on the work of Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill to consider how the dystopian girl implicitly registers, yet explicitly disavows, the ongoing production of gender inequality in her society. The girl channels optimism about the heroic potential of young women to challenge political power structures, legitimised by the implication that gender is irrelevant in the dystopian future. Lying beneath this postfeminist veneer, however, are ancient patriarchal expectations, and each of these dystopian girls struggles to navigate repressive narrative patterns which continue to be imposed on young women both inside and outside the text.

In the second chapter, I analyse the dystopian girl as a figure who embodies neoliberal colour-blindness. Indicating the absence of race in those texts discussed in the first chapter, I show this to be a repressive silence analogous to the absence of gender in the dystopian future. In *Uglies*, for example, it is suggested that a society which mandates the physical appearance of the populace will become homogenously white, but the text never registers the disturbing racial consequences of this imagining. A differential strategy is presented in *Divergent*, in which race is tacitly registered through descriptions of secondary figures, but is only ever a marginal and depoliticized aspect of the text. The dystopian girl works to centre

whiteness and colour-blindness in the text despite its setting in Chicago, a city which in the contemporary is known both for its minority white population and divisive racial politics. A similar strategy operates in *The Hunger Games*, in which racial inequality is only vaguely referenced in the backdrop of the text, and the racial ambiguity of the girl means this can be disavowed when the narrative is adapted for film. However, in my analysis of this adaptation, I suggest that the relinquishing of narrative authority from the dystopian girl allows the films to explicate the revolution as the direct result of the senseless death of a black child. This means that the films register the racial politics of both Panem and the contemporary United States with far greater force than occurs in the literary text, as a result of the greater distance the film medium affords from the girl's colour-blind perspective.

In the third chapter, I consider how YADF set in educational settings both troubles and reiterates the notion of adolescence as a time of linear growth into stable maturity. This has been identified by thinkers including Carol Gilligan and Nancy Lesko as a masculinist tradition which excludes girls from models of normative development. Feminist advances have shifted the marginalisation of girls, however, and the continuing successes of young women in western education systems and economies has led Anita Harris to claim that "girlhood operates now as adolescence functioned then" (2), as an idealised representation of young adult growth. This chapter will suggest that the dystopian girl's development queries this optimism, suggesting that girls continue to be marginalised by patriarchal models of adolescent development. In *Only Ever Yours*, the gender repression which simmers beneath the surface of the popular trilogies bursts to the narrative surface. In this dystopian future, girlhood is experienced as an unbearable countdown, and womanhood is anticipated as a kind of inexorable death of self. Girls are genetically engineered and brainwashed into compliance by a savagely violent patriarchy. The dystopian girl is only able to develop into a narrow

selection of restricted adult roles, and her resistance is futile. This text suggests that neoliberal postfeminism works to elide the reality of ongoing gender inequality by emphatically gendering the dystopian girl. By contrast, the *Slated* trilogy conveys adolescent liminality in a more ambiguous and potentially liberating way. The protagonist Kyla has been ‘slated’, wiped of her identity and associated memories and given a new family because of an unknown crime. As the narrative progresses, Kyla acquires various other names associated with repressed memories, each indicating a different facet of her personality. I argue that the trilogy presents adolescence as a site of experimentation, resisting the normative insistence on singular coherence, even as the trilogy format works to discipline her into a more typical narrative of linear development.

In Chapter Four, I analyse Saci Lloyd’s *The Carbon Diaries* duology and the television adaptation of Kass Morgan’s *The 100* to consider how these texts engage with neoliberal models of subjectivity. *The Carbon Diaries* imagines how the dystopian girl might reject individualism to embrace radical politics and the revolutionary potential of the collective, indicating how she is able to refute the political apathy which neoliberalism engenders. By contrast, I situate *The 100* as educating the girl into an acceptance of systemic political violence and an internalisation of brutal competition and anti-utopian defeat. Drawing on key thinkers on neoliberalism, I consider how the contrast between these texts indicates the ambivalence of the dystopian girl as a figure able to resist neoliberal ideals to varying degrees of success.

In the final chapter, I consider how later dystopian fiction has commented intertextually on the dystopian girl in response to her ubiquity in popular culture. I analyse Kiera Cass’s *The Selection* as a prominent example of the dystopian romance sub-genre which came to dominate YADF during the height of its popularity. In these texts, the

romantic life of the girl is emphasised to the detriment of her political awakening, so that the narrative conventions of the romance novel almost entirely swallow the dystopian predicament. Anna Day's *The Fandom* (2018) wryly satirises the dystopian romance by casting its protagonist into the world of her favourite franchise, wherein she must play the role of the dystopian girl to complete the canonical ending of romantic death. *The Fandom* suggests that the conventions of romance fiction have exhausted the political potential of the dystopian girl, positioning its heroine as a corrective by educating her into acceptance of political rage. A more oblique critique of the dystopian girl is produced within Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016), in which every girl on the planet awakens to discover a dormant physical power. This novel produces a complex engagement with the YADF imaginary, undermining its postfeminist assumptions while also indicating how the genre's celebration of violently enacted revolution projects the dystopian girl as an anti-utopian figure. Her acceptance of political violence is identified as a reiteration of patriarchal ideology in the text, so that it both registers the necessity of feminism as a counterpoint to this ideology whilst also suggesting that the dominant model of dystopian girlhood is unable to provide such a counterpoint.



## CHAPTER ONE: THE DYSTOPIAN GIRL AS POSTFEMINIST SUBJECT IN *THE HUNGER GAMES*, *UGLIES* AND *DIVERGENT*

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I analyse three of the most commercially successful Young Adult dystopian series published during the focal time period of this thesis: Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* (2005-2007), Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010), and Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011-13). Each of these trilogies feature an adolescent heroine -Tally, Katniss and Tris respectively- who is celebrated for her rebellious spirit and becomes famous in the worlds of the novels because of her opposition to a dystopian government. This fame is reflected by the staggering success she has achieved as a literary figure. The *Uglies* series has sold over four million copies (Corbett), *The Hunger Games* over a hundred million (Scholastic), *Divergent* over thirty-two million (HarperCollins), and the film franchises of the latter two texts have grossed \$2.9 billion and \$765 million respectively (Box Office Mojo). Together, these texts produced a model of the female protagonist in YADF which I name the dystopian girl, and which subsequently became a recognisable literary type, repeated across dozens of texts.<sup>2</sup> Considering how and why YADF obsessively reiterates the dystopian girl is crucial to understanding the genre's articulation of adolescent girlhood and how this is linked to its engagement with social and political life. This chapter codifies the dystopian girl in order to understand how YADF does, and does not, produce girlhood as resonant with transformative possibility.

The dystopian girl evidences the ways in which "individualism, choice and self-realisation –as historic markers of masculinity- now interpellate female Subjects, along with discourses of conventional femininity" (Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz 19). In these texts, the expectation that the girl adheres to feminine standards of beauty, heterosexuality and passivity

is pitted against the desire to project her as a heroic individual who refuses to conform to societal norms. Although she is projected as a symbol of empowerment, her delineation often tacitly undermines the notion that girls are capable of challenging dominant power structures. The ambiguity this contradiction produces is heightened by the reluctance to criticise, or even to acknowledge, gender inequality in the texts which articulate her. This means that the dystopian girl epitomises the postfeminist paradox, in which gender inequality is simultaneously palpable and unspeakable.

Angela McRobbie identifies postfeminism as a newly hegemonic idea in the neoliberal west, “which says feminism is no longer needed, it is now common sense, and as such it is something young women can do without” (8). The notion that feminist ideals can be complacently discarded has, in McRobbie’s view, enabled patriarchal ideas to retain their grip on power, relegating discussion of gender inequality to the margins of public life. In *Uglies*, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, gender is rarely mentioned and girls and boys are ostensibly treated equally, indicating how thoroughly postfeminism has become reiterated throughout western popular culture. However, I also argue that these texts generate implicit critiques of postfeminism, by registering how the pretence of equality works to mask the ongoing maintenance of repressive gender binaries. Beneath the veneer of parity, the girl continues to experience normative expectations of femininity: to glamourize herself for public display, and to accept male authority in her personal and political life. Her failure to challenge gendered normativity is sealed by her inability to identify patriarchy as the repressive ideology which generates these demands. YADF therefore indicates the importance of feminism as a means of challenging dominant power structures; unable to identify gender as a repressive construct, the dystopian girl is incapable of challenging patriarchal bindings. Although these trilogies cast her as a powerful and inspiring figure, by the end of the narrative

the girl is often muted or defeated, and her development is recirculated back into patriarchal narratives of femininity.

In this chapter, I detail the specifics of what I mean by ‘the dystopian girl’ as an observable literary type, identifying her characteristics and considering to what degree these challenge literary tradition. I situate my analysis within feminist debates which have surrounded the dystopian girl as either radical or regressive, intervening by identifying an aspect which has been ignored precisely because of its pernicious invisibility: the paradoxical framing of the oppressive dystopian society as a postfeminist utopia. I indicate how this leaves the girl incapable of challenging the palpable gender normativity of her society, because this is projected as non-existent. Finally, I consider how the narrative ending functions to resolve the girl’s liminality in an intrinsically repressive way, attempting to define her in accordance with gender stereotypes and revealing the patriarchal face behind the postfeminist veil.

#### FUTURE GIRLS

The dystopian girl is only the latest iteration of a fascination with girlhood in western culture. As McRobbie states, “[y]oung womanhood currently exists within the realm of public debate as a topic of fascination, enthusiasm, concern, anxiety and titillation” (57). Anita Harris observes that images of confident young women have been thrust into prominence by western neoliberal regimes, idealising them as symbols of the future. Harris names this as the “ideal of the future girl” (2), which she argues applies “symbolic and material uses . . . more typically applied to young men, or youth in general, [to] young women” (15). Harris critiques the future girl myth as encoding neoliberalism’s core value of individualism, imagining girls as “flexible, adaptable, resilient, and ultimately responsible for their own ability to manage their lives successfully” (8). Harris argues that the highly-educated and happily-consumerist

western girl “functions as a powerful ideal that suggests all young women are now enjoying these kinds of lives and that this is what it means to be successful” (8). Harris’s analysis indicates how the future girl myth appropriates feminist goals by depoliticising them, recuperating them back into the maintenance of neoliberal economies and the patriarchal status quo, so that only individual success within this system is celebrated and endorsed.

Reading the dystopian girl as a fictive iteration of the future girl myth is tempting, given that both project girlhood as utopian. However, the setting in which the dystopian girl is articulated dampens any reading of her as a success story along neoliberal lines. Dystopia separates the girl from the educational attainment and consumerist excess which the future girl myth embodies. All three girls in these texts are poorly educated, taught only the propaganda of their closed societies if they are taught anything at all, and live in places and times where consumerism is no longer available. There are no advertisements or shopping malls, no frenzied participation in the consumerism which are the future girl’s riches, and which mark the stereotyped preoccupations of the western teenage girl. In their encyclopaedia of “Girl Culture”, Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh expand on the various ways girlhood has been stereotyped in American culture, observing the emphasis on social practices like phone calls, texting and shopping; material artefacts, predominantly clothing, cosmetics and accessories; and physical spaces, often the bedroom and the shopping mall (xxvii). These associations cast the girl as the consummate consumer, and they are all strikingly absent in representations of the dystopian girl, who is able to forge an identity outside such overdetermined parameters. She signifies the possibility of a girlhood experienced outside consumer culture and its attendant minimisation of the girl as a shallow spendthrift. Katniss hunts in the forest and sells her wares at the market, earning respect for her skill. Tally roams around the outskirts of the city on a hoverboard, playing pranks on the privileged. Tris leaps

and bounds through a crumbling future Chicago in a series of daredevil escapades. The dystopian girl is, paradoxically, liberated by her existence in a post-capitalist dystopia.

As the narrative progresses, however, the girl realises the extent of her oppression, and longs to live within a different political system. Often, this system appears to be remarkably similar to the contemporaneous western ideal of liberal, representative democracy. Sean P. Connors and Iris Shepard claim *The Hunger Games* “may actually work to reinscribe the status quo and thus aspects of the dominant ideology”, so that the series may reaffirm “what readers have probably learned to value” (132). This observation is bolstered by the moments of cross-cultural contact which occur in the final books of each of these trilogies. The dystopian girl is exposed to an alternative society based on differential values to the dystopia she has been raised in, and ultimately resolves this ideological tension by espousing the benefits of the contemporaneous political status quo. For example, Tally visits the multicultural metropolis of Diego and is amazed by its democratic system. This is a place where politics works “like the way the Rusties had lived, debating every issue in public instead of letting the government do its job” (Westerfeld, *Specials*, 229), and Tally marvels that this is proof that “you could do just about anything you wanted here” (228). This implicitly valorises the wisdom of the contemporary political system, as ‘the Rusties’ is the nickname given to contemporary American society due to its legacy of abandoned cars and buildings. Diego’s ‘New System’ ultimately triumphs, and the implication is that Tally’s society has embraced representative democracy of the present, a state idealised as utopian because it is positioned against an oppressive dictatorship. The text thereby closes off critique of neoliberalism and its imbrication in contemporary American governance in favour of simplistic celebrations of representative democracy.

Similarly, in the third *Hunger Games* novel, *Mockingjay*, Katniss finds herself in District 13, a drab and conformist society which appears designed to parody communism as a political idea. Here all resources are pooled and the minutiae of citizen's lives are policed with exacting detail, to the very last calorie. Although the leaders of District 13 are instrumental in toppling Panem's repressive government, the text is only able to imbue this with optimism by emphasising that the new society will not be organised along such collective lines. In fact, the goal of the rebels is to install a political system which mirrors the contemporary United States: "We're going to form a republic where the people of each district and the Capitol can elect their own representatives to be their voice in a centralized government. Don't look so suspicious; it's worked before" (Collins *Mockingjay* 99). Rather than meeting this idea with the scepticism she exhibits for District 13's policies, Katniss admits "this republic idea sounds like an improvement over our current government" (99). Again, the dystopian girl's opposition to dystopian power is modified to articulate conventional political wisdom. The American model of democratic capitalism is implied to be the only thinkable or workable mould of communal organisation, by idealising its representative practices while obscuring its other economic, ecological and political consequences.

An almost identical moment occurs in *Divergent*, when Tris reads an article on the political system in place in her city which criticises "the failings of choosing government officials based on their faction" (Roth *Divergent* 261). The article "promotes a return to the democratically elected political systems of the past", and Tris is forced to admit that "[i]t makes a lot of sense" (262). Tris ultimately learns to challenge the Faction system, in which people are grouped and classed according to dominant personality: "now I'm wondering . . . if we ever really *need* these words, "Dauntless," "Erudite," "Divergent," "Allegiant," or if we

can just be friends or lovers or siblings, defined instead by the choices we make” (Roth *Allegiant* 134). In this moment, *Divergent* validates Andrew O’Hehir’s reading of YADF as “designed to remind us how grateful we should be to live in a society where we can be ‘ourselves’”. This banal criticism of a self-evidently flawed social system is couched in neoliberal rhetoric, in which the right to be defined by personal choice is projected as the epitome of political freedom. David Harvey argues that this rhetoric of freedom and choice is deliberately mobilised within neoliberalism to promote the extension of corporate rights as emancipatory, capitalising on the fact that “[t]he word ‘freedom’ resonates so widely within the common-sense understanding of Americans that it can be used to justify almost anything” (38). Each of these examples legitimise Connors and Shephard’s observation that young adult dystopia may invite the reader to “critique the social problems of the fictional world, as opposed to their own” (134). In these moments, the texts affirm, rather than critique, the wisdom of the contemporary neoliberal world-system, using the dystopian setting to illustrate the reader’s good fortune to have been born in a time the dystopian girl admires and endorses as an inspirational model of political organisation. The future girl myth works to maintain western superiority, by silencing critique of gender inequality *within* western culture, suggesting that women and girls are only oppressed outside its bounds. It may be that, like static images of repressed third-world girls, the dystopian girl is designed to make western readers value what they have already been told to prize: the current political and economic system. The freedom of the girl from capitalism and consumerism is in this sense not a liberation, but a lamentable lack.

In his analysis of *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games* as “capitalist agitprop”, O’Hehir claims the dystopian girl operates as “propaganda for the ethos of individualism [. . .] entangled with the symbolism of female empowerment”. In O’Hehir’s reading, the dystopian

girl is not a counterpoint to the future girl myth, but its reiteration. His analysis indicates how the dystopian girl operates as an avatar of neoliberal ideology, an embodiment of the ideal of the adaptable, self-making individual. Each of these trilogies indicates her miraculous ability to adapt to a new set of social demands, and even her resistance to structural oppression is attributed to her unique capacity for self-invention. The overarching story of the *Uglies* trilogy is Tally “rewiring herself once again” (*Specials* 291), adapting to multiple identities and expectations imposed upon her. Similarly, Tris strives to be “remade” (*Divergent* 60), actively seeking to “become something else” (87) by transferring from one Faction to another. For Tally, this capacity for adaptation and self-making is not only social, but cognitive. Tally overcomes the brain lesions imposed upon her as a ‘Pretty’ through effort alone, an achievement projected as testifying to her innate ingenuity: ““you thought your way out of being Pretty”” (Westerfeld, *Specials* 314). Although Katniss also excels at adaption to undesirable circumstances, the last novel of the trilogy tempers this by suggesting that reinvention of the self is not always possible. Although Katniss’s description of herself as “like a caterpillar in a cocoon awaiting metamorphosis” indicates the potentiality which the dystopian girl is often positioned as representing, she has become so traumatised by her experiences that she is no longer able to renew herself: “I squirm, trying to shed my ruined body and unlock the secret to growing flawless wings. Despite enormous effort, I remain a hideous creature, fired into my current form by the blast from the bombs” (Collins *Mockingjay* 424). Katniss’s inability to overcome her traumatic experiences tacitly indicates the futility of attempting to transcend systemic power through perpetual self-invention. In this sense, O’Hehir’s reading simplifies the complexity of the dystopian girl’s engagement with neoliberal ideology, as she signifies both the power and possibility of individualism and its limitations.



The trilogies selected for this chapter are not only the most popular iterations of the dystopian girl. They also typify the qualities this character is typically envisioned as possessing. Tally, Katniss and Tris are all white (or Katniss's case, ethically ambiguous, as will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter), able-bodied, praised for their conventional attractiveness, modest, and filled with self-doubt. In this sense, it is difficult to see what is new about the dystopian girl at all, given that none of these qualities challenge or rework long-standing ideals of western female adolescence. Where the dystopian girl diverges from tradition, however, is in her articulation as an explicitly political figure. She not only participates in public life, but actively challenges the dominant power structure of her society, often leading to revolution and the advent of a new regime. This dynamic reframes what Ilana Nash names as “‘the chrysalis moment’, the carefully manipulated scenario in which an adolescent female is shown crossing a threshold of sexual maturity” (23), and in doing so becomes “a public spectacle” (24). This moment has “remained a staple of girl-centred entertainment” (24) for decades, especially through the recurring trope of the makeover. In contemporary YADF, however, the girl rises to public prominence as a result of her resistant subjectivity and ethical opposition to the hegemonic power structure, as opposed to her newly discovered sexual appeal. Although this is an important divergence from the prurience of the chrysalis moment, the significance of her appearance is not entirely effaced; she is still often cinched, prodded and carved into an acceptably beautified vision of young womanhood. This demand for sexual display recirculates her political significance back into an articulation of “the voyeuristic appeal of female adolescence” (23) on which the chrysalis moment hinges.

The primacy of her political conviction is further diluted by her delineation as a reluctant revolutionary, someone who accidentally becomes involved in a collective uprising and, once prominent within it, experiences this as an undesirable imposition. Tally's lament

that, “[a]ll she’d wanted was . . . to feel safe inside in a clique of friends, and now she’d found herself in charge of a rebellion” (*Pretties* 125) typifies the ambivalence of the dystopian girl as a figure often projected as the photogenic face of a revolution she barely endorses or even understands. Although the dystopian girl is not necessarily passive, she is reactive and uncertain, and her political actions are motivated by spontaneity and pragmatism as opposed to ideological conviction. This reframes her rebelliousness to cohere with stereotyping of adolescent girls as passive embedded in the western literary tradition. In her history of girls in American fiction published until the mid-1980s, Barbara White claims the imposition of inferiority is so pervasive that delineating confidence and self-determination strains the mimetic tenets of realism: “girls are taught to be tender, weak, and humble [so that] when they suddenly act “tough” the strength seems imposed upon them” (183). White notes that even and especially when the fictional girl is introduced as defiant, the narrative forces her to unlearn this behaviour, naming the loss as growth. By framing her within this tradition, I indicate how the dystopian girl often reiterates repressive tradition, despite her ostensible disruption of patriarchal devaluation as an embattled revolutionary.

To summarise, what I refer to as ‘the dystopian girl’ is a universalised idea of girlhood, usually depicted as white, able-bodied and conventionally beautiful, the latter implied by appreciative male characters despite her effacement of vanity. This figure is projected as an avatar of rebellion against the political status quo, even as she articulates a largely repressed unease generated by ongoing, underlying patriarchal expectations. This unease limits the ability of the girl to challenge the dystopian regime, and, by the end of the text, her liminality is often resolved into conventionality, with her incendiary conviction sliding into self-doubt so that she becomes “less assured and less capable” (Henthorne 35). The dystopian girl also signifies a reluctance to participate in the collective upheaval she

instigates. Although often finding herself at the forefront of revolution, she almost always retreats from public life. Her inability to engage with the social or political outside a temporary pose of opposition ultimately affirms her as a figure of neoliberal individualism, although the preceding complexity and ambiguity of her delineation is never entirely resolved. The dystopian girl is fundamentally contradictory in that she signifies a passionate conviction in the importance of opposing political violence and cruelty, whilst also suggesting the attempt to reshape political culture along more ethical grounds is ultimately futile. Her revolutionary activity is presented in a manner akin to contemporary clichés of teen rebellion, a phase to be discarded with adult maturity. I argue that this means the dystopian girl is ultimately a repressive figure, even as YADF also provides apertures of more utopian possibilities in its unprecedented investment in the girl as a political actor.

#### THE KATNISS DEBATE

That the dystopian girl has emerged in the realm of YA fiction is not insignificant. In a panel at the Young Adult Literature Conference in London in 2016, the YA author Sarra Manning described YA as a “female friendly microcosm”, which fellow panellist Anna James expanded to claim that YA was “a bubble in which everything in publishing is reversed” (James et al). By this, James meant that YA is one of the only sectors of publishing where women and girls are both the dominant producers and consumers of fiction. A 2012 article on the preponderance of female writers in YA noted that the category indicated “a parity that would seem like a minor miracle in some other genres” (Lewit “Why”), and a year earlier Robert Lipsyte defined YA as a genre in which fiction by “young female novelists [is] bought by female editors, stocked by female librarians and taught by female teachers”. Of all the texts analysed in this thesis, only the *Uglies* trilogy was written by a male writer, and the only

YADF franchise centred on a male protagonist is *The Maze Runner*, which the author James Dasher acknowledged as an anomaly: “[i]t’s refreshing to have the main character be a male for once, seems like there’s been a lot of female leads” (Sinha-Roy). Despite this ostensible novelty, *The Maze Runner* typifies an endemic mainstream bias which favours male characters and perspectives. A study which counted speaking characters in Hollywood films made between 2007 and 2017 found that female roles consistently hovered around thirty percent, and the majority were inessential to the plot (Smith et al). Although this thesis in many ways criticises the dystopian girl as an unsatisfactory rendering of the girl as a political figure, that she exists at all is significant and commendable. She not only reworks the masculine biases of mainstream cultural production, but provides a refreshing alternative to the dominant rendering of girls in YA narratives which immediately preceded her. Meghan Lewit reads Katniss as embodying a “girl power ethos” which waned during the supernatural romance trend sparked by the phenomenal success of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series (2005-2008). This genre often modelled the girl as an overtly passive and enfeebled figure, epitomised by *Twilight*’s controversial protagonist, Bella Swan. Lewit claims that “[i]n contrast to Bella’s blank-slate quality, Katniss is a complex and sometimes destructive force of nature” (“Casting”). Although the line drawn here between Katniss and Bella amplifies their differences, the multiplicity of the dystopian girl as an action heroine, romantic lead, dystopian protagonist and quasi-mythic figure allows her to channel a far wider variety of meaning. Furthermore, unlike the ‘girl power’ fantasies of the 1990s, evident in popular figures such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Xena Warrior Princess, the dystopian girl is articulated as an explicitly political figure, placed in opposition to a central state. The rarity of *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* as transmedia franchises centred on adolescents indicates

that YADF is an important space in mainstream culture in which girls are taken seriously, not only as characters, but as political actors.

YADF has accordingly received widespread acclaim for its rendering of young women as complex and powerful, and Katniss in particular has been widely praised as “the ultimate girl power hero” (McGrath 2015), “pure feminist catnip” (Urwin 2015) and “one of the most radical female characters to appear in American movies” (Scott and Dargis). Much of the acclaim stems from the perception of Katniss as an androgynous character who embodies traits stereotypically gendered as masculine and feminine. She is impulsive, hardy and terse, but also empathetic, caring and emotional. According to such readings, the complexity of Katniss’s characterisation draws attention to the arbitrariness of gender and destabilises the binary of masculine and feminine. Jennifer Mitchell notes the significance of her namesake, a hermaphroditic plant, which “speaks directly to the configuration of Katniss as a character who blurs, erases, transcends and challenges traditional representations of gender” (129). According to her admirers, Katniss embodies a new idealisation of the girl as a staunch and formidable person who insistently refutes tradition and insists on being recognised as complex and powerful.

Katniss has also been the subject of an array of criticism, however, with critics challenging the idea that she represents a radically new imagining of the girl. She has been described as a “Feminist Bait-and Switch” because of her passivity and imbrication in romance (Thaller) or else a reiteration of the “strong female character” type which has become prevalent in recent popular culture, and which Sophia McDougall claims encodes a “patronising promise” that female strength is “anomalous”. If the androgynous dystopian girl taps a chink in the armour of patriarchal ideology, this is only because she is able to do so as a character whose beauty, heterosexuality and whiteness ensure she does not fundamentally

challenge the hierarchies this ideology produces and maintains. As Judith Butler has argued, “[g]ender can be rendered ambiguous without disturbing or reorientating normative sexuality at all. Gender ambiguity can operate precisely to contain or deflect non-normative sexual practice and thereby work to keep normative sexuality intact” (xiv). The dystopian girl may be described as racially ambiguous or faintly androgynous, but in mainstream YADF she is almost never explicitly non-white, queer or transgender. Furthermore, although her sexuality may appear uncertain at the beginning of her narrative, as in Katniss’s aversion to Gale’s advances, this is always resolved by an affirmation of heterosexuality by the end of her narrative.

The variant interpretations of Katniss indicate the contradictoriness of the dystopian girl, who embodies incongruous meanings both within the dystopian society and for readers outside it. The difficulty of identifying what she represents, particularly in terms of gender, is exacerbated by the fact that she carries “the burden of multiple symbolic identities”, as “a western hero, an action hero, a romantic heroine and a tween idol” (Balkind 45). The multiplicity of the dystopian girl as a generic figure reflects the fact she is often “caught in between and on the brink of multiple states simultaneously” (Day, Green-Barteet and Montz 9), rendering her as an inherently liminal figure, incapable of occupying a coherent social role or identity. In *Divergent*, Tris is delimited within fixed social labels throughout her narrative, and finds the conformity attached to these labels untenable. Tris learns through mandatory testing that she is Divergent, someone who cannot be easily sorted in one of the Factions, and who thus threatens the entire political system. Tris as Divergent represents the impossibly limited expectations made of girls in society, and problematises the labelling of girls with definitive terms which overwrite their inner complexity. The dystopian girl’s rejection of

conformity to social expectation is perhaps her most empowering trait, as she strives to define herself on her own terms and refuses to internalise the dominant ideology of her culture.

The struggle to navigate repressive expectations also runs throughout *The Hunger Games*, as Katniss becomes a canvas for competing ideas of what female adolescence represents. First framed as a Tribute, a sacrificial lamb to the slaughter of the Games, she is glamourized and made into a spectacle by the male stylist Cinna, wearing a series of flaming costumes which earn her the name of the ‘Girl on Fire’. This attributes an excess of meaning to Katniss beyond that sanctioned within the frame of the Games, while also correcting her previous androgyny by emphatically gendering her through costume. When first presented to the public, she is stylised in a manner akin to an aloof high-fashion model, instructed to disdainfully overlook the public as she rides a chariot emblazoned in fire. Cinna then restyles her in the more palatable image of the demure ingénue when she is interviewed on television, and her exaggeratedly feminine gown endears her to the public even as she struggles to simper appropriately. As a Victor of the Games in the second novel, *Catching Fire*, this feminisation intensifies when she is expected to fulfil the role of the infatuated young lover. Katniss rejects this role, and with it obedience to the government, in order to accept the mythic label of ‘the Mockingjay’. Katniss is now presented to the public as a superheroine, armed with hi-tech bow and arrow and dressed in a skin-tight costume designed for the battlefield and the ever-present cameras, artfully curated as a revolutionary figurehead.

Although Katniss’s navigation of these various identities might suggest she develops in a linear manner towards adult maturity, there is in fact no sense of personal development in any of these roles she plays. Her public personae are articulated as performances, so that she embodies a kaleidoscope of meaning which never fully settles to allow her to express a more coherent sense of identity. The implication of her decision to ultimately live in seclusion is

that she is no longer able to sustain the public's searing gaze and its voracious desire to impose meaning upon her, choosing instead to live in "refuge from the world" (*Mockingjay* 395). For Katniss, the only viable way to avoid being typecast as a warrior goddess or simpering fool is to remove herself from society altogether. This works to implicitly undermine the postfeminist insistence that patriarchal ideals of femininity prevail because women and girls 'choose' them, or as Susan Faludi phrased it, the insistence "not only that [the 'feminine' woman] wear rib-crushing garments, but that she lace them up herself" (93). The delineation of Katniss's public identities as imposed stereotypes effaces the notion of 'choice', but it also suggests that girls are only able to negotiate patriarchy through capitulation or exile: and even the latter encodes the former, as we will see in the final section of this chapter. It is worth noting the sleek *Mockingjay* image of Katniss is also the one presented by the franchise through film posters and promotional photos. Although the text articulates this as an unwanted and depersonalising imposition, it remains central to Katniss's glamourized appeal as an action franchise heroine. This indicates the elisions between the demands made of girls inside the text and the mediated desires of the audience outside it, and further suggests the inescapability of objectification and depersonalisation for girls in the public eye.

Tally moves through a similar array of projected meanings in the *Uglies* trilogy, but unlike Katniss, these meanings are not signified by performances and costumes which can be posed and discarded, but through the irreversible violence of scalpel on skin, tissue and bone. Each novel in the trilogy sees Tally shape-shift into a different social identity signified by the titles, as she moves from Ugly to Pretty to Special. As with Katniss, this is not articulated as maturation, and Tally rejects the socially sanctioned scripts accompanied by each identity, ultimately deciding to reject society altogether. As an Ugly, she is permitted a socially



sanctioned form of rebellion through tricks played on the much-envied Pretties who live across the river. Although Tally longs to become a Pretty and achieve normative personhood, she strikes up a friendship with a fellow Ugly, Shay, who is vehemently opposed to the Pretty procedure. She educates Tally into resistance against her society, so that she becomes disenchanted with the notion of Prettiness, ultimately rejecting it altogether. However, she is still forced to undergo the procedure and begins the second novel as a Pretty, the prerequisite plastic surgery accompanied by a pleasantly empty-headed sensation. Although initially enjoying the hedonistic pleasures of this lifestyle, she soon becomes bored by its monotony and superficiality, again rejecting the narrative stipulated by an imposed social label. The power structure of Tally's society reciprocates by transmogrifying her into a Special, a posthuman military weapon deployed to police the city. Repeating the narrative pattern of the other two novels, Tally rebels against expectation once again, disobeying her superiors and insisting on her right to determine her own behaviour. At all three stages of her metamorphosis, Tally is given a social script to perform which is encoded and naturalised through physical appearance, and in each instance, she rejects this imposition entirely. Unlike Katniss, who gamely attempts to perform the roles given to her as instructed, and who never foresees or controls the subversive potential of her public image, Tally refuses to perform to type, situating her as a more radically independent version of the dystopian girl.

Yet this framing is also one which affirms another aspect of the dystopian girl's normativity: her able-bodiedness. The presumption of able-bodiedness and the absence of disability inflect all three trilogies, and the girl's rigorous physicality is a precondition of her narrative centrality. A disabled Tribute for the Hunger Games would be distinctly disadvantaged given the punishing physical demands of being a Tribute, while the Faction Tris chooses, Dauntless, presume the ability to leap from skyscrapers, bound onto moving

trains and career along zipwires at a moment's notice. In *Uglies*, this presumption becomes particularly disturbing, as disability is not only erased, but registered as repellent. The Pretty procedure reifies the “ideology of the perfect body” which characterises “the disabled body as requiring cure – in order to become ‘normal’” (Allan 9). The procedure is described as leaving “old marks of accidents and bad food and childhood illnesses all washed away” (*Uglies* 25), and this perfectibility intensifies when Tally becomes a Special. Her transformation leads to the destruction of her romance with Zane, a Pretty who has become physically impaired, as she is no longer able to identify him as attractive, too attuned to “the infirmity of his movements” (*Specials* 85) so that when she imagines “stroking his shaking hands . . . the thought disgusted her” (89). In his analysis of the permeation of “a neoliberal, post-industrial conception of work [which] increasingly revolves around ideas of speed, productivity and efficiency”, Stuart Murray claims this has led to disability being increasingly understood as “unendurable”. Tally’s revulsion at Zane’s slowness indicates the linkage between neoliberal ideals of posthuman speed and the utopian obsolescence of disabled bodies, so that “[i]n this framework, a future with disability is a future no one wants” (Kafer 2). When Zane attempts to catch a bag, Tally watches “his hands coming up a full second too late to catch it [. . .] Tally swallowed. Zane was crippled” (84). Posthuman transformation leaves Tally “[f]ree from the imperfectness of ugliness [and] the averageness that seemed to be leaking out of Zane” (83). Although intended to convey her troubling lack of empathy as a Special, these posthuman abilities only slightly elevate her above the dystopian girl’s wider physical ability. Her conformity to cultural ideals of the body indicates the normativity at the centre of her claim to narrative centrality, as someone who is not only a protagonist, but an action hero.

Katniss is as an excellent hunter, nimbly agile and unfailingly accurate with a bow and arrow, whilst Tally spends much of her trilogy expertly navigating the landscape on a hoverboard, or else travelling robustly across wild terrain on foot. The dystopian girl's athleticism is heightened when she is presented in visual media. The *Hunger Games* films amplify Katniss's physical abilities, presenting her as super-heroic, while the *Divergent* films envision Tris leaping, sprinting, punching and shooting her way through a frenetic series of action sequences. The endurance and resilience of the dystopian girl's body is reflected in the absence of both sexuality and pubertal changes. If she has periods or cramps, longings or orgasms, then these moments of bodily irruption are discreetly curated from the narrative frame. This ensures that the dystopian girl is able to fulfil the traditional role of the hero, which necessitates a rendering of the body as stable, predictable and functional. Leah Phillips argues that "bodily instability either questions the hero's very being 'hero' or signals his death" (5), thereby precluding "being female from 'being-hero'" (6). This preclusion is predicated on "the charges of leaky instability that patriarchal cultures have long levelled against women" (Nash 39), the notion that women's bodies are volatile and unpredictable, thereby legitimising their secondary status. McRobbie observes the reoccurrence of "the leitmotif of the unruly body that needs constant disciplining", in popular fiction aimed at women, claiming that this offers "insight into the disciplinary matrix of neoliberal society, with its emphasis upon policing and remodelling the self" (240). The body functions differently in these YADF trilogies, however, so that the dystopian girl's relationship with her body is less dysfunctional, a site of confidence and skill. There is no evidence that either she or her society understands the female body to be aberrant or unstable, liberating her from patriarchal constriction, but also prohibiting her from articulating any sense of her body as a site of disorder or desire.

This articulation of the dystopian girl's body as both capable and typical indicates her ability to sustain liberating and repressive meanings simultaneously. This is evident also in the debate surrounding the dystopian girl as either feminist or anti-feminist. The debate evidences a dynamic Rosalind Gill has observed in feminist cultural analysis, in which representations are appraised as either 'positive' or 'negative' according to the critic's particular understanding of feminism. Gill claims that this approach has its origins in second-wave "feminist media activism" (33), which involved a "call for positive images [which] was also implicitly a call for greater diversity in media representations of women" (34). Gill indicates that this project fell apart because "it was impossible to agree on which images were positive- because the meaning of the image does not reside in the image itself but in its interpretation or negotiation of the context in which it is produced and interpreted" (34). This approach to media texts may be divisive and ultimately futile, but as the Katniss debate illustrates, it has persisted as the dominant custom of feminist media analysis.

Rather than selectively reading the dystopian girl as 'positive' or 'negative', feminist or anti-feminist, this thesis will, like the dystopian girl herself, occupy ambivalence. This means complicating the dominant reading of the dystopian girl as a feminist avatar, while also recuperating the transformative possibilities which may be overlooked if she is dismissed because of her normativity or capitulation to patriarchal meaning. If we read the dystopian girl as another glossily rendered white girl whose primary interests are romantic entanglement, we miss her myriad other significances. Similarly, if we accept the marketing hyperbole of the dystopian girl as a radical rupture from the norm, we risk overlooking the ways in which the textual projection of her as a utopian figure elides her more repressive resonances. The dystopian girl is neither entirely radical nor entirely regressive, and this

thesis is invested in considering the significance of this lack of coherence without overwriting its essential ambivalence.

Therefore, instead of dissecting the dystopian girl's characteristics to quibble over their value or adherence to feminism, we must engage with how YADF produces feminist critique of patriarchal ideology through means other than her representation. An example is provided by Stephens and McCallum's observation that much YA fiction solicits a "feminist reading position", through intertextual inferences which parody and remodel canonical genres such as romance and the fairy tale in order to indicate how "femininity is constructed and naturalised in texts" (130). This strategy is evident in the *Uglies* trilogy, through the recurring dream Tally has of herself as a "beautiful princess" (*Pretties*, 44), and which shifts to reflect her dawning sense of self and attendant political awareness. In the first occurrence, she is rescued from a tower by a prince, because "you couldn't have this dream without a prince" (44), and rewarded with "a classic happy ending", with one alteration: "The prince was totally ugly" (45). This dream encodes Tally's desire to adhere to normative expectations of beauty and heterosexuality, and her underlying desire to resist these demands embodied by her attraction to David, an Ugly who has refused the mandated surgery. When Tally has the dream again, it becomes "pretty clear that no prince was showing up", so the princess leaps from the window into the unknown, wondering if she has "changed the story completely" (*Pretties* 244). Here the text plays with fairy tale convention to critique the genre's idealisation of feminine passivity, offering the dystopian girl as an alternative model of empowered young womanhood. However, such parodic intertextuality is only ever a minor element of the series, and Tally's dream potentially dilutes the political cogency of its implied feminist critique. Imagining patriarchal oppression as a dragon obscures more than it reveals,

and the deconstruction of the fairy tale princess provides little insight into the repressive gender norms operating within Tally's society.

Angela E. Hubler has criticised the feminist reading position observed by Stephens and McCallum as “essentialized, individualized, and depoliticized” (61), viewing their praise of this approach as epitomising the overemphasis on linguistic subversion in feminist analysis. Hubler instead suggests that feminist critics might pay closer critical attention to “female involvement in explicitly political novels” which seek to “represent the development of political consciousness, map structures of oppression, and assess possibilities for social change” (65). Hubler's call for a more direct approach to the political in both fiction and feminist critical analysis seems particularly pertinent in the context of the praise heaped on the dystopian girl primarily because of her representative novelty, despite her lack of an ‘explicitly political’ purpose. However, accepting Hubler's approach only leaves us able to engage with the few YA texts which fulfil this criteria, neglecting analysis of the vast majority of texts which engage with the political in a more inferential way, whilst also finding ourselves in the trap Gill identified of arbitrating ‘good’ and ‘bad’ texts. Hubler's approach is nonetheless a useful modifier of Stephens and McCallum notion of the inferred feminist reading position as a satisfactory means of articulating feminist principles. As evident in the example of Tally's dream, intertext and inference are often so vaguely articulated as to become divorced of social specificity or transformative urgency, and this is particularly pronounced in texts where the connection between the dystopian future and contemporary present is not always readily discernible.

In contrast to the wealth of critical attention paid to the luminous figure of the dystopian girl, critics have infrequently analysed the dystopian society surrounding her, and particularly how this society reiterates patriarchal ideology. This lack of analysis of how

power in YADF operates in a specifically gendered way is also attributable to the fact that there is little evidence of such a thing in most of these texts. In fact, when reading these trilogies for evidence of constraining gender power, the ostensible lack of such a force becomes striking. Hubler argues that YA critics must seek out texts which “map structures of oppression”, and although this *appears* to be a prime concern in YADF, dystopian critique is steadfastly kept at a remove from any consideration of how dystopia may be more challenging and oppressive for the dystopian girl than it is for the dystopian boy.

#### YA DYSTOPIA AS POSTFEMINIST UTOPIA

Ever since it has been codified in the early twentieth century, adolescence has been imagined as a time when girls become most intensely aware of gender as a repressive construct, encountering boundaries they realise will become less permeable upon adulthood. White observes that “[i]n novels of female adolescence conflict over gender identity is the major theme” (20), because while for boys the lessened status of adolescence is temporary, “when the girl becomes an adult, her status will not change significantly [because] she is still ‘only a woman’” (19). What is striking about each of these trilogies, then, is the absence of conflict over gender identity. YADF appears to render White’s observations outdated in the face of millennial optimism regarding the capabilities of the girl. Tally, Tris and Katniss never identify their societies as having different expectations for girls or women, and they do not seem to perceive becoming a woman as different to becoming a man. In these dystopias, it seems everyone has accepted that there is very little difference between the capabilities or personalities of boys and girls, and the dystopian girl is afforded the neutrality which has been granted exclusively to boys and men for most of western history. Paradoxically, the dystopia provides a space of remarkable gender neutrality, so taken for granted that it is barely

acknowledged in the text. These societies may be politically repressive and dictatorially controlled, but they are also post-gender utopias, in which girls of the future are released from stereotypical presumptions and structural limitations. It is in this utopian space that the dystopian girl emerges as a hero not only to the reader of the narrative, but within her society.

In this sense, each of these series are quintessentially postfeminist. In 2009, Angela McRobbie identified postfeminism as a hegemonic ideology in contemporary western culture. Observing that “[e]lements of feminism have been taken into account and . . . absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life” (1), this means “[t]here is no trace whatsoever of the battles fought, of the power struggles embarked upon, or of the enduring inequities which still mark out the relations between men and women” (19). This is exactly what we find in the dystopian societies of these novels. Each implies that gender difference is widely perceived as irrelevant, and that women have achieved systemic equality, the primary goal of the feminist project, even amidst the oppressively unequal structure of the dystopian society. This suggests to the reader that gender inequality is so taken for granted that it will be perpetually rejected as a norm, and find no expression in how society is organised in even the darkest dystopia.

McRobbie argues that the postfeminist myth is designed to project an illusion of equality in order to prevent feminism from ever again challenging existent power structures. She identifies its most prevalent symbols as images of young women as success stories, designed to imply that girls “have more agency and more choice” than ever before whilst eliding the “continued existence of gender hierarchies and the . . . more subtle ways in which these are constantly being reproduced” (46). The ideological function of the future girl myth is to provide “an illusion of positivity and progress while locking young women into ‘new-old’ dependences and anxieties” (10) concerning their bodies and their appearance. Applying



McRobbie's ideas to YADF enables us to see how these texts produce the postfeminist illusion, as "a new constraining form of gender power which operates through the granting of capacity to young women" (7). McRobbie's analysis indicates that we should be cautious about uncomplicatedly celebrating images of youthful female empowerment, particularly when, as with the dystopian girl, this is projected in a manner designed to imply that gender inequality is no longer a relevant issue.

Panem, the nation which has succeeded the collapse of the United States in *The Hunger Games*, is sharply divided by class and economic inequality, but gender plays no role in this attribution of social worth. In the privileged Capitol, men and women are enthusiastic participants in a cult of glamour, fashion and beauty, whilst in the Districts, disadvantaged boys and girls are equally entered into the Hunger Games to fight to the death. Class status is understood as being far more relevant to chances of survival than gender, a perception validated by the success of both boys and girls from the privileged Districts. Katniss is recognised as a formidable contender even before she enters the Games, and this is understood to be surprising not because she is a girl, but because she hails from the poorest area of Panem, District 12. Ranked by the Gamemakers as the most likely Tribute to succeed, Katniss validates this assessment when she ultimately triumphs against the privileged 'Career' Tributes from wealthier Districts. Charismatic and capable, Katniss wins the admiration of her society despite its prejudices against the lower classes. In this sense, the text implicitly negates the validity of intersectionality, the idea that gender, race and class interconnect to multiply disadvantage individuals. The text suggests that Katniss is disadvantaged because she is poor, but not because she is a girl (or, as will be discussed later, implicitly non-white). In doing so, it projects "subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis", which Kimberlé Crenshaw identifies as a presumption embedded in "dominant

conceptions of discrimination”, and which “marginalizes those who are multiply burdened” (140) by simplifying and distorting their experiences.

In *Divergent*, girls and boys are equally encouraged to choose Dauntless, with its ritualistic fist-fighting, tattooing and reckless stunts of bravery, or else Abnegation, in which people dress modestly and devote themselves to serving others. There is no sense that either of these choices might be perceived as stereotypically gendered. When Tris chooses to leave Abnegation in favour of Dauntless, this is perceived by other characters as surprising only because it demands rejecting her parents. Male and female Dauntless hopefuls are placed in the same physically arduous training scenarios, including gender-neutral fist-fights, and like Katniss, Tris rises through the ranks despite her disadvantages, ultimately succeeding in her desire to win a place in the Faction. *Uglies* registers post-gender in a less overtly positive way than the other texts. In Tally’s society, girls and boys are both indoctrinated into acceptance of the notion that physical attractiveness is the most important aspect of their identity. The beauty ideal for both genders is identical, emphasising delicate youthfulness, and all adolescents are subjected to extensive plastic surgery on their sixteenth birthdays to ensure they meet these expectations. Although the text draws on feminist critique of beauty norms this is purged of the specificity of this experience to girls and women. The gender neutrality of Tally’s society is confirmed when she discovers a rural village in which people live in a pre-industrial way, without the technology to which she is accustomed in the city. Tally observes that “it was easy to tell the sexes apart” in the village (*Pretties* 260), and notes that this cultural understanding of a gender binary is accompanied by the denigration of women as inferior. Tally quickly identifies and criticises this, remarking that “the boys-in-charge thing” in the village is “frustrating” (306), and that it gives her a “queasy feeling” (264). The implication is that, unlike the backwards villagers, who are “pretty much Stone Age about the

whole gender thing” (*Specials* 160), her own society is much more forward thinking about gender, and her comparative silence on how gender functions in her city affirms this implication.

Yet there are hints in all three texts that the postfeminist illusion obscures more than it illuminates. All of the pressures traditionally associated with being a girl in western culture are evident in the delineation of the dystopian girl, despite her positioning as an ‘empowered’ symbol of the postfeminist utopia. What is lost is her inability to identify these pressures as gendered. Separated from a vocabulary which might allow her to identify and criticise her society as sexist, she is therefore never able to mount any critique of systemic misogyny, providing a stark contrast with the ease with which Tally identifies and criticises the gender binary of the village. Katniss spends much of the first novel of *The Hunger Games* learning her society’s expectations of femininity as a performance of glamour, beauty and vulnerability, but this is presented as a gender-neutral consequence of the celebrity status afforded to her as a Tribute in the Games. Tributes of both genders are tweezed, shaved and buffed at the Remake Centre, processed like packing meat and sent glistening into the purview of the television cameras. Although Katniss occasionally identifies gendered discrepancies, as when she observes that only female Tributes are expected to shave their legs, this is balanced by an observation that male Tributes are also altered at the Remake Centre so that they cannot grow beards (*Catching Fire* 59). The importance of youthful beauty in determining the popularity of Tributes is indicated most emphatically in the character of Finnick, a male Victor of the Games celebrated primarily for his erotic appeal. Yet Katniss’s narrative also suggests an underlying distinction between the objectification of young men and women, as when she and Peeta are forced to feign a romance for the public. The framing of Katniss as a romantic heroine means she is forced to simmer in girlish

frippery, made to “feel so vulnerable in this flimsy dress. But I guess that was the point” (*Hunger Games* 439). Here the text thereby implies that stereotypes of femininity as signifying delicacy and vulnerability persist in Panem, registering heteronormative romance as a mode in which this is most palpably expressed.

The pressure to conform is even more extensive in *Uglies*, where Tally is indoctrinated into a corrosive beauty myth which idealises traits like “[b]ig eyes and full lips like a kid’s”, which say “I’m young and vulnerable, I can’t hurt you, and you want to protect me” (*Uglies* 16-17). This is an ideal of beauty which has long been associated with femininity in the west, but the text identifies this as an ideal imposed on boys just as much as girls. In one sense, this indicates the arbitrariness of what is culturally mandated as physically attractive for each gender, as Tally finds herself overpoweringly attracted to a Pretty boy and “his beautiful face, gaunt and vulnerable” (*Pretties* 327). It also implies, however, that boys and girls are subject to the same social pressures to focus on maintaining their physical appearance as a marker of their social worth. This potentially elides the fact that the “beauty myth” as “an imperative for women and not for men” (Wolf 2), precisely because it is a “belief system that keeps male dominance intact” (3). *Uglies* effaces patriarchal power in favour of implying that all adolescents are subject to identical normative pressures, so that the beauty myth is not, as in Wolf’s typology, ‘used against women’, but against boys and girls indiscriminately.

The anxieties experienced as a result of these expectations of performance and display are exacerbated by the girl’s inability to identify the ideology which has generated them: a reworked patriarchy which redoubles its expectations of girls, whilst rendering these demands invisible beneath a veneer of gender parity. These texts illuminate the reality behind the illusion of the postfeminist myth, that is, the “re-instatement of gender hierarchies through

new subtle forms of resurgent patriarchal power” (McRobbie 47). At the same time, these texts continue to project the postfeminist myth through their shared failure, or refusal, to acknowledge such hierarchies as gendered, as well as through their investment in the luminous figure of the dystopian girl herself. The contradictions which reveal postfeminism as a masquerade are registered in YADF, alongside a deep silence on gender which allows the masquerade to continue its dissembling work, producing further contradictions. Girls both inside the text, as characters, and outside it, as readers, are not provided with a language or vocabulary with which to identify what the dystopian society imposes upon the dystopian girl, or discuss how this is linked to what contemporary society imposes upon girls outside the text.

As previously mentioned, the dystopian girl’s body is not imagined as the site of tireless self-discipline, which McRobbie claims typifies the neoliberal imaginary’s intersection with patriarchy. Instead, this discipline is externalised, imposed upon the girl’s body as a condition of public visibility. Katniss cannot be televised until she is tweezed, shaved and beautified, leaving her “like a plucked bird, ready for roasting [and] intensely vulnerable” (*Hunger Games* 75). Tally cannot fully embody personhood until she becomes a surgically altered, supposedly gorgeous clone of everyone else, because to be ‘Ugly’ is to be “nothing” (*Uglies* 7). For Tris, becoming Dauntless means living a life of much greater public prominence, and her friend Christina mentors her in the art of feminine display, forcing her to “purchase a shirt that exposes my shoulders and collarbone, and to line my eyes with black pencil” (*Divergent* 246). Although a reluctant participant, Tris’s ‘chrysalis moment’ signifies her growing sense of self-confidence and is implicitly endorsed by the text: “I don’t bother objecting to her makeover attempts anymore. Especially since I find myself enjoying them” (246). These novels indicate that for girls, personal development is signified most palpably by

the possession and display of a spectacular body, with the makeover indicated as a prerequisite of public visibility.

In the *Uglies* trilogy, Tally gradually unlearns her society's beauty propaganda, associating the beauty myth with political apathy and stifling conformity: "[t]he logical conclusion of everyone looking the same was everyone thinking the same" (*Uglies* 273). She learns that the plastic surgery gifted to every sixteen-year-old is covertly accompanied by the imposition of brain lesions which render the person a 'Pretty': incurious, conformist and passive, so that the trilogy registers Wolf's claim that "*the beauty myth is always actually prescribing behaviour and not appearance*" (Wolf 7). The trilogy distances the linkage between beauty standard and proscribed behaviour from gender, however, so that the fact that "Pretties didn't like conflict. Pretties didn't take risk. Pretties didn't say no" (*Uglies* 232) is never married to a recognition that there have always been expectations made specifically of girls and women in patriarchal societies. Wolf argues that youthfulness is idealised because it represents "experiential and sexual ignorance", whilst age is not 'beautiful' precisely because "women grow more powerful with time" (4). The notion of youth as a symbol of innocence and purity is a patriarchal construct which has always been assigned primarily to white girls in western culture, but the text articulates this as encoding a power dynamic between adolescents and adults more generally, indicating its disinterest in placing gender (or, as will be seen in the next chapter, race) at the forefront of its dystopian critique.

Although the most overtly critical trilogy regarding the beauty myth, *Uglies* is also the most silent on gender inequality. The intensity of this silence is accompanied by the most vivid depictions of self-harm in any of the trilogies. On the surface of the plot, Tally starves and cuts herself in order to achieve a mental clarity dulled by the 'Pretty' brain lesions, and in the hope she will become thin enough to slip the shackles on her wrists. On a symbolic level,

the image of Tally as a self-scarred, starving girl registers anorexia and self-harm as frustrated forms of anger against hegemonic patriarchy, internalised and imposed upon the self. This is particularly the case for her self-harm, which the text represents as an expression of her frustrated inability to articulate rage against her social constriction. McRobbie claims that disorders like anorexia are acts of “gendered melancholia” (115) and “a kind of institutionalised madness which accrues from the impossibility of femininity” (110). Tally’s moments of self-harm can be read as acts of protest against the beauty myth imposed upon her, while also tacitly registering postfeminism as a fiction which allows the imposition of patriarchal ideals of femininity to be simultaneously enforced and denied.

Of the three trilogies, *Divergent* comes closest to an acknowledgement of specifically gendered expectations which disadvantage girls. When Tris rises through the ranks of Dauntless hopefuls to become a front-runner, she is attacked and groped by a group of jealous male rivals. Tris’s older mentor and lover Tobias explains that she has broken an implicitly gendered code: “[h]e wanted you to be the small, quiet girl from Abnegation [. . .] He hurt you because your strength made him feel weak” (*Divergent* 285). Tris’s success reveals the fallacy of the idea that girls are intrinsically inferior, but Tobias advises her to feign vulnerability or else risk further trouble. Tris complies, agreeing that she will, “need the protection of seeming weak” (289), and re-using this “little-girl act” (*Insurgent* 188) whenever it proves useful. Importantly, this is always presented as a performance: “[people] think that because I’m small, or a girl . . . I can’t possibly be cruel. But they’re wrong” (*Divergent* 463). Tris defies the gendered expectations of her society through subversion, tacitly recognising the sexist double-standards of her society while refusing to internalise them.

However, Tris's life at Dauntless is projected as a state of empowerment precisely because it enables her to display herself in collusion with the postfeminist façade of glamorous confidence. Her physical transformation echoes what McRobbie terms the "postfeminist masquerade", the mediated image of the stylised young woman which "openly acknowledges . . . the fictive status of femininity" (64) whilst eroticising the gender binary through an exaggerated feminine display which is always presented as "a freely chosen look" (66). Newly preoccupied with her appearance, Tris is now able to experience the narcissistic pleasure of the chrysalis moment, adorning herself with tattoos and admiring herself in the mirror. In *Abnegation* she was forced to wear drab clothing and efface vanity, so that her ability to beautify and display herself is equated with the neoliberal spoils of personal freedom and choice, and the reckless individualism of Dauntless life. However, the narrative ultimately circles Tris back to the traditionally feminine virtue she initially rejected: self-denial. Faced with the choice of either murdering her brother or destroying her city, Tris ultimately chooses to sacrifice herself to ensure the continued safety of both community and kin. This denouement indicates how the narrative ending often frames the dystopian girl within the dictates of repressive tradition, recirculating her radical possibility back into the maintenance of the patriarchal status quo.

#### NARRATIVE ENDINGS AND DYSTOPIAN WOMANHOOD

Given that each of these trilogies has formed the basis of a successful transmedia franchise with a wealth of supplementary material, the very notion of the narrative 'ending' might appear to be redundant. The *Uglies* trilogy has been followed by a spin-off novel, *Extras*, two books of world-building lore, two graphic novels which reimagine the original trilogy from Shay's perspective, and a new trilogy which began being published in September



2018. *Divergent* was also followed by a spin-off novel, *Four*, while *The Hunger Games* was accompanied by two mobile games and, like *Divergent*, was adapted into a highly lucrative film franchise. Despite this frantic expansion of the storyworlds, none of these ancillary items have, as yet, updated the reader on the life of the dystopian girl herself (and in Tris's case, of course, this would be impossible). The formatting of her story within the overarching structure of the trilogy means the girl develops in accordance with the tenets of the three-act narrative structure espoused within the screenwriting discipline. In a well-known guide to writing a mainstream screenplay, Syd Field defines the third act of a story as "the resolution", stating "*resolution means solution*" (26). In accordance with this structure, the YADF trilogy often solves the girl's liminality by framing her within a definitive ending. This sense of completion is exacerbated by the fact that both *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games* close with an Epilogue occurring several years after the events of the main narrative. *Uglies* also finishes on a contrapuntal note, as the third-person focalisation used throughout the trilogy shifts into an italicised first-person 'Manifesto', stylised as being written by Tally herself. Literary critics have typically suggested that YADF ends with "degrees of hesitation, oscillation, and ambiguity" (Sambell 164) but in these texts the ending works to firmly enclose the girl within definitive meaning. Although this does not entirely eradicate her prior liminality nor her contradictoriness, this ending often articulates a muted sense of retreat from political action, suggesting that "rebellion [is] permissible for girls, not women" (Broad 126).

Each of these endings share a failure to imagine how the girl might actively participate in the new society she has brought into being. Although she has instigated revolution, the work of improving the new society is left to others, so that she is free to challenge dominant power structures, but not to wield power within them. Tris confesses, "I don't know anything about this country or the way it works or what it needs to change" (*Allegiant* 282), and death

ultimately absents her from this difficulty. This is contrasted by the fate of her boyfriend Tobias, who lives on to become an aspiring politician and “assistant to one of our city’s representatives in government” (*Allegiant* 517). Katniss also forgoes continued political involvement, while Tally declares in her Manifesto that “[t]ogether, you’re more than enough to change the world without [me]” (*Specials* 369). Whether through death or exile, the dystopian girl is unable to develop her adolescent resistance into political power as a woman within society. This abstention is particularly galling given that both *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* specify that a male love interest becomes actively involved in the new government, heightening the suggestion that the political realm is a specifically masculine space. In this sense, it is difficult to read the dystopian girl as a radical or empowering figure, or even a divergence from literary tradition. western girlhood has typically been imagined as a permissible space for rebelliousness precisely because it is finite. Jenny Bavidge observes that an ideal of female adolescence became formulated during the nineteenth century which she names as “the Anglo-American girl.” Defined by her “intelligence, independence and playfulness”, this character always “ultimately turns away from a period of adventurousness, back towards a life of domesticity” (42). The narrative ending functions to frame rebelliousness and independence as permissible up until the girl’s eligibility as a woman, at which point she must demonstrate ‘maturity’, typically synonymous with the acquirement of docility and restraint, and rewarded by heteronormative marriage and motherhood.

Given that YADF has emerged in the context of the twenty-first century west, where opportunities for women and girls are far greater than those available when the Anglo-American girl became codified, one might expect this genre to imagine the dystopian girl as developing into a less restricted mould of adulthood. Yet the relationship between the dystopian girl and her literary ancestors is less disconnected than one might expect or hope.

Each of the endings of these trilogies to some degree articulates the patriarchal desire to curtail the troubling potentiality of the girl, disciplining her into conventionality. As with her whiteness and her heterosexuality, the dystopian girl's failure to maintain rebelliousness in adulthood reiterates normative patriarchal notions of girlhood. And yet, these endings also encode a countervailing desire to resist the pull of normativity, refraining from sealing the girl entirely into a compromised pose of conventionality, and maintaining an aperture of resistance which covertly articulates, albeit faintly, other possibilities.

At the end of the *Uglies* trilogy, Tally exiles herself from society after experiencing extensive mistreatment by the government. Concerned by the shifting social attitudes she has been instrumental in fomenting and the inexorable expansion of cities into the wilderness, she decides to live in the wild in order to protect it. Tally refuses assimilation, and projects herself in indefinite radical opposition to the ideology of the city: "Whenever you push too far into the wild, we'll be here waiting, ready to push back" (*Specials* 371). Her decision is implicitly endorsed as the final, didactic message of the text: "Be careful with the world, or the next time we meet, it might get ugly" (372). Speaking to the reader directly for the first time in the text, Tally's 'Manifesto' is projected as evidence that she has finally achieved a sense of self outside imposed limitations. Tally's posthuman body, transformed beyond biological productivity, is also released from reproductive expectations, leaving her able to frame her identity in more radical terms. She resolves: "[f]rom now on, no one rewires my brain but me" (371).

The radical possibilities of Tally's ending, however, are tempered by the fact that she moves into a self-imposed exile with David, her mentor and lover. This dilutes the intensity of her relationship with her frenemy Shay as the most important relationship in the text, rechannelling this latently queer energy into a heteronormative frame. Tally's ending frames

her within the heteronormative tradition of the romance novel, moderating the projection of her new identity as a declaration of independence. The wilderness has been consistently associated with David throughout the trilogy, and he educates Tally into the ecocritical world view she subsequently espouses. Although she begins her Manifesto by describing herself as an “I” in the first two paragraphs, as soon as David is mentioned she articulates herself in the plural “we”, suggesting an elision of the self into the unity of the romantic pairing:

“Remember us every time you decide to dig a new foundation, dam a river, or cut down a tree [. . .] the wild still has teeth. Special teeth, ugly teeth. Us” (372). David invites Tally into the site of “[t]he most blatant of our American myths” (Town), the wilderness historically associated with male dominance and colonial conquest. Tally’s presence reworks the myth of the wild as a space to escape from feminised urban living, and from the presence of women. Her narrative ends with a bold articulation of identity defined through this space, but it also dissolves this identity into romantic partnership, with a male character who has wisely guided her into this subject position.

The dynamic of retreating from public life into private, romantic exile is even more overt in the epilogue which ends the *Hunger Games* trilogy. Set many years after the fall of Panem, Katniss is now the mother of Peeta’s children, living together in the seclusion of their District, destroyed by bombing the war and now abandoned. Holly Blackford’s analysis epitomises the scathing feminist critique this has received: “Collins tricks her readers by offering us a ruthless female gamer – an imagined avatar of many young women today- and then taming Katniss into a heterosexual romance plot that ends . . .with marriage and reproduction [. . .] And this is revolution?” (49). As Blackford suggests, Katniss’s fate is one which has been meted out to girls for generations: a husband, children, and little else.

Katharine Broad argues that this reframes the entire trilogy from one invested in “social

upheaval to the maintenance of a reproductive status quo”, keeping Katniss “appropriately gendered” and “ultimately docile” (126). Katniss shifts from being a self-sufficient, enterprising girl who challenges those in power and is expressly disinterested in romance, to a cowed adult woman who passively accepts motherhood instead of participating in the rebuilding of Panem. Her decision to bear children is not expressed as an act of hope or personal desire, but instead signifies capitulation to Peeta’s domestic wheedling: “It took five, ten, fifteen years for me to agree. But Peeta wanted them so badly” (*Mockingjay* 454). This is an abrupt shift from Katniss’ previous insistence that she will “never marry, never risk bringing a child into the world” (*Hunger Games* 378-9). This refusal was implicitly rooted in her fear of exposing children to the risk of entering the Games, so that the text positions her change of heart as a final act of faith in the future. However, this projection fails to erase the disturbing sense of coercion underlying this decision. In the hearth, Katniss surrenders to the masculine authority she refused to accept in the state. The muted tone of the epilogue may shy away from idealising heteronormative monogamy, but this is nonetheless positioned as a preferable alternative to, and escape from, political life, and the only viable option for Katniss as a woman.

The epilogue has been interpreted less negatively, however, indicating the dystopian girl’s signature ambivalence. Tom Henthorne analyses Peeta and Katniss’s union as signifying a “third space of possibility [which] challenges the legitimacy of binaries such as male and female, masculine and feminine” (8). This reading recognises the way in which Peeta and Katniss are positioned as challenging gender stereotypes as characters who do not adhere comfortably to either the masculine or feminine. Peeta is physically strong and socially skilled, while Katniss is both terse and emotionally driven. Henthorne’s argument is that they trouble the gender binary which underlies heteronormativity, even as they fulfil its most

fundamental script: productive heterosexual monogamy. Although Henthorne is correct in the sense that the text evidently offers Peeta and Katniss's union as resonating with utopian potential, there is no sense of how this might resonate or inflect systemic change, or how the microcosm of their union might symbolise transformative possibility beyond the banality of the hearth. As Georgie Horrell has noted in her analysis of South African YA fiction, the notion that "romantic love . . . dissolves boundaries and enhances enlightenment" is "an authorial sleight of hand" which offers no "viable means for overcoming oppression" (53). The text, like Katniss, turns away from the troubling complexity of political life, offering romance as a sliver of hope in the midst of systemic crisis. The inadequacy of this approach is shadowed by the final description of Katniss's children, blissfully unaware that "they play on a graveyard" (436). This final image acknowledges that Katniss and her descendants can never truly escape the consequences of the political, regardless of her desire to disappear into the comfort of romantic obscurity.

Both *Uglies* and *The Hunger Games* project romance as a purifying balm which remedies the painful experience of participating in political life. Whether through the ecocritical unity of Tally and David, or the cosy domesticity of Katniss and Peeta, both endings imbue heterosexual romance with utopian possibility. Observing a similar investment in adolescent romance in YA fiction more generally, Clementine Beauvais suggests that analysis of such texts must consider, "the extent to which it exalts youth as a territory for social change, or only pretexts it in order to legitimise what it essentially an adult political agenda" (63). In the case of *Uglies*, Tally's manifesto does at least offer her relationship with David as predicated on shared political principles which cast them in ideological opposition to their society. Although Tally and David do not attempt to effect change *within* society, they refuse to participate in it based on their commitment to an antithetical set of values. It is

difficult, however, to recuperate the political meaning of the epilogue of *Mockingjay* in quite the same way. There is no sense that Katniss's retreat represents an ideological commitment to subversive principles. Instead, her self-exile is portrayed as a refusal to participate in the ideological altogether, an apathetic longing to shut herself away from political life in the hope that society will leave her and her family in peace.

The ending of the *Divergent* trilogy is unique among these texts, as Tris dies in order to save her society. Although Tris's brother offers himself up in penance for his collusion with the dystopian regime, Tris cannot abide the idea of allowing him to die and offers herself in his place at the last minute. Her ending therefore channels the ideals of Abnegation, the restrictive Faction she was desperate to escape from at the beginning of her narrative because of its drab insistence on effacing oneself in favour of the common good. She articulates her rationale in the moment of death as the homespun wisdom taught to her by her mother, that "real sacrifice [. . .] should be done from love" (473). In the moment of her death, Tris is reunited with the spirit of her mother, appearing in "Abnegation grey, stained with her blood" (475), signifying her own act of self-sacrifice earlier in the trilogy, when she died to save Tris's life. The reunion of the dying Tris with her dead mother indicates the text's morbid investment in sentimentalising female self-sacrifice as the height of moral purity; Tris's mother greets her with "eyes bright with tears. 'My dear child, you've done so well'" (475). Both women are Divergent, imbued with an unusual array of talents and aptitudes, yet both are ultimately projected as symbols of Abnegation. In becoming her mother, Tris finally matures into a model of womanhood as a state of self-denial. Her death is also a loss of narrative authority, anticipated from the beginning of the third novel, *Allegiant*, the first in the trilogy which Tobias narrates alternate chapters. As the story moves inexorably towards martyrdom, so Tris's claim to narrative perspective is diluted and ultimately divested.

Following her death, Tobias takes over the narrative completely for the last fifty pages, and is therefore able to define Tris's ultimate significance, further romanticising her death in the bathetic clichés of doomed youth: "I suppose a fire that burns that bright is not meant to last" (492). This divestment of narrative authority was further consolidated by the spin-off novel, *Four* (2015), in which Tobias retells Tris's narrative entirely from his perspective.

In dying, however, Tris also absents herself from capitulation to monogamous heterosexuality. Reading her death as signifying a preference for ideological conviction over romantic love is suggested when Tobias visits her body and describes it as "stiff and unyielding" (493). The word "stiff" has previously been used in the trilogy as an insult for those from Abnegation, levied at Tris when she expresses discomfort with Dauntless's culture of bodily exhibition, in which boys and girls undress in front of each other. Tris's death is an irreversible refutation of romantic union, but this nonetheless accords with the repressive dictates of literary tradition. Roberta Trites observes that depictions of female coming-of-age typically imagine this process as culminating with "a choice between auxiliary or secondary personhood, sacrificial victimization, madness, and death" (*Disturbing* 12). Tris may have paved the way for the remodelling of dystopia as "[a] kind of paradise" (504), but she can never experience this utopia first-hand, nor, as Tobias does, "become someone new" (504) within it. Instead, her denouement articulates her as something very old: the morally pure, Romantic girl-child whose death signifies the corruption of the adult world, and the hope that this may be overcome through remembrance of her luminous example.

## CONCLUSION

At first glance, *Uglies*, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* articulate the dystopian girl as a figure of empowerment in opposition to the delimiting confines of literary tradition. She



is less explicitly burdened by gendered expectation than girls previously depicted in most western fiction, and she is not defined primarily through sexual awakening or romantic entanglement. Instead, these trilogies channel a broader range of themes through the girl, who is able to become a symbol not only of romance, vulnerability and empathy, but also heroism, bravery and strength.

The symbolic resonance of the dystopian girl is recognised within the narrative. The elevation of Katniss to *Mockingjay*, Tally to *Special* and Tris to *Divergent* are all quasi-mythic elevations, fixing them into an elevated, yet constricted, pose. Tris's final narrative statement registers this elevation: "There is nothing that can kill me now; I am powerful and invincible and eternal" (*Allegiant* 468). This means that although the personal traits the dystopian girl is imagined as possessing resist gender stereotype, she is nonetheless ultimately depersonalised in a familiarly gendered way. Escaping literary girlhood as an over-determined state of symbolic significance is, it seems, almost impossible to achieve, even and especially amidst the gauzy subterfuges of a postfeminist utopia.

My analysis has shown how the dystopian girl appears as a modern myth, projecting girlhood as a site of social change and political possibility. The girl empowerment imagined in these texts reiterates postfeminism, however, by obscuring the ongoing patriarchal minimisation of girls and women through a ubiquitous muteness on gender inequality. This means these texts ultimately articulate a frustrated and ultimately abandoned critique of gender as a patriarchal binary which means girls, dystopian or otherwise, learn they are seen as other, and valued as less.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE NORMATIVE WHITENESS OF THE DYSTOPIAN GIRL IN *THE HUNGER GAMES*, *UGLIES* AND *DIVERGENT*

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I will continue to analyse the texts discussed in the previous chapter, *Uglies*, *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games*, to show how the repressive silences they generate pertain not only to gender, but to race. I argue that the absence of race in these texts is a manifestation of post-racial colour blindness, the notion that “racial conflict and discrimination are a thing of the past” (Evans and Giroux 116) in western societies. This idea became prevalent in the United States following the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, lauded as a symbolic victory for African Americans which seemed to herald that, in the words of the conservative radio host Lou Dobbs, “we are now in a 21st-century post-partisan, post-racial society” (Paul). There is a certain irony, then, that one of the most significant political developments which occurred during Obama’s presidency was the emergence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Initially formed in response to the acquittal of the murderer of the teenager Trayvon Martin in 2013, the movement grew in response to a spate of incidents in which black citizens were killed or mistreated by the police throughout American cities. The Obama election may have provided the post-racial myth with its most significant avatar, but by the end of his tenure as President, Obama himself acknowledged that “such a vision, however well-intended, was never realistic. For race remains a potent and often divisive force in our society” (Jamieson). The coincidence of the Obama presidency with BLM indicates how the post-race myth projects an attractive illusion of equality which not only obfuscates, but actively denies the ongoing reality of racial inequality, silencing and discrediting those who voice its continuance.

The disavowal of race in American politics, and the ugly reality of its continued relevance, occurred during the same period in which YADF came to prominence. The first *Hunger Games* novel was released in 2008, the same year as Obama's election, and the film adaptation was released only weeks after Trayvon Martin's murder. This means that a genre founded on celebrating uprisings by marginalised subjects became one of the nation's most popular forms of entertainment at the same moment that black activists were staging a national movement to protest against systemic injustice. It is striking, then, that YADF written and published during this period so rarely considers or registers race as an aspect of the power dynamics of the dystopian state. Race is rarely included as part of the YADF's critique of contemporary political culture, and when race is mentioned, it is usually only as a passing reference to the physical features of non-white secondary characters. As with its reiteration of postfeminism, YADF unthinkingly adheres to the presumption that race is not a pertinent aspect of contemporary social and political life. Dystopian fiction is primarily concerned with articulating contemporary social and political predicaments through the lens of futurity, entering into "a dialectical negotiation of the historical tension between what was, what is, and what is coming to be" so that it "allows us to apprehend the present *as* history" (Moylan 25). In accordance with this, these trilogies explicitly critique the present state and future implications of, among other things, fossil fuel usage, beauty norms, reality television, science and technology, militarised policing, warfare, urban sprawl, deforestation and structural poverty. This makes their shared refusal to consider racial inequality even more striking. Given that race remains one of the most persistent indicators of social and economic disparity, this absence of race cannot be dismissed as an oversight. It is an erasure which propagates the post-racial myth, implying that racial inequality is not a problem worthy of concern. The dystopian systems in these texts are designed to critique power structures which

have always functioned to marginalise and penalise people of colour in western culture. This makes YADF's continuing failure to consider race the genre's most striking absence.

Similarly, although the dystopian girl has been widely celebrated as an iconic rendering of youthful feminism, this necessitates a wilful ignorance of her role as a figure of normative whiteness, indicating how such a reading relies on white feminist assumptions. The dystopian girl is the locus of a refusal to consider race as an oppressive construct, as her centrality works to maintain whiteness as a normative experience and a dominant framework. The textual focus on the white girl's perspective is enacted at the expense of those non-white characters who either linger in the shadows or do not exist at all in the dystopian future. Her occupation of narrative authority means that non-white characters are appraised and defined in accordance with her perceptions, and their narrative significance is dictated by her appraisal and their contribution to her development. In the previous chapter, I observed a dynamic in which the dystopian girl is unable to acknowledge the existence of gender inequality, even as this is tacitly reproduced beneath the narrative surface. A similar but even more pervasive dynamic operates concerning race in these texts, in which racial inequality is only ever registered through analogy or inference. This typifies the way in which colour-blindness, and the underlying ideology of white supremacy which generates this blindness, emerges in YADF more generally.

*Uglies* imagines a future of homogenous whiteness, evident also in Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993). Before the advent of the dystopian girl, *The Giver* was the most successful and widely recognised YA dystopian novel, a Newberry medal winner and a "staple in middle schools" which has sold over twelve million copies (McClurg). The absence of race in *Uglies* and *The Giver* epitomises the assumption of whiteness as a neutral default, failing to register the presumed ubiquity of whiteness in the future as troubling. By contrast, the strategy of

representing race in *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* appears to be less problematic. Both project the future as diverse through the occasional reference to the darker skin or racialised features of secondary characters, although the significance of this difference is never discussed, and the notion of whiteness as normative is maintained by the fact that such features are only ever described when the character is not white. The superficial diversity of the text works to elide the ongoing generation of normative whiteness at the narrative centre. The narrator-protagonist may notice the racial difference of her non-white peers, but she remains blind to whiteness and its privileges, which allow her to challenge the dystopian society even as those marked as racially other are more severely punished for their acts of rebellion. This means the dystopian girl imbues whiteness with the invisibility and neutrality which is at the centre of its continuing claims to power in the contemporary.

The lack of racial representation is not specific to the futures imagined by YADF, but runs throughout science fiction in general. Adilifu Nama reads blackness in this genre as a “structured absence” (4), meaning the lack of black characters or communities is not an oversight or an insignificance, but an indication of the desire for eradication. Nama cites a line from the comedian Richard Pryor, who joked of the 1982 dystopian film *Logan’s Run*, “[a]in’t no niggers in it. I said, “Well, white folks ain’t planning for us to be here”” (Nama 10). Pryor’s joke indicates how representations of race are particularly charged in visual media. As Dyer observes in his analysis of whiteness in western culture, because race “refers to some intrinsically insignificant geographical/physical differences between people, it is the *imagery of race* [my italics] that is in play” (1). This chapter will also therefore consider how these trilogies have been adapted into visual media, considering the imagery of race in the *Divergent* and *Hunger Games* films and *Uglies* graphic novels. Although the *Divergent* and *Hunger Games* films affirm the implied diversity of the text, the refusal to consider the

significance of race is maintained. The casting of Jennifer Lawrence as Katniss perpetuates normative whiteness, whilst eradicating the character's prior racial ambiguity and the political inferences this ambiguity generates. In the *Uglies* graphic novels, *Shay's Story* and *Cutters*, the sinister monolith of whiteness implied in the literary text is expunged by Devin Grayson's depictions of the characters in the exaggerated tradition of Japanese manga, with inhumanly large heads and eyes, miniscule noses and impossibly proportioned bodies. This elevates the characters beyond discernible racial or even mimetically human identity, an elevation heightened by the fact that the series is drawn in black and white. This means that visual adaptation often works to further obscure the importance of race to the YA dystopia.

Considering the visual adaptation of these narratives allows me to frame them not only as YA novels, but as examples of science fiction cinema. Nama argues that although the future in this genre is typically "explicitly painted as colour-blind" (170), race persists as a "deeply repressed subtext" (170) which "[c]hurn[s] just below the narrative surface" (10). This chapter is an attempt to register the churning of race beneath the surface of YADF, and to indicate how the dystopian girl sits ambivalently between resistance and capitulation to the power structures which maintain post-race denial. This chapter is rooted in acceptance of the fact that racist thinking "is part of the cultural non-consciousness that we all inhabit" (Dyer 7) and that "[r]acial imagery is central to the organisation of the modern world" (1). In part, it is also an attempt to rend the normative power and dominance of whiteness by rendering it "strange" (Dyer 10) puncturing its claim to neutrality and invisibility. Dyer claims that "[t]he point of seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all the inequities, privileges and sufferings in its train . . . by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in the world" (2). By indicating how whiteness is woven into the fabric

of the dystopian girl's position of narrative authority, we are able to see how YADF is complicit in racist structures and hierarchies.<sup>3</sup>

The absence of race in YADF is one that is often ignored in accounts of the genre. The essay collection *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction* (2016), does not contain a single article on race, and breaches the issue only once in the introduction, in a footnote which discusses the Jennifer Lawrence controversy. The first collection of essays on YADF, *Brave New Teenagers* (2013), contains an important article on race by Mary Couzelis which germinated the idea for this chapter, but Couzelis's analysis remains sectioned away from the rest of the discussion, a lens discarded in the introductory overview. I write this chapter in part to register how *central* whiteness is to YADF and its imagining of both present and future. Dyer claims that race "is never not a factor, never not in play" (1), and my analysis in this chapter is an intervention designed to indicate how significant race is to the genre both despite and because of its ostensible absence. The absence of race in YADF is produced by a fundamental reluctance to connect inequitable social hierarchies and political resistances against them with the ongoing reality of racial inequality in the west. This reluctance must be confronted and overcome if such hierarchies are ever to be substantially challenged.

#### "A PRETTINESS EVERYONE COULD SEE": NORMATIVE WHITENESS IN *UGLIES*

As discussed in the previous chapter, the *Uglies* trilogy imagines a future in which every sixteen-year-old undergoes extensive plastic surgery at the age of sixteen, transforming them into a Pretty. Tally feels deep shame as an Ugly because of her "wide nose and thin lips, the too-high forehead and tangled mass of frizzy hair" (8). It is striking that this list of 'unattractive' contain almost entirely ones associated with blackness, and historically disparaged within western culture because of this association. Anthropometric facial analysis

has found African American women to have higher foreheads and wider noses than white American women (Porter and Olsen 191). In a discussion of South African white supremacy, Jonathan Manning claims that “three hundred and fifty years of colonialism and apartheid have taught us that . . . to have dark skin, curly hair, a broad nose and thick lips is ugly” (527). During the American slave era, “hair acted as the true test of Blackness” (Byrd and Tharps 17), so that “[g]ood hair was thought of as long and lacking in kink, tight curls, and frizz” (18). Tally’s dissatisfaction with the perceived ugliness of her broad nose, high forehead and frizzy hair means that reading her as a woman of colour is initially supported, or at least not precluded, by the text. When she expresses her desire to fulfil her society’s ideal of beauty, race is left unmentioned, however, suggesting that she does not perceive or think about race in any meaningful way. Instead, Tally longs to possess “a certain kind of beauty, a prettiness everyone could see. Big eyes and full lips like a kid’s; smooth, clear skin; symmetrical features; and a thousand other little clues” (16-17).

Despite the absence of race from the beauty norms described in the initial sections of the first novel, the qualities associated with a Pretty are analogous to those associated with normative whiteness throughout western culture. The “vulnerable, doe-eyed pretty mold” (103) is associated with the promise of “beauty, glamour, elegance” (98), qualities feminine whiteness has long been held to epitomise in its signification as “the pinnacle of human beauty” (Dyer 72). Tally’s longing for these qualities as a Pretty is also a longing for whiteness. That the attainment of Prettiness may come at a price for people of colour is also suggested by the description of the operation, in which “[t]hey rubbed you raw, and you grew all new skin, perfect and clear” (25). This phrasing echoes the advertising spiel of skin-bleaching products and the “longstanding trope of black babies and women scrubbed white” in their marketing (Conor). The city in which Tally lives is described as being particularly



strict in its guidelines for acceptable Prettiness: “[s]ome cities allowed exotic operations . . . but the authorities here were notoriously conservative” (39). Implicit in Tally’s description of her city’s unusually proscriptive beauty norms is an acknowledgement of this as a racially homogenous place, in which whiteness is forcibly instilled. Rather than suggesting that other cities may diverge from normative whiteness, however, *Uglies* later suggests that homogeneity is monitored and imposed by the “Committee for Morphological Standards [. . .] a global institution that made sure pretties were all more or less the same” (263). In this dystopian world, whiteness is both everywhere and nowhere, rebranded as ‘Prettiness’ and circulated outside the vocabulary of racial discourse, thereby ensuring its pernicious invisibility.

The whiteness of Prettiness is first suggested when Tally plays with technology that allows the user to experiment with what they might look like after the procedure. Experimenting with her friend Shay’s face, she lightens her “olive skin,” describing this as taking “the shade of the skin closer to baseline” (43). The implication is that whiteness is a neutral position from which all other races are seen and defined as aberrant. This is reiterated when Tally describes the operation as indicating a “preference toward the mean”, so that “[t]he overall average of human facial characteristics was the primary template for the operation” (256). This suggests that *all* races, including whiteness, are erased by the operation, and that Pretties are the equivalent of a mixed-race population, or a new phenotype altogether, a suggestion heightened by the graphic novels, in which the characters are all delineated as racially ambiguous. Such a suggestion is contradicted, however, by the fact that Tally understands that achieving ‘Prettiness’ demands lightening unacceptably dark complexions. Similarly, Shay’s description of the Pretty procedure as producing a factory of

“hyped-up Barbie dolls” (82) implicitly acknowledges that the operation is an inscription of whiteness.

When Shay expresses offense at the suggestion she lighten her skin, Tally dismisses her as having a “chip on her shoulder” (44), reiterating the ideology of the city’s uniformity with a statement which typifies colour-blind rhetoric: “people killed one another over stuff like having different skin color . . . It’s the only way to make people equal” (44-45). This is the closest the character, or the series in general, comes to acknowledging the Pretty procedure as a bodily imposition of white normativity. Tally articulates the operation as a utopian transformation of an otherwise divided society into the collective unanimity of Prettiness, eliding the fact that this reiterates whiteness as normative and invisible, eradicating difference while bleaching whiteness of specificity. The suggestion that the operation seeks to ‘solve’ racism is assuaged by Tally’s claim that, “[e]veryone judged everyone else based on their appearance. People who were taller got better jobs, and people even voted for some politicians just because they weren’t quite as ugly as everybody else” (44). An opportunity to frame racism as structurally embedded in the reader’s present is averted in favour of implicitly equating racism with more trivial biases. Tally hints at the maintenance of white supremacy which churns beneath colour-blindness, but articulates racism as an ahistorical failing of innate human psychology: “[i]f only people were smarter, evolved enough to treat everyone the same even if they looked different” (97). By contrast, ecological devastation is identified by Tally as a systemic issue manifest in the reader’s present: “[y]ou almost couldn’t believe people lived like this, burning trees to clear land, burning oil for heat and power, setting the atmosphere on fire with their weapons” (62). At the end of the trilogy, deforestation re-emerges as an issue, and the final keynote of the text is Tally’s avowal to fight against it. The notion of opposing racism cannot be imbued with the same glimmer of

utopian possibility, because Tally assumes this problem has already been solved: by making everybody white.

Shay eventually convinces Tally not to have the Pretty procedure, and she flees to the Smoke, a camp in the wilderness occupied by those opposed to the cities. During her journey through the wilderness, she discovers a monoculture of white orchids. The reader is informed that this once rare and highly valuable plant was genetically modified to enable it to propagate more easily. This led to it becoming aggressive and hostile, producing “endless fields of white” (181). A ranger tasked with their destruction describes them as “[o]ne of the most beautiful plants in the world. But too successful [. . .] They crowd out other species” (181-2). Tally marvels that “[t]he flowers were so beautiful, so delicate and unthreatening, but they choked everything around them” (182-3). This moment can be read as an implicit analogy for the artificial monoculture of pale, beautiful human beings in Tally’s city. Reading it in this way allows us to see how the myth of whiteness as synonymous with purity belies the reality of white supremacy as a rapacious and aggressively dominant ideology. The image of the white fields estranges whiteness, wrenching it from banality and aligning it with deathliness: “the orchids glowed like ghosts in the moonlight. Now that she knew what they were, the sight chilled Tally” (184).

That white supremacy is only registered in *Uglies* through metaphor and implicit analogy typifies the strategy of racial inference in YADF, in which racism and white supremacy are only tacitly acknowledged in a manner easily overlooked or interpreted differently. Rather than staging this moment as an entry into considering Prettiness as the enactment of white supremacy, it is projected as a hinge point in the dystopian critique produced by the text, which shifts from beauty standards to ecocriticism. Yet the potency of this image of whiteness as stifling, oppressive and illusory remains. This is where Antero

Garcia argues critics, academics and educators must step in, claiming that if race exists only as inference, this must be drawn to the forefront of textual analysis, particularly in texts for younger readers. Drawing on Spivak's claim that "[t]here is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak" (103) in western representations of racial and cultural others, Garcia insists that, "[w]e must emphasize for youth how the subaltern cannot speak- cannot even find spaces for representation- in today's YA novels" (75). It is important to add that this is already being done within fandom spaces which have emerged around these texts, as will be seen in my analysis of race in *The Hunger Games*. *Uglies* fans have been less invested in racial interpretations of the trilogy, and this is unsurprising given the colour-blind prevarications of Tally's focalised narrative perspective.

Tally's colour-blindness is consolidated when she finds magazines from the past. Although startled by the variety of facial features and body types depicted, she does not express surprise at the presumable difference in skin tones, despite the implicitly white monoculture of her own society: "She'd never seen so many wildly different faces before. Mouths and eyes and noses of every imaginable shape, all combined insanely on people of every age. And the *bodies* [. . .] almost all of them had wrong, ugly proportions." (198). Once again, the text generates a moment of social commentary ripe for the discussion of race, yet ignores it entirely. Tally marvels at the diversity of media representations in the past, but never once connects this to racial difference, as if she is literally incapable of discerning it. When she finds an image of an emaciated fashion model, she registers the strangeness of this "starving" woman with "the skull practically visible beneath her flesh", even as she admires her proximity to Prettiness, her "big eyes, smooth skin, and small nose" (199). The image of the fashion model is articulated as shadowing the connection between the beauty myth and ecological destruction as variant manifestations of contemporaneous systems of power: "the

Rusties had been insane, almost destroying the world in a million different ways. This starving almost-pretty was only one of them” (200). Ravaged ecosystems and famished bodies are implicitly interlinked by the text as the pillaged ruins of what bell hooks names as “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (7) but the white supremacy of this hegemonic structure is expunged, existing only as a deeply repressed subtext. The race of the fashion model, and of those populations displaced and disadvantaged by environmental collapse, are absent in the prose, even as the white orchids gleam eerily and ambivalently.

hooks’ phrase specifically aimed to capture the “interlocking systems of domination that define our reality” (7), combatting the practice of treating race, gender and economics as separate issues. *Uglies*, however, consistently fails to connect racism and sexism, and this is exacerbated by the insistent colour-blindness of Tally’s narrative perspective. While she initially cites the prevention of racist murders as justification for the Pretty procedure, after viewing the fashion model she claims it was also designed to prevent the epidemic of eating disorders: “[t]hat was one of the reasons they’d come up with the operation. No one got the disease anymore, since everyone knew at sixteen they’d turn beautiful” (200). The text fails to *connect* these reasons, however, as similarly produced by the misogyny and racism of patriarchy. This is because Tally is ‘unable’ to see the race of the model or the other people whose images populate the magazine, or indeed, to register the gendered specificity of the eating disorder which disproportionately affects women and girls (“Statistics”).

If the first *Uglies* novel suggests that Prettiness is synonymous with whiteness, then in the second novel, *Pretties*, this becomes more complex. Tally describes her Pretty boyfriend Zane as having “skin . . . the same olive as everyone’s, but in the sun . . . it somehow looked pale” (49). If Shay’s olive skin was somehow perceptibly too dark for the normative project of the Pretty procedure, then Zane’s, in its closer proximity to the city’s norm of whiteness,

renders him “extra beautiful” (49). The racial ambiguity of the description of skin as “olive” engenders an obfuscation of the racialised project of the Committee for Morphological Standards, allowing the text to paradoxically register and disavow the imposition of white normativity. Zane’s whiteness is emphasised in the darkness of his dyed hair, a minor rebellion against the committee’s guidelines which means he is “the only one whose looks really stood out” (49). This conspicuousness is heightened by his emaciation: “he didn’t eat much, keeping his face gaunt” (49). There is a striking contrast between the newly Pretty Tally’s narrative lingering on Zane’s whiteness and thinness as attractive and appealing, and her earlier revulsion as an Ugly at the thinness of the fashion model. The narrative delineation of Zane registers his whiteness as strange, but in a manner which eroticises this strangeness as a heightened form of beauty. A high level of inferential reading is demanded here. The reader must remain cognisant of the fact that Tally’s personality is now dramatically different, that she has internalised the beauty standards she once resisted, and that this has been imposed upon her by the procedure to understand her desire for Zane as a desire for whiteness. Tally gradually realises that to be “pretty-minded” (106) is to be ““brain damaged”” (90), and whilst she connects this solely to narcissism and political inertia, the small moment of her description of Zane registers that she has also internalised white supremacy. However, that this exists at such a passing moment in the text indicates the marginality of race as an element which can be easily overlooked. Tally may eventually realise “the terrible price of being pretty - that lovely meant brainless, and their easy lives were empty” (114), but the loss of racial diversity is never lamented.

Later in *Pretties*, Tally finds herself again in the wilderness, and comes across a group of hunter-gatherers who have never had the procedure. She notices that “[t]hey were paler than pretty average, with the sort of freckly, pinkish skin of those occasional littles born extra

sensitive to the sun” (258). This passage suggests that Pretties are not ‘white’ in the sense that it is currently understood. Although this might seem to undermine reading Prettiness as a project of whiteness, in fact this moment registers one of whiteness’s most important qualities: the arbitrariness of its designation. Whiteness, like all racial types, is a socially invented category bestowed upon certain groups of people which has shifted throughout its history. Some nationalities and ethnic groups, including Spanish, Italian, Armenian and Irish immigrants to the UK and US, have been excluded from normative whiteness during different historical and national contexts, whilst being stably accepted in its folds in the contemporary. As pithily expressed by James Baldwin, “[n]o-one was white before he/she came to America. It took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country” (178). If the whiteness of the hunter-gatherers is not the whiteness of the Pretties, this does not mean the procedure cannot be read as a structural imposition of white supremacy. Instead, this moment indicates the artificiality of whiteness as a marker of personhood. There is another, more troubling consequence of the description of the hunter-gatherers, however, in that they imbue whiteness with a prelapsarian quality akin to the recurring white supremacist fantasy of a halcyon time before racial diversity. Their contrast with the Pretties, whom the reader is evidently designed to find disturbing, potentially reconfigures the racial analogy embedded in the text, recasting the Pretties as avatars of a post-racial American future in which ‘pure’ whiteness can no longer be discerned. This racial dichotomy chimes with the imaginary of racist science fiction popular among white supremacists, including *Hold Back This Day* (2001), a “racist dystopia” (Jackson) in which “enforced race-mixing” has produced a “uniformly brown-skinned population” (Ian Allen), and in which the white male hero defects to Avalon, “the only white colony left in the universe” (Jackson).

The traditionally Anglo-Saxon name of the only named character of the tribe, Andrew Simpson Smith, contrasts the strangeness of the names of the Pretties, and his rugged characteristics similarly cast him as a representative of idealised white masculinity contrasted by their enfeebled urbanity: “[l]iving in the wild had made him . . . a hunter, a warrior, a survivor” (*Specials* 162). The villagers live humble lives without technology or consumerism, and this provides the contrast drawn between the urban and the wild, the pure and the corrupted, with disturbing racial connotations: “there was the natural state of the species, right in front of her. In running from the city, perhaps this was what Tally was running towards” (*Pretties* 278). Here the text makes an elision between ‘the natural state of the species’ and the ‘pinkish skin’ of these people, further suggesting complicity in the notion that ‘whiteness’ and ‘human nature’ are synonymous. The tribe channels what Dyer identifies as the foundational myth of whiteness, the notion that whites are “the purest expression of the human race” (22). Just as Tally criticises the gender norms of the villagers without noticing her own, she notices their whiteness while seeming incapable of registering the violently imposed racial homogeneity of her own society. Tally discovers that the villagers do not in fact live in the wilderness, but in a reservation maintained by the cities so they may observe “‘certain fundamentals . . . of human nature’” (*Pretties* 311). Again, Tally does not seem to register the sinister implications of the fact that only white people have been preserved.

In the third novel, *Specials*, Tally visits another city, Diego, and here Tally’s inability to see race is suddenly cured. Racial difference is the first thing she notices in Diego, as she describes the contrast between two residents: “[o]ne had skin much paler than any Pretty Committee would ever allow, with red hair and a smattering of freckles [. . .] The other’s skin was so dark it was almost black, and his muscles were way too obvious” (221). This difference is attributed to Diego “throw[ing] out the Pretty Committee’s standards, letting



everyone look the way they wanted” (225), resulting in “skin every shade between deep black and alabaster” (227). Tally notices that in Diego, those of similar skin shades seem to congregate together, and she registers this with deep unease: “It reminded Tally uncomfortably of how people grouped themselves back in pre-Rusty days, into Tribes and clans and so-called races who . . . made a big point of hating anyone who didn’t look like them” (227). Tally’s anxiety registers how deeply she has internalised the white normativity of her own society; the diversity of Diego’s populace representing a threat to the stability and dominance of the whiteness she has unthinkingly internalised. This is confirmed by the fact that Dr Cable, the inventor of the procedure, wants to colonise Diego and eradicate its troubling variety, “[t]urning it into another city just like ours: strict and controlled” (288).

Cable’s war with Diego ends with her defeat, and the trilogy ends without resolving the uncertainty this has produced: “[t]here was talk of new morphological standards, of letting uglies and pretties mix, even of expansion into the wild” (344). Rather than regarding the collapse of homogenous ‘standards’ which ensure the imposition of whiteness with utopian potential, Tally registers this with further anxiety, linking it to overpopulation and urban expansion: “[w]ere the city pretties going to start acting like Rusties nows? Spreading across the wild, overpopulating the earth, levelling everything in their path? Who was left to stop them?” (344). An association is made here between urban racial diversity and overpopulation, producing an underlying association of whiteness with strict control over both populace and planet. The diversity of Diego is implicitly dystopian, and its rapacious growth is aligned with its ethnic diversity. This echoes Dyer’s description of the dystopia delineated in *Blade Runner* in which the “Los Angeles of the future [is] marked by cataclysmic pollution: dirt, endless rain, crumbling buildings, and very much part of the pollution, teeming oriental hordes” (213). Similarly, diversity and pollution are implicitly synonymous in the imaginary of

*Uglies*, embodying the fear that “whites are going to be swamped and engulfed by the non-white multitudes” (216). The defeat of Cable’s homogeny by Diego’s diversity is articulated as a shift from static predictability into “a world where change was paramount” (360). Rather than imbuing this change with utopian possibility, Tally warns the reader that “[f]reedom has a way of destroying things” (*Specials* 356). Refusing to live in Diego, she chooses to retreat to the wilderness with David, her explicitly white boyfriend. This is not only a moment of ecological activism, but a “white flight”, a phrase originated in America which describes the “phenomenon [. . .] in which whites fled from neighborhoods as blacks bought homes there” (Kruse 5). Tally, disturbed by the threatening proximity of unpredictable and unknowable racial others, flees to the perceived purity and simplicity of life outside the city.

It is important to note that I am not saying that the racial inferences embedded in *Uglies* are deliberate or consciously enacted. This is not necessarily a ‘racist’ text in the contemporary understanding of the term as a virulent pathology. The author of the trilogy, Scott Westerfeld, acknowledged in a 2018 interview that the lack of consideration of race in the trilogy was an oversight: “I have to admit that *Uglies* hand-waved that away, by making Tally’s city ‘postracial.’ To a white guy back in 2005, that made sense in a future that also lacked pollution and war, but it blunted a lot of the series’ relevance to our present day” (Charaipotra). However, it is the very unthinkingness of the text’s replication of white normativity and supremacy which is useful, in that it indicates how deeply embedded these ideas are in contemporary imagining of the social, the political, and the future.

#### BEING “GENETICALLY PURE”: ALLEGORISING WHITENESS IN *DIVERGENT*

At first glance, the *Divergent* trilogy might appear to offer a more progressive vision of racial difference in dystopia. Unlike the homogenous world of *Uglies*, *Divergent* is set in a

future Chicago in which Tris occasionally describes the non-whiteness of secondary characters, including her friends Christina and Tori. This is almost always accompanied with a compliment, so that Tris praises Christina's "dark brown skin" (*Divergent* 51) and Juanita's "skin rich with color" (*Allegiant* 18) as being similarly "pretty". The implied diversity of the text was reflected in the casting of the film adaptation, with prominent secondary parts played by non-white actors including Octavia Spencer, Zoe Kravitz, Maggie Q and Mekhi Pheiffer. Yet the cost of this representation is to render race unspeakable outside the observation of superficial physical differences. This future is not white, but it is colour-blind.

A Census data study conducted in 2010, the year before the first *Divergent* novel was published, found that Chicago was the most racially segregated city in America (Glaeser & Vigdor 6). As Chicago resident and writer Noah Berlatsky pungently expressed: "welcome to Chicago, where segregation is almost a civic art form" (*The Atlantic*). That Tris lives amongst a diverse array of people, but rarely notices non-whiteness other than to compliment its attractiveness, suggests that Chicago has become a post-racial utopia, in which urban segregation no longer defines the city's demographics. Yet this vision of Chicago is also a dystopian one, in which citizens are categorised into tightly defined, visually encoded Factions, dictating where they live and what jobs they are assigned. This means that the city is as starkly segregated as in the reader's present, yet race has disappeared as an arbiter of value or opportunity. The refusal to consider race as an element of urban organisation or social control means the text elides the racial dynamics of the city's divided history, bleaching segregation of its racial connotations. That the narrative perspective belongs to Tris also works to centre whiteness as a normative position in a city which, in the contemporary, is notable for being one of the few American cities with a minority white population ("Quick Facts"). Tris's whiteness is evident not only in narrative descriptions of the character as

blonde-haired and blue-eyed, but in the fact that she only notices racial identity when it constitutes something other than whiteness. This reflects Antero Garcia's observation that in YA fiction, "[w]hen a character is Latino or Black or Asian . . . these are noteworthy attributes that define these characters in ways white characters are not" (41). The particularity of non-whiteness in YA narratives reiterates of the wider invisibility of whiteness in western culture which Dyer means that whites, "will speak of, say, the blackness or Chineseness of friends, neighbours or colleagues . . . but we don't mention the whiteness of the white people we know" (2). That Tris only notices the race of non-whites indicates she is a locus of whiteness, imbued with the power to identify racial others while assuming whiteness itself to be invisible, banal, and normative.

The parallels between the Faction system of Chicago's future and the racial segregation of Chicago's present does not seem to be registered or solicited in the text, which instead encourages a reading of the system as a painful loss of individualism. Tris's desire to rebel against her society is driven by a desire for a social identity beyond limiting tribalism: "I don't belong to the Bureau or the experiment or the fringe. [. . .] the love and loyalty I give . . . form my identity far more than any word or group ever could" (*Allegiant* 456). Tris's longing to be seen as an individual rather than a representative of a group is also a desire for one of the most significant white privileges. As Richard Dyer argues, a white person is taught to believe that "all she or he does . . . is to be accounted for in terms of our individuality" so that "[t]he assumption that white people are just people [is] endemic to white culture" (2).

The third novel, *Allegiant*, partially rends the invisibility of whiteness in the text through the introduction of the Bureau of Genetic Welfare. Tris discovers that the Faction system is a controlled experiment, designed by the Bureau to produce "Genetically Pure" individuals: Divergents. Almost everyone in Chicago is "Genetically Damaged" after the

government began modifying genetic material to manipulate behavioural traits. The Bureau was formed after the “Purity War . . . waged by those with damaged genes against the government and everyone with pure genes” (195). The division between the “GPs” and the “GDs” is expressed as a quasi-racialised distinction between the advantaged and disadvantaged. The GPs live in communities “saturated by experiments and observation and learning” (196), justifying their elevation above the GDs as a “division based on knowledge” (196). Tris is immediately opposed to this social division and articulates this directly to the reader: “a system that relies on a group of uneducated people to do its dirty work without giving them a way to rise is hardly fair” (196). This means that, in a similar manner to Tally’s experience at the village, the dystopian girl articulates explicit critique against an alternative system of inequality whilst failing to draw the link between this system and the one in which she has been raised.

The perceived superiority of the GPs means that mixing socially with the GDs is seen, literally, as a degradation of purity. Tris is informed that “[a] man surrounded by genetic damage cannot help but mimic it with his own behaviour” (216). Tris immediately rejects this idea, and her opposition to the division between the GPs and GDs signifies a rejection of the idea that race dictates aptitude, that racial mixing is socially corrosive or biologically degrading, or that legitimising hierarchical categories of personhood through the authority of scientific language is acceptable. Both Tris and the text express sympathy for the GDs and use their plight as an increasingly overt analogy for racial injustice: “Genetically damaged people are [ . . . ] poorer, more likely to be convicted of crimes, less likely to be hired for good jobs” (243). Discrimination in the criminal justice system, economic inequality and lack of opportunity are all experiences which draw directly from racialised experiences of marginalisation, and which the text criticises through the overt analogy of the plight of the

GDs. Their marginality leads to the existence of GD communities who live “outside the government’s influence [because] it seemed more appealing to opt out of society completely rather than trying to correct the problem from within” (243). This self-imposed exile is enacted in recognition of their marginality, and hints at the possibility of a utopian space of self-determination for those oppressed within hegemonic political systems. This both echoes and contrasts the space Tally makes for herself in the wilderness with David. While a racial reading of *Uglies* indicates this as a retreat from ethnic urban multitudes to the white purity of nature, in *Allegiant* it is the racialised urban population who embody utopian possibility in their refusal to accept their subjugation within a prejudiced system. The GD analogy means that racial injustice is finally acknowledged in the text and incorporated into its dystopian imagining.

However, this analogy is also troubling in its elevation of prejudicial rhetoric and racist practices from the specificity of race itself, appropriating experiences specific to people of colour while removing them from the narrative frame. This indicates a disparity between the text’s willingness to register race as an analogy, and its steadfast insistence on keeping race itself unspoken. This contradiction is epitomised in a moment when Tris describe how her relationship with Christina has been affected by the revelation that Tris is Genetically Pure. Tris laments that she is “not sure what to do - not sure how to talk to her now that I have these advantages and she does not and there’s nothing either of us can do about it” (296). Although Tris realises that she has been invested with privileges which Christina can never attain, this is described as being rooted solely in the distinction between GP and GD. The implication is that the difference between whiteness and blackness is irrelevant, affirmed by Tris’s claim that it is only ‘now’ that she possesses social advantages her black friend does not. As in *Uglies*, the rendering of race through analogy works as erasure as it much as it is

recognition, through the implication that if only ‘GP privilege’ exists, whiteness is no longer relevant.

Nonetheless, the GD analogy means that *Divergent* comes the closest of all the trilogies to indicating how racist practices are imbricated in dystopian systems, encouraging the reader to question how race bias is structurally maintained. The analogy being made is so overt that it is easy to distinguish, as when Tris questions the value system embedded in linguistic description of ‘damaged’ and ‘pure’, noting that “[t]he genes for blue eyes and brown eyes are different too, but are blue eyes ‘damaged’? It’s like they just arbitrarily decided that one kind of DNA was bad and the other was good” (256). Tris directly criticises a system in which human value is defined arbitrarily through biological categorisation, even as she continues to refuse to link this to the specificity of racist western ideologies.

#### FANDOM, FILM AND RACE IN *THE HUNGER GAMES*

My reading of race in *Uglies* and *Divergent* work against the grain of the texts because, with the exception of the notion of Genetic Purity added in the last novel, this theme is barely discernible. By contrast, fans and critics of the *Hunger Games* trilogy have read race as central to its imagining of the social and political, so that race is “the subject of a long, bitter, multifold debate within the Hunger Games fandom” (Arrow 27). The trilogy is set in Panem, a country divided into twelve Districts which are exploited by a central Capitol, which ensures its dominance by the rigid policing of the Peacekeepers. Although the citizens of the Districts are disadvantaged in comparison to the decadence of life in the Capitol, this disadvantage varies depending on their location and economic importance. District 11 is noted to have among the harshest systems of governance in Panem. Residents are forced to work tirelessly on crop fields, and resistance is penalised with a severity that even Katniss has

not experienced, even though she hails from a poorer District. The text consistently implies that District 11 is populated by black people in a system of brutal exploitation which appears to reconfigure plantation slavery. Here the text encourages the reader to consider how systemic racism is spatially and economically encoded, and hints at how the wealth of a metropole relies on the exploitation of those raced and classed as others on its peripheries.

A racial reading of the text is supported by the implicitly ethnic division of District 12, in which the higher status merchant class are blonde and blue-eyed, whilst the poorer, lower status people are all olive-skinned and dark haired, classed as “Seam” and expected to work difficult and dangerous manual labour in the mines. Katniss is half-merchant, half-Seam, but her resemblance to her Seam father meant that many fans of the trilogy have interpreted her as a woman of colour. Furthermore, many fans have read this as central to the series’ political commentary. Such a view is epitomised in an account of the series written by an fan online:

“If Collins intended this metaphor . . . and Katniss is a woman of color – then I love this trilogy, because it is the kind of book that would allow women and YA of color (olive or otherwise) to envision their struggles differently. They could see themselves as heroes, as agents for change, as people who can resist instead of merely struggling to exist. If Collins intended this metaphor, and Katniss is a white girl with skin somewhat darker than her mother, then I hate this book: because then Collins is deliberately appropriating the struggles of millions and placing white protagonists in places where people of color should be (and in reality, are).” (“xalexziel”).

Although this fan subsequently insists on the validity of reading Katniss as a non-white character, her use of ‘if’ indicates a textual ambiguity eroded when the text was adapted



for film. The casting of Jennifer Lawrence in the role of Katniss caused controversy among those who identified this as a whitewashing of the character, but Suzanne Collins refuted this by claiming that contemporary notions of race are irrelevant in Panem, as there has been ““a lot of ethnic mixing”” (Valby). Collins’ comments indicate how ambiguous renderings of race enable subsequent denial of its significance, while also indicating the presumption that racial inequality will be ‘solved’ in the future. Although Collins appears to invoke America’s ongoing history of racial segregation and exploitation in her text, this resides only on its margins, enabling it to be easily effaced and erased.

Another controversy which emerged following the release of the first *Hunger Games* film in 2012 illustrates the pervasiveness of colour-blindness, and the racism it both denies and conceals. A wave of confusion emerged from the fanbase over social media regarding the casting of the biracial actress Amandla Stenberg as Rue, despite the explicit description of her “dark brown skin” in the books (*Hunger Games* 43). One fan remarked on Twitter that Rue’s racial identity made her death “less sad”; another expressed disappointment at the casting of a black actress in favour of a “the little blond innocent girl [I] picture[d]” (Tatar). An anonymous fan compiled over two hundred of these Tweets in a viral Tumblr, *Hunger Games Tweets*, stating in a *New Yorker* interview, ““that word innocent? This is why Trayvon Martin is dead”” (Holmes). The surprise of readers at this casting indicates how racism permeates colour-blindness despite being presented as its disavowal. Rue’s coding as a symbol of purity and innocence meant that many readers were unable to ‘see’ her blackness despite its explicit articulation in the text, because these qualities are so consistently associated with whiteness. That Rue’s blackness was seen to make her death less emotionally affecting reflects a system of value which colour-blindness leaves unchallenged; the assumption that “whites are people whereas other colours are something else” (Dyer 1), and binary coding of whiteness as

representing “purity” “transcendence” and “virtue”, whilst blackness represents the body, sexuality and a lack of innocence (Dyer 72).

The ambiguity of the text’s rendering of race may have enabled the colour-blind presumptions of some its readers, but it also means that many others were able to discern race as central to its social and political commentary. This testifies to the fact that inference and subtext are not necessarily erasure, and the openness of the text to interpretation allows for the possibility of what Andre M. Carrington has called a ‘reparative reading’ of race. In his analysis of race in science fiction, Carrington clarifies a reparative reading strategy as acknowledging that a text or genre is “full of undesirable eventualities and potential disappointments”, but considering also that it may nonetheless “provide some resources out of which we can envision Black people in a more just relationship to the production of popular culture” (21). Carrington argues that “approaches to Blackness in popular culture are incomplete if they only pursue negative critiques of the way dominant narratives facilitate racial marginalization, because creativity has also thrived in conditions of subordination” (13). The following section will attempt to produce a reparative reading of race in the *Hunger Games* films, recuperating its significance to the narrative which many fans felt was lost in the cinematic adaptation of the trilogy. This reading opens up analysis of the myriad visual representations of whiteness as a repressive and artificial construct, undermining the qualities it is most frequently assigned in western culture, that is as “normative, benign, and frequent” (Carrington 17), while also registering the films’ many incendiary images of black protest as central to its imagining of the political, through visual connections made between blackness, radicalism and revolutionary overthrow.

I focus on the films rather than the novels here because, in visualising the revolution in Panem, the films exceed the boundaries of Katniss’s narrative perspective, allowing race to

emerge from deep subtext to the forefront of the text. In the first novel, Katniss's mourning of Rue represents her first consciously enacted gesture of resistance to the prefabricated narrative of the Games. This produces a pivotal protest in Rue's home, District 11, which is the spark which ignites revolution across the country. That the District implicitly implied to be black in the text is the one which instigates revolution is not insignificant to a racial reading of the text, nor is the fact that this protest is sparked by the dehumanisation of a black child. In the novels, however, this protest is only ever hinted at, and cannot be described directly because Katniss is still in the Games. The films are able to visualise this directly, and in doing so more emphatically link public outrage at Rue's death to implicitly racialised revolutionary upheaval. The choice for the filmmakers in this moment is stark: either eradicate the implied blackness of the District and remove the racial inferences of the revolution, or else represent it and, in doing so, celebrate black protest against a militarised police force as utopian. Given that the *Hunger Games* films are Hollywood productions with vast budgets aimed at younger audiences, it is perhaps surprising that the latter decision was made.

The acknowledgement of Panem's racial politics in the films are also encoded through a consistent visual strategy, in which the colour white is persistently coded as synonymous with power, violence and death. The films subvert the traditional western association of whiteness with purity and virtue, registering whiteness instead as a symbol of oppression, exclusion and death. The malevolent President Snow wears a stark white beard, hair and clothing, and torments Katniss with his emblem, a white rose, placing it in her house and showering white roses over her destroyed District. Panem's police force, the Peacekeepers, dress in white uniforms and visors, and the Hunger Games are orchestrated from a blindingly white control room populated by people dressed in gleaming lab coats. Richard Dyer has

observed that the positive connotations of whiteness in western culture also indicate absence: “[c]leanliness is the absence of dirt, spirituality the absence of flesh” (75). That whiteness signifies absence renders it “an ideal can never be attained . . . to be really, absolutely white is to be nothing” (78). This means that whiteness also signifies a kind of death, while also imposing death upon others through its claims to power: “if the white association with death is the logical outcome of the way in which whites have had power, then perhaps recognition of our deathliness may be the one thing that will make us relinquish it” (208).

The associations between whiteness, deathliness and power are encoded in the visual imagery of the films, and reflected in the casting of white actors to play the roles of the most privileged characters in Panem. The well-funded Tributes from District 1 are all white and blond, and they lead the ‘Career pack,’ a group of all-white Tributes from the most esteemed Districts, who pick off others from less privileged places, while hoarding food and resources to maintain their position of power. The racial politics underlying this divide are further suggested by the fact that Katniss’s resistance against the Careers is forged through alliances made with the black Tributes from District 11, Rue and Thresh, while her popularity is masterminded by the subversive stylist Cinna, played by the mixed-race actor Lenny Kravitz. This casting both reflects and tacitly confirms the underlying racial inferences of the text, inviting a reading of the films as registering the deathly pervasiveness of white power and encoding resistance against this power as emerging within an alliance of the most underprivileged and racialised groups in the country.

Rue’s death at the hands of the Careers is crucial to a reparative reading of the films as encoding race and class revolution as utopian. When Katniss mourns and commemorates Rue’s death, she rejects a system of value which places little worth on the lives and deaths of black children. Previously in the film, the murder of Tributes is not shown directly, obscured

from the viewer's gaze. In contrast, Rue's death is shown on-screen, and occurs in a torturously slow sequence in which she slumps to the ground, Katniss weeping and holding her as she whispers her dying words in extreme close-up. The heightened emotional response engendered by this visual framing is sustained as both Katniss and the camera linger on Rue's body as she places her on a bed of white flowers. Again, this contrasts the swift removal of the bodies of other dead Tributes from both the arena and the screen, which are almost immediately parachuted away. Katniss stages her mourning for the television cameras, forming the white flowers into a bouquet which she places in Rue's hands before kissing her forehead. As she walks away from Rue's body, she makes the three-fingered salute directly to camera, confronting both her implied audience in Panem and her actual audience in the multiplex. This mourning sequence works to imbue the death of a Tribute with pathos for the first time in the film, while also implicating the viewer in the dehumanising voyeurism which casts the brutality of the Games as entertainment. Katniss's acts of grief are both tacit condemnation, and an invitation to resist.

As Katniss makes the salute, the film cuts away to show her being projected on a screen in a public square in District 11. The audience is shown as a mix of black and white faces, but it is an unnamed black character who reciprocates Katniss's gesture, and black faces are emphasised in the foreground of the crowd shots. Another black character angrily breaks away from the crowd and attacks a Peacekeeper, initiating a rapidly intercut sequence of protest, in which vats of grain are destroyed, Peacekeepers are beaten, and buildings are set alight. This is swiftly followed by marching rows of Peacekeepers in gleaming white riot gear, who attack the protestors with water hoses, reducing them to flailing postures of self-defence. The film invites parallels between this uprising and the Civil Rights movement, by echoing the famous images of black protestors being hosed down and attacked by police dogs

in Birmingham, Alabama which were broadcast around the world and aided the global support for the moment (“They Fight”). The first political protest in the narrative is therefore directly inspired by the death of a black girl at the hands of a privileged white boy, engendered by Katniss’s insistence on framing this death as tragic and unnecessary, and in a manner which evokes the history of the movement for black rights. The *Hunger Games* films imagine a society in which the death of a black girl causes not only moral outrage, but becomes the catalyst for a rebellion against a dehumanising system of inequality. Rue’s death is the spark which ultimately blooms into revolution over the course of the next three films, culminating in Snow’s disposal and the ruin of the Capitol. Such a reading has been discerned by fans of the series, with one claiming: ““The revolution never started with Katniss, she was just the tinder for Rue’s ignition. Rue was the real Mockingjay”” (qtd. Garcia and Haddix 208). Katniss’s media-savvy gestures to the camera works to produce the film’s suggestion that citizens must rise against systems of injustice which accept the senseless deaths of young people of colour.

Yet Rue’s centrality to the revolution is not reflected by the narrative structure. Rue is significant primarily because she is a thematic double of Katniss’s younger sister, and because she engenders Katniss’s character development, in that her death leads Katniss to defy the Games and the Capitol. The dynamic between Rue and Katniss indicates how the centrality of the dystopian girl becomes troubling when viewed through a racial lens. Interpreting the union between Rue and Katniss as a symbolic rendering of intersectional feminism, in which two girls share their knowledge to topple the affluent white Tributes, is potentially undermined by the fact that only Katniss is able to live on and rebel outside the Games, motivated by the lesson Rue’s death has taught her. This dynamic is further evident in the contrast between Katniss and the other District 11 Tribute, Thresh. Both Katniss and Thresh

refuse to conform to the logic of the Arena which insists that Tributes from differential Districts murder each other at the first opportunity: Katniss by allying herself with Rue, and Thresh by later saving Katniss's life in recognition of this alliance. Katniss becomes elevated as the Mockingjay, a symbol of resistance against the government, but Thresh is killed in the Arena soon after saving Katniss's life, an event so unimportant that it barely registers in either the literary text or the film adaptation, where it occurs off-screen. The stereotypically racialised delineation of Thresh, a tall and muscular boy with a permanently stern expression, is reflected by the strange, monosyllabic cadence of his speech, which evidences "how the dialogue of black characters is construed as an alien, estranging dialect" (Morrison 52) in American fiction, working to dehumanise this group and present them as aberrant.

Despite these problems, a reparative reading of the films indicates how central Rue's death is to its political imagining, as black rage and grief leads to broader resistance across a spectrum of structural disadvantage. The films not only encode white supremacy as the ideology underpinning hegemonic power, but also imagine how resistance against this power might be forged through collaboration between disenfranchised sections of the population. Mark Fisher identified the poster tagline of *Catching Fire*, 'Remember Who the Enemy Is', as "an ethical demand that calls out through the screen [for] a collectivity that can only be built through class consciousness" ("Remember"). To this I add that racial consciousness is also invoked by the film as an essential component of collective resistance to systemic power. At the beginning of the second film, Katniss and Peeta are forced to tour the Districts as Victors, leading them back to District 11, where they are confronted with giant screens of Thresh and Rue's faces. The camera lingers on Rue's weeping mother and siblings standing beneath the screen, and this leads Peeta to go 'off script', promising them remuneration for their loss, while Katniss tearfully apologises for being unable to save Rue from death. This insistent

humanisation of black victims leads an elderly black man in the audience to raise the three-fingered salute, and the Peacekeepers reciprocate by pulling him onto the stage and shooting him in the head. The sequence which follows shows Katniss and Peeta speaking in front of increasingly unruly crowds, so that the film reiterates its implicit condemnation of systemic brutality against black bodies and lives, while suggesting this as the catalyst for an uprising endorsed as righteous and necessary.

In *Mockingjay Part One* and *Mockingjay Part Two*, the elevation of the narrative beyond Katniss's limited perspective is extended further, through several sequences of organised revolt invented entirely for the films. In the last novel, Katniss becomes increasingly cynical regarding political change, because her role as Mockingjay is stage-managed to engender the ambitions of District 13's leader, Alma Coin. However, the translation of the novel's events into film allows the narrative to be wrested from Katniss's narrative control, countering her deepening conviction of the political realm as irredeemably corrupt through sequences which visualise collaborative resistance as heroic, ingenious and valorous. In *Mockingjay Part One*, lumber workers in District 7 are shown being led to work in the forest at gunpoint by the Peacekeepers, using the Mockingjay call as a signal to rapidly climb the trees as bombs beneath their feet are detonated. A medium frame shot of the men establishes them as a multiracial group, so that this sequence envisions a racially diverse group of oppressed workers using the skills they have acquired as part of their labour to destroy their overseers, thereby seizing control over the means of production. Later in the same film, a similarly diverse array of people stage a successful attack on a dam, fighting against the Peacekeepers to break the floodgates and causing the Capitol to lose electricity. This sequence similarly begins with a lingering wide shot of the unified crowd marching towards the camera while staring into it, as if challenging the audience as well as the brutal



authority of the Peacekeepers. In both of these sequences, acts of organised communal resistance are acknowledged as being of key importance to the fall of Panem, divesting the dystopian girl of the centrality she holds as the narrative voice of the literary text. This suggestion was heightened further by the marketing campaign which accompanied the release of *Mockingjay Part 1*, in which posters celebrating a diverse array of citizens as “District Heroes” (“District Heroes Collection”) promoted the release, indicating that the revolution is only successful because of its collective, grassroots support across the nation.

These additions indicate the narrative potential of what media theorist Henry Jenkins has named “transmedia storytelling” (20). Jenkins argues that this is a “new aesthetic” (21) which has emerged within “convergence culture”, meaning the dissolving boundaries between consumers and producers in the digital age. Transmedia storytelling means “consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes . . . and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience” (21). The narrative additions made to the *Mockingjay* films indicates the productive expansiveness of transmedia storytelling, as well as suggesting that for dystopian texts this may heighten the political message of the narrative. That such a reading relies on attention to inferences which are visually encoded rather than statements which are explicitly articulated also indicates, however, that race remains resolutely unspoken in the films. Although the films confirm the suggestion that District 11 is a predominantly black District, the references to the brutal treatment of its citizens are excised, including a crucial moment when Katniss, in conversation with Rue, realises her extent of her privilege as someone in a less stringently policed District. Reading race in the films indicates the potential limitations of reparative reading in the context of a franchise in which ambiguity is as much a silencing as a voicing,

the whiteness of Katniss herself closing off one possibility even as others are, albeit only partially, opened. This is perhaps unsurprising in the context of a commercialised system of film production which has consistently refused to centre people of colour in its framings, erasing non-whiteness from texts it adapts for the multiplex on the justification “that casting . . . white stars [is] essential to getting funding and/or achieving maximum global box office returns” (Mendelson). Jenkins views transmedia storytelling as a democratisation of media narratives, signifying a “participatory culture” in which producers and consumers are “participants who interact with each other” (3) while acknowledging that “[n]ot all participants are created equal. Corporations . . . still exert greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers” (3). The adaptation of literary narratives into other media forms is always a commercialisation, rooted in the desire to increase profitability in a manner which, in the dystopian text, demands either ambiguity or silence on potentially controversial issues, and will inevitably express a preference for inference over explication.

## CONCLUSION

The silence on race in YADF is a problem, because it means the genre fails to register a crucial aspect of contemporary systems of power which these texts are predominantly designed to critique. It also further marginalises young people of colour in a generic frame which might otherwise meaningfully empower them. Although reparative reading provides a strategy of recuperation in the context of a genre in which race is primarily inferred or ignored, more explicit considerations of race are essential and increasingly necessary. The Black Lives Matter movement has powerfully undermined the dangerous fallacy of colour-blindness in a nation still marred by racism’s corrosive structural manifestations. In an era in which Obama’s replacement Donald Trump was endorsed by the KKK during his election

campaign (Hooton) and in which the Brexit campaign for the United Kingdom to leave the EU successfully mobilised racist rhetoric to achieve its political aims (Virdee and McGeever), it is more important than ever for YADF not only to hint at the significance of race in the contemporary, but to confront it directly. If implication easily settles into erasure, then a more explicit consideration of race in YADF is both necessary and important. One example of such a strategy in YADF is provided by Louise O’Neill’s *Only Ever Yours* (2014). This novel considers the intersectional pressures of racism and sexism upon young women, and indicates how this is internalised by its female protagonist.

However, *Only Ever Yours* also evidences how the paratextual elements of a YA novel can work to obfuscate racial inference. Every edition of *Only Ever Yours* depicts either a white girl or a blonde doll on the front cover. Although this registers the racist beauty ideals of the society depicted in the novel, it also erroneously implies that the protagonist is white. These covers fit all too easily into the dominant mould of the YA cover and its projection of young white female beauty as normative and aspirational. Antero Garcia observes that the ubiquity of white female faces on the cover of YA novels suggests to non-white readers “that they need to embrace books for white people” (63), indicating how “marketing decisions often limit audiences in ways that leave youth of color feeling like outsiders” (35). Similarly, fans may have read Katniss as non-white based on the subject matter of her narrative, but this was elided by her depiction on several covers of the text. Although most editions of the novel published before the release of the film did not show Katniss at all, those that did, including the German, Swedish and Romanian editions, depicted her as white-skinned (Andersen). The Barbie doll adorning the mass-market UK paperback edition of *Only Ever Yours* visualises the sinister moulding of girls into beautified objects in the novel, but it also reflects the fact that the dystopian girl is herself a reiteration of normative western ideals of white female

beauty, as affirmed when Katniss and Tris were honoured with their own limited edition Barbie dolls.

This chapter argues that the dystopian girl is not only a figure of ‘female empowerment’ who does not seem to notice gender inequality even as she experiences it. She is also a figure opposed to segregation, inequality and prejudice, but who never connects these problems to race. Her colour-blindness is rooted in her position as a figure of normative whiteness, a position which is also a precondition of her ability to rebel and be celebrated for doing so. The most retweeted false quote from the @DystopianYA Twitter account states from the implied perspective of the dystopian girl: “It’s time to rise up against the government and be a revolutionary. Good thing I’m white, or I’d be a thug.” The whiteness of the dystopian girl is most insidious when it reconfigures analogised experiences of racial inequality to place a white person at their centre. Often what is projected in YADF as a dreaded possibility in an anticipated future is a lived reality for communities of colour. That the dystopian girl is labelled and marginalised for something outside of her control, as in *Divergent*, or kept disenfranchised in structural poverty, as in *The Hunger Games*, or subjected to oppressive beauty standards which disparage inherited facial features as unacceptable, as in *Uglies*, elides the fact that these are all lived experiences of racism with ongoing histories in the west. The oppressions experienced by the dystopian girl draw on those which communities of colour continue to face, whilst relegating these communities to the backdrop of the text. Rue’s death may instigate a revolution, but this is only because Katniss mourns her and, in doing so, ensures her own centrality. Rue may be the ‘true Mockingjay’, but Katniss is the celebrated figurehead of the revolution, just as it is Jennifer Lawrence, and not Amandla Steinberg, the actress who plays Rue, who is depicted on the promotional posters for the film. The racial connotations and collectively driven nature of the

revolution are smothered by Katniss's centrality in the media story which the franchise enshrines, even as the films also encode the narrative's underlying racial and collective resonances. Promotional posters instruct viewers to "Remember Who the Enemy Is", but the ultimate hero's identity is without question. In a poster released to promote the final *Hunger Games* film, Jennifer Lawrence poses imperiously on a throne, staring confrontationally at the viewer. Her costume is skin tight and blood red, and the throne on which she sits is a perfect, blinding white.

### CHAPTER THREE: BECOMING THE DYSTOPIAN GIRL IN *SLATED* AND *ONLY EVER YOURS*

## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I diversify my analysis by considering how two texts published after the initial popularisation of the dystopian girl undermine her projection as a postfeminist subject. Teri Terry's *Slated* trilogy (2012-14) and Louise O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* (2014) both articulate implicitly feminist critique of dystopian patriarchies, while also undermining hegemonic narratives of adolescent development. *Only Ever Yours* updates Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by imagining an autocratic theocracy which genetically engineers girls, named 'eves', to ensure they embody western beauty ideals. Kept cloistered in 'Schools' where they learn the importance of starvation and self-objectification, they are ultimately categorised as either wives or whores by high-status young men. The text rejects the implication in *Uglies* that beauty standards are enforced equally upon girls and boys, indicating that they function to monitor female sexuality and depersonalise women, rendering them passive objects of the male gaze. The text also challenges post-racial colour blindness in its articulation of the protagonist, freida<sup>4</sup>, as a non-white girl whose racial identity prevents her from achieving any status within the system. The eves are divided into strictly defined categories based on their success in achieving popularity for their looks on the social media site MyFace. The text comments more directly on the misogynistic elements of contemporary culture than previously discussed narratives, as indicated by O'Neill's claim that "[e]very single thing that I wrote about in that book was inspired by a real-life event" (Mellor). O'Neill's text rejects the postfeminism embedded in the dominant model of the dystopian girl, motivated by her desire to communicate that "we live in an undoubtedly patriarchal society" (Claire). However, in her desire to use dystopia to "start a conversation about how we see and treat women" (Claire), the text also reiterates disempowering notions of girls as passive dupes and helpless victims of patriarchal culture, providing little space for

the consideration of how girls are also able to resist patriarchy. freida has so thoroughly internalised the misogyny of her environment that she is ultimately destroyed by it, and the text suggests that girls require careful adult intervention if they are to be able to negotiate systemic power structures without falling victim to them. This reifies a hierarchical modelling of feminism which is potentially problematic, as it embeds implicitly paternalistic impositions of adult prerogatives upon the young, assuming they are in need of direction and guidance.

The criticism of postfeminism is less overt in *Slated*, and lies primarily in the text's subversion of patriarchal models of adolescence which it suggests work to inculcate political passivity. Set in a future Britain which has become a totalitarian police state run by 'the Lords' (meaning 'law and order'), rebellious adolescents are 'slated', wiped of their memories and forced into an arrested state of development which is closely monitored by parents, psychiatrists and teachers. The implication that this as a patriarchal regime is evident in the misogynistic treatment of Slated girls, and symbolised by the fact that the protagonist Kyla's father is a Lord. The resistance to patriarchy in this text is mounted on the level of identity, as Kyla is positioned as undermining the humanist sense of self as stable and essentialised which underpins patriarchal societies. Instead, Kyla encodes poststructural notions of identity as both heterogeneous and socially and culturally produced, so that her resistance to the dystopian regime encodes a rejection of the very notion of selfhood which this regime projects as normative and ideal.

Both texts undermine the narrative of adolescence as a process of linear development which is hegemonic in patriarchal western societies. Nancy Lesko analyses how this discourse of adolescence became established in the early twentieth century in order to idealise the "strong, disciplined, white male", who was defined against "undeveloped girls and youths of color" (11). Lesko argues that this means "race and gender are intricately woven into the

norms for and into the concept of developmental stage, or maturity” (12) so that “adolescence [is] always a technology of whiteness, of masculinity, and of domination” (11). These texts enact an analogous critique of adolescence as a framework which encodes patriarchal power, through educational settings which register how ‘adolescence’ operates as a disempowering framework which disciplines the young into conformity and underlines the secondary status of girls and people of colour. Both texts indicate adolescence as the life-stage in which patriarchal power over girls is most palpably and brutally enforced, while projecting the dystopian girl as either able or unable to resist this oppression. freida internalises the School’s rampantly negative messages about feminine identity, viewing herself as a body to be objectified in a manner exacerbated by her marginality as a non-white subject whose value lies solely in her exotic sexual appeal. By contrast, Kyla successfully articulates resistance to the oppressive narrative of personal development enforced upon her by the dystopian state, an ability contrasted in the text by the comparative victimhood of her adopted black sister. Both texts thereby indicate how adolescence operates as a ‘technology of whiteness’ and ‘domination’, but while *Only Ever Yours* remodels the dystopian girl as a non-white victim of this technology, *Slated* reiterates the mainstream iteration of the dystopian girl as a figure of white normativity whose successful rebellion is enacted at the expense of non-white others.

The distinction I draw between these texts in their engagement with narratives of adolescence also operates on the level of genre. As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, the narrative structure of the YADF trilogy often functions to repress the troubling elements of the dystopian girl’s earlier characterisation, particularly through epilogues which seek to contain her within a fixed meaning. Similarly, the epilogue in *Slated* functions as a disciplining device, attempting to curtail Kyla’s ongoing liminality into deadened stability. By contrast, *Only Ever Yours* is a standalone novel with a definitive ending in which freida is



unambiguously defeated. This means that the text adheres to the classical model of dystopian narratives, in which the failure of the protagonist is projected as bearing a specific didactic purpose, and in which “utopianism is pushed to the very brink of darkness” (Graham Murphy 474). O’Neill’s text remodels this masculinist dystopian format, in which “women [usually] motivate carnal resistance” (474) to articulate feminist meaning, through the suggestion that freida’s defeat indicts patriarchal ideology, suggesting this must be confronted and rejected to prevent the ongoing production of girl victims. If the ambiguity of the mainstream dystopian girl often works to obscure contemporary power dynamics, then the stark clarity of freida’s fate imparts a more definitive message to the reader, encouraging them to consider the connections between body, self and state. In an article in which O’Neill articulates her reason for writing the novel, she states, “come with me, teenage girl. Let me hold your hand. Let us say it together. “I am a woman. I am a feminist. And I am proud to be both.” (O’Neill, “My Journey”). O’Neill places hope firmly outside the space of her text, in the figure of the presumed adolescent reader who will apprehend her message, make comparisons with her own society, and challenge the intersecting technologies of gender, race and adolescence in a way that freida cannot. *Only Ever Yours* remodels both YADF and the dystopian girl, so that she is no longer a figure of postfeminist denial, but the subject of feminist concern expressed through a more traditional dystopian narrative structure.

Both texts indicate how the narrative conventions of YA are remodelled by their interaction with the tenets of dystopian fiction. In her reading of YA narratives as “dedicated to depicting how potentially out-of-control adolescents can learn to exist within institutional structures” (*Disturbing 7*), Roberta Trites claims the genre delineates adolescent development as a gradual capitulation to structures of power. By staging the development of the protagonist as a transition from rebellion to moderation, Trites claims “the underlying agenda of many

YA novels [is] to indoctrinate adolescents into a measure of social acceptance” (27). However, rather than reifying this agenda, these texts register it as dystopian, suggesting that YADF encodes a desire for a more emancipatory remodelling of both YA and adolescence itself. Placed within oppressive educational environments which define their identity as aberrant, Kyla and freida are expected to actively develop themselves in accordance with strictly policed guidelines which they cannot achieve. Both girls find themselves unable to attain the normative identity which is the purpose of their education, and experience a crisis of identity linked to their failure to develop in accordance with normative expectation. These crises of selfhood are produced both by their abject social position and the contradictory expectations of the culture in which they have been raised, rather than emerging organically or innately, as is suggested by normative modelling of adolescence as a crisis of identity produced by essentialised pubertal changes. Both texts are connected in their investment in their denaturalisation of adolescence, indicating how the intersecting narratives of ‘linear growth’ and ‘identity crisis’ do not emerge spontaneously, but are imposed upon the girl by her society and the power infrastructure. These texts indicate how developmental notions of adolescence work to disempower individuals, rendering growth as synonymous with the internalisation of hegemonic ideology, and curtailing the threateningly open space of adolescent becoming.

In my analysis of *Only Ever Yours*, I indicate how the text uses the dystopian setting to consider how patriarchal values are embedded in all facets of contemporary culture. Drawing on the work of the feminist thinkers, including Susan Bordo, Carol Gilligan and Marilyn French, I show how the text rejects postfeminism, criticising models of adolescent development as encoding racism and misogyny. I suggest that although this remodelling of the dystopian girl undermines her imbrication in neoliberal colour-blindness, it also reifies the

idea that girls, and especially girls of colour, are disempowered victims in need of the intervention of adult feminists. By contrast, I show that *Slated* articulates Kyla as embodying notions of identity and subjectivity which oppose patriarchal scripts, so that she indicates how the dystopian girl's liminality challenges the notion that subjects are, and must be, predictable, knowable and containable. Although the narrative format of the trilogy works to discipline Kyla into these qualities, I argue that the text ultimately projects 'becoming' as identity rather than a pathway to its realisation. Although Kyla is therefore a particularly emancipatory modelling of the dystopian girl, I argue that she also encodes the white normativity endemic to the dystopian girl figure, so that her ability to challenge the dystopian state is, as with Katniss, Tris and Tally, a tacit expression of white supremacy.

#### NO GIRL POWER: GROWING DOWN IN *ONLY EVER YOURS*

As previously described, the dystopian society depicted in *Only Ever Yours* is openly patriarchal, in contrast to the subtler and overtly disavowed evocations of patriarchy in the trilogies analysed in the previous chapters. The setting echoes Kate Millett's description of "the principle of patriarchy . . . male shall dominate female, elder male shall dominate younger" (25), indicating the particular vulnerability of adolescent girls to patriarchal domination. The narrative takes place in Freida's final year at the School she has lived in since birth, and the chapters are structured as a countdown to the Ceremony which culminates her education. During the Ceremony, the eves are sorted into three categories: Companions, chosen by the ten highest status boys to live with them and bear their children; Concubines, who live together in brothels and satisfy the men's sexual needs; and Chastities, the lowest status women, who stay in the School for the rest of their lives, rearing future eves. The eves know from a very young age which of them are most likely to achieve Companionship,

because this is dictated by their social media ranking. The top ten eves rated most attractive are paired with high-status Inheritants, and are also at the top of the School's social hierarchy. The stark line drawn between the most popular eves and the rest of the group is felt most intensely by those in the liminal position of being closest to the top ten. Although freida begins the novel sitting comfortably within this elite, the stress produced by the looming Ceremony sees her slipping down the rankings, due to the damage her looks incur from insomnia and her increasingly haphazard regard for personal maintenance. This leads to her position becoming even more precarious, leading to an awareness of the path to development not as "a bridge to the future" but "a tightrope made of cobwebs" (220). The structure of the novel indicates that the notion of adolescence as a period of personal development is a chimera for girls in a culture in which their physical appearance is emphasised as their only important quality. The success or failure of the eves to achieve the status of Companion is established externally, dictated by public opinion and the male gaze. The only meaningful role freida can play in this process is to perpetually control her physical and mental state, by staying as thin as possible, repressing all emotions, and remaining compliant and sexually available at all times.

O'Neill's text registers the coming-of-age narrative as a coercive and exclusionary device for girls both inside and outside the text. Continuous self-improvement is synonymous in the text with managing and maintaining physical appearance, insisted upon as the only route to success. The text registers that "girls today make the body into an all-consuming project in ways young women of the past did not" (Brumberg xvii). In her analysis of American girls' diaries, Brumberg claims that "[b]efore World War I, girls rarely mentioned their bodies in terms of strategies for self-improvement or struggles for personal identity" so that "[b]ecoming a better person meant paying *less* attention to the self" (xxi). By contrast, the

eves are forced into glamourizing, sexualising and starving themselves, indicating the text's alignment with contemporary feminist critique of "the new expectation that young girls will be seen as sexy early in their lives" (Walter 63) so that "hypersexualization is ubiquitous, so visible as to be nearly invisible: it is the water in which girls swim, the air they breathe" (Orenstein 224).

The text also indicates the racist underpinnings of this obligation by showing that, as a non-white girl, freida is shown to be incapable of achieving the high-status of Companion, even as this is projected as the ultimate purpose of the eve's project of self-development. freida is excluded from the School's normative model of adolescent girlhood, yet this narrative is imposed upon her regardless, so that she can neither attain adolescence nor escape it. O'Neill's text suggests that patriarchy continues to disbar girls from achieving the heightened personal power which is projected as the prize of normative adolescent development in the contemporary, due to rampantly enacted beauty ideals and sexualisation which insists on the primacy of physical appearance as a measure of both development and worth. In her analysis of 'the return of sexism' in the context of neoliberal postfeminism, Natasha Walters observes the ancient idea that "the main journey for a young girl is expected to lie along her path to winning the admiration of others for her appearance" is now articulated through "a strong rhetoric of independence and self-expression" (64) co-opted from feminism, with the implication "that even young girls will want to 'express themselves' through perfecting their appearance" (65). The dystopian setting of *Only Ever Yours* undermines the implication that self-objectification can ever be a choice for girls who, like the eves, are raised from birth in a patriarchal echo-chamber which continually tells them that their value lies in their bodies and not their minds.

At the School, the eves learn that femininity signifies weakness, inferiority and aberrance, projecting masculinity as superior and normative. Marilyn French argues that such a binary is the foundational basis of patriarchal culture, justifying the assumption that “men’s proper sphere [i]s the use of power - of mind, of spirit and of body”, leaving women and girls to be “defined by those traits men wished not to possess” (108). The eves are taught that emotions and appetites are a specifically feminine burden, and encouraged to divest themselves of these qualities in order to achieve subjectivity. Here the text indicates how qualities ascribed as ‘feminine’ are rendered abject in patriarchal culture, aberrances which must be effaced for subjects to achieve stable maturity. This leaves the eves in a paradoxical bind, defined entirely through traits which the School also instructs them to change. freida is unable to articulate a legitimate claim to selfhood given that for girls in her culture, *all* human qualities are distanced from a female identity.

Carol Gilligan argues that “[g]irls’ initiation or passage into adulthood . . . marks the beginning of self-doubt and the dawning of the realization . . . that womanhood will require a dissociative split between experience and what is generally taken to be reality” (xxi). Observing that girls often define themselves through their relationships with others, in opposition to patriarchal models of adolescence as the process of developing individualism and independence, Gilligan claims this explains why “female development has appeared most divergent and thus most problematic” (11) within the discipline of psychology. Gilligan reframes the interpretation of female adolescent development “as centring on a struggle for connection rather than [seeing] women . . . as having a problem in achieving separation” (xiv). Her work is useful here because it indicates the gendered specificity of institutionalised models of adolescent development, elided by their claims to neutrality and common-sense. freida reflects the alienation Gilligan observes among girls confronted with an imposition of

normative development which contradicts their innate sense of self, and which elevates individualism to a utopian principle of self-making. In the text, the systematised model of adolescent development works to ruthlessly individualise the eves, preventing them from developing a sense of self in relation to each other and thereby preventing the threat of collective resistance to the regime of power.

Science colludes with culture in the text to legitimise an essentialist and misogynist gender binary which works to keep the eves docile and detached from one another. Practices like Organised Recreation, in which the girls are drugged and placed in glass coffins in an environment designed to “combat female hysteria syndrome”, a supposedly infectious malady associated with “hysterical, overemotional girl behaviour” (43), work to prevent collectivity. Organised Recreation occurs whenever the girls have an extended opportunity to socialise without a pervading structure of competition, justified by the claim that they might otherwise “infect each other” (43) with ‘hysterical’ notions, and reminding them that they are ultimately powerless and entirely alone. The girls communicate constantly on the social media site MyFace, and the site provides an illusion of selfhood for freida, who states that “[w]ithout MyFace, I’m floating. I have nothing to anchor myself, to prove I exist” (100). The digital projection of identity provides no greater sense of connection, however, as the site is both heavily moderated, closed off from public comments, and the site of aggressive peer competition between the eves. MyFace and the online comparison game Your Face or Mine indicates that the text is more directly engaged with contemporary digital culture than the dominant trilogies, in which there is no ostensible access to the internet. It suggests social media is another site for patriarchal oppression to be expressed and enforced, not only through the reward system it provides for girls to objectify themselves for public approval, but in the cyber-bullying the girls continually enact against each other. In the emphasis on

social media sites as dehumanising and the sense of connection it provides as illusory, however, the text does not consider how the internet has also enabled young women to communicate and express themselves. For example, “[y]oung feminists use social media in order to respond to rape culture and to hold accountable the purveyors of its practices and ways of thinking when mainstream news media, police and school authorities do not” (Rentschler). The internet is widely argued to have produced a new wave of feminist activity (Munro), enabling collective endeavours such as the Everyday Sexism Project, a site where women share experiences of sexism, the 2017 Women’s March, and the #MeToo movement, which involved sharing stories of rape and sexual assault on social media. Although the absence of positive use of social media in *Only Ever Yours* is designed to heighten the sense of dystopian despair, it also perpetuates the impression that girls are hollow receptacles of patriarchal culture, and fails to capture the more ambivalent way in which the internet has not only provided a space for misogyny to thrive, but also for women and girls to collaborate, connect and organise.

‘Comparison Studies’, in which the eves examine each other’s bodies, Organised Recreation, and MyFace all function to prevent them from making genuine connections with each other, but they still maintain friendships. freida shares an intense bond with isabel, the most popular and highest ranked girl in the School who is, unsurprisingly, white, blonde and extremely thin. However, the looming Ceremony in which they ‘come of age’ is articulated as the ultimate eradication of any solidarity lingering between the eves, so that “[a]ll charades of friendship or alliances are forgotten” (297). If, as Gilligan claims, girls tend to define themselves in relation to others rather than as self-interested individuals, then the text indicates that postfeminist neoliberalism and sexualisation works to discourage this sense of connectivity, by placing girls in constant competition for social status, economic security and



male attention. Leading up to this event, the School is visited by the Inheritants, the sons of the richest and highest status men in the Eurozone who will choose the Companions. The girls become split between likely Companions and Concubines, and subdivided again into tiers of higher and lower status within these groups. The patriarchal virgin/whore dichotomy is literalised in this divide, as submitting to the boys' sexual desires leads to instant and permanent downgrading to Concubine status. The contradictions between the necessity of sexualising themselves to attract male attention, the paramount importance of maintaining chastity, and the impossibility of objecting to the imposition of male desire, leads to a complex game of flirtation and prevarication for the potential Companions, indicating the impossible expectations made upon girls in a culture which simultaneously encourages them to sexualise themselves and condemns them when they express this sexuality.

Despite the fact that their status as adults is dictated entirely by male evaluation, the lack of social mobility for the eves is elided by the School's insistence that each of them strives towards idealised subjectivity, by repressing her emotions and maintaining an appearance of glamourized femininity. Here the text belies the suggestion that pursuing patriarchal beauty ideals can ever be "a freely chosen look" (McRobbie 66), particularly for the young, whom the text suggests are ill-equipped to enact resistance against normative ideology. Furthermore, the text indicates the emptiness of individualism which, for girls defined entirely by their appearance, can only ever be superficial. The similarity of their appearance intensifies the perceived importance of minute physical differences, so that "freja looks suicidal at the thought of someone stealing her identity as the thinnest eve in 16th year" (152). The competitiveness fostered between the eves works to poison the well of intimacy naturally engendered between these "sisters" through their sharing of space, as when freida "can feel their breath now, inside me. We are part of each other" (79). This latent sense of

collective identity is described by freida as a “suffocating . . . togetherness”, however, due to the imposition of a zero-sum game of development in which status can only be achieved by a tiny elite. Thus when isabel achieves prominence through excessive thinness, freida describes this as if “she’s taking all of the available thinness for herself, stealing it from the rest of us” (181), while another eve’s self-possession produces a “fanciful image of her sneaking into our cubicles at night-time [and] draining us of our confidence until her belly is swollen with her plundered loot” (185).

Maintenance and display of the body and a tight grip on the emotions are espoused as the pathway to stable adult selfhood, but it becomes increasingly apparent that placement as a Companion is largely outside the eve’s control. They are told weeks before the Ceremony, for example, that the MyFace rankings that previously dictated their place within the pecking order of the School are “null and void” and “meaningless” (127). This sudden removal of an externally determined definition of identity is acutely painful: “[i]t’s as if she has ripped our skeletons from our bodies, smiling as the remaining flesh collapses in on itself” (127). Nonetheless, the new meaninglessness of the ranking system does not disrupt the girls’ hierarchies: in fact, the rankings “have never felt more important” after this revelation, largely because of the need for a “clearly defined” pecking order (168). This evidences that the girls have so comprehensively internalised external definitions of their value that they are only able to reiterate this sense of selfhood once it is removed. It also indicates that the School’s determined prevention of a collective sense of identity has been successful. Provided with an opportunity to interact with each outside a predetermined hierarchy and to rework the communal structure, they nonetheless adhere to the familiarity of the static social shape, and to the patriarchal modelling of society as an expression of entrenched hierarchies in which self-interested individuals vie for prominence.

The dissemination of patriarchal ideology in the School works not only to individualise the eves, but to prevent them from expressing potentially troubling emotions, as “[e]motional behaviour can be off-putting to men and must be controlled” (275). In their “Unacceptable Emotions class” (77) the eves learn that anger is particularly unacceptable because “[a]nger is ugly. Nice girls don’t get angry” (77). Freida’s inability to express her anger about the constriction of life at the School means she is only able to experience rage as a bodily implosion, a “big red balloon bursting through my stomach, leaving a gaping hole behind” (77). Anger is a particularly dangerous emotion because of its potential for expressing rebellion and resistance, qualities only ever briefly fantasised about by Freida, as when she feels a “nervous thrill” (174) at the idea of challenging an overweight boy who criticises her appearance. The only moment when Freida expresses her anger openly at a figure of authority is when Isabel starves herself into emaciation. Her wilful neglect produces an anger felt as a “flash of lightning running through me, white hot” (233), but this is only temporarily expressed at a Chastity before being redirected almost immediately back at Isabel: “I want to fling a bucketful of Unacceptable Emotions and watch them splash all over her face like paint” (235). The redirection of righteous ire from an agent of the power system to a similarly disempowered peer illustrates how comprehensively Freida has internalised the rampant competitiveness of the School’s values, ensuring that her anger does not become politicised.

As in *Uglies*, Freida’s inability to express rage against the system means this emotion is ultimately redirected back at herself, through punishment of her body. Freida, like all the eves, is engaged in a constant battle against her appetite, and to maintain a thin frame in accordance with the imperatives instructed by the School. In this environment, developing an eating disorder is an essential aspect of being a girl and becoming a woman. For an eve to

develop even slightly over her target weight is an unthinkable sin, one punished systemically, by the automated activation of a diet plan, but also communally, as the eves shame and torment each other for even the slightest weight gain. Girls who fail to adhere to the beauty norm by gaining weight are instantly rendered abject, as the other eves distance themselves from this threat to the stability of the normative social order to maintain their own illusions of coherent selfhood, performed as a lack of hunger. When freida sees the overweight christy, she empathetically acknowledges her own desire to indulge in the comfort of food, but feigns distance from this emotional response because “*I didn’t want to understand christy’s weakness*” (137). The curtailment of the emotions is articulated as further separating the eves from collective resistance; unable to reveal weakness, they are prevented from communicating meaningfully with each other or from sharing their discontents.

The only power available to freida lies in punishment of the body, and the only viable sense of agency she experiences is expressed as self-control over its appetites. This corresponds with Bordo’s observation that eating disorders provide “a range of values and possibilities that western culture has traditionally coded as “male” and rarely made available to women: an ethic and aesthetic of self-mastery and self-transcendence, expertise, and power over others through the example of superior will and control” (178). Nonetheless, the text indicates that freida’s obsessive control over her body is an illusory pretence of power which only works to consolidate her true powerlessness within the system, reflecting that “[t]o *feel* autonomous and free while harnessing body and soul to an obsessive body-practice is to serve, not transform, a social order that limits female possibilities” (Bordo 179). Drawing on Hilda Bruch’s work on female sufferers of eating disorders, Bordo notes that the urge to starve oneself is often perceived by anorexics as belonging to an external voice, a “dictator who dominates me” and who is “always male” (155). In *Only Ever Yours* this voice is

systematised, and eating disorders are institutionalised. Spaces to vomit after eating are provided for girls and they become so accustomed to weighing themselves they can estimate each other's weight at a glance with metric precision, "all of us weighing [each other] as accurately as any body scanner" (35). *Only Ever Yours* registers the eating disorder as "the most startling and stark illustration of how cavalier power relations are with respect to the motivations and goals of individuals, yet how deeply they are etched onto our bodies, and how well our bodies serve them" (Bordo 164). The text's contextualisation of the eating disorder as an expression and consequence of patriarchal power works to indicate how individual pathologies are produced within and by wider culture, and how social interactions reiterate dominant ideologies.

The ultimate goal of this war against physical growth and fleshy desires is not the stable sense of maturity which is the projected goal of adolescence. Despite the claims of the School that the Ceremony 'completes' the eves' development, they are by definition always liminal figures, undermining the notion that adolescence is resolved by stable maturity. Their position as women is perennially precarious, dependent on perpetual submission and the waging of an eternal war against the body. Female maturation is articulated not as the development of power, nor as a heightened or stabilised sense of self, but as fleshy entropy and bodily decay: "[w]ith every year since your design date, you are getting older, losing your bloom, depreciating in value" (58), because although "[a]ll eves are created to be perfect . . . over time, they seem to develop flaws" (53). The School insists that these flaws cannot be perceived by the eve herself but must be identified collectively through "useful" comparison between "sisters" (53). The self is therefore always unknowable to the eve, and she is always defined through the exterior evaluation of others. This produces a paradoxical sense of selfhood in which the body both *is* the self, whilst also being the enemy of the self

which must be constantly monitored, disciplined and controlled. freida frequently attributes active verbs to her body, a sense of animation oppositional to her personal feelings of paralysis. A perceived gain in weight is described as “blubber ripping through my skin” (98), whilst loss of weight beyond socially acceptable parameters is also described as a bodily revolt: “[m]y bones jostle underneath my skin, fighting to be the first ones to pierce my flesh” (103). That these diametrically opposed evaluations of the body as either over or under weight occur only pages apart indicates the fictiveness of these projections. freida is incapable of rationally or objectively assessing what she looks like, and therefore who she is actually is, because the School emphasises that what she looks like *is* who she is: ““Personality does NOT matter. All that matters is being pretty”” (84). This means that when her appearance deviates even slightly from the ideal, she experiences a pathological sense of depersonalisation, unable to identify her reflection as herself: “[g]reasy dark hair pulled away from an ashen face. Is that the girl they keep calling freida?” (103). freida’s alienation from her body, and thus from herself, becomes more pronounced as she becomes increasingly unable to reconcile the contradictory expectations of her culture, until her narrative voice begins to shift into the third person, with freida describing her actions as if watching them externally, narrating the frail movements of “a broken doll” (348).

Her inability to achieve her goal of Companionship is implicitly rooted in her non-white racial identity. The hierarchy of the School is racially encoded, with white and blonde girls idealised and non-white girls tacitly suggested to be highly unlikely to achieve the coveted status of Companion. freida is implied to be non-white, as inferred by self-comparison to Mahatma, the only character in the novel described as being “brown-skinned like me”, and O’Neill’s naming of the character after the Indian actress Freida Pinto (Mellor).<sup>5</sup> freida consistently expresses a sense of her racial identity as a shameful deviation

from normative standards, so that she whitens her face and is conscious of the “patches of brown breaking out through the pale make-up I requested to be layered on this morning” (159). The notion of the mutinous body working to undo the work of normative self-making signifies an unwinnable war to be waged not only against appetite, emotion and sexuality, but also, for non-white girls like freida, against racial identity itself.

Race becomes a more prominent aspect of the text when freida attracts the attention of Darwin, the highest status Inheritant whose preference for freida means she supersedes the pale-skinned megan to the top of the social pile. freida’s brief reign as social queen precipitates a craze amongst the other eves for self-tanning to match her darker skin tone, but this trend quickly fades as freida falls out of favour and white beauty ideals are reasserted as normative. Her romance with Darwin leads freida to hope that she might become a Companion if she adheres to the School’s rules, but her growing sense of precarity leads her to have sex with him and, worse, to beg him to choose her, an unacceptably wilful assertion of desire. She is rejected and shamed, labelled a Chastity and sentenced by Darwin’s father to the dreaded Underground. freida’s aspirations are revealed to have been hopeless from the outset, as she is not ““what the Judge would want for Darwin”” (290), a “second-tier eve leapfrogging over more suitable girls” (385), whose temporary elevation of status “undermined the natural order of things” (384). None of the eves implied to be non-white in the text achieve Companionship, revealing the lie behind the constantly reiterated message that all the eves must make ““correct choices”” and use “[a]ll the theoretical knowledge that you have been taught”” (125) to ensure placement “within the appropriate third” (125). In fact, for implicitly non-white eves like freida, the system is rigged from the beginning, and the insistence on self-development elides the fact they will never be valued in the same way as the white, blonde girls. Although the projected values of the School imply a meritocracy in

which eves are all able to attain high status through individual effort, it is obvious to freida and, it is implied, the other non-white eves that this will never be something they can attain. Attention to the racial inferences of the text of the text explains why girls like “liu and naomi”, that is those implied to be non-white, “look stricken” by the widening divide between the companions and concubines, hoping to “absorb [the] popularity” of the top ten girls (209) whilst remaining palpably aware that “[t]hey’re the back up plan; the ones destined to become second-tier concubines” (213). This is further emphasised when Darwin shows freida “controlled concubines”, women accessed remotely through censors and instructed to perform sexual acts on each other. The concubine has skin “as dark as mine, her hair the same lustrous brown” (242), and her physical similarity to freida casts her as a shadow self, an indication of the true purpose of creating girls like freida: the provision of exotic sexual novelty for the amusement of Inheritants bored of their white companions. Darwin ultimately rejects freida in favour of the pale-skinned megan, reasserting the dominant paradigm and indicating that the hope which fluttered briefly in freida’s imagination, that romance might provide the possibility of escape from her predetermined identity and fate, was illusory.

Here O’Neill adheres to the canonical tradition of the classical dystopia, in which the protagonist is utterly defeated at the end of the text in order to signify the social message of the text in the starkest manner possible. In O’Neill’s text, patriarchy divides, dements and ultimately destroys. freida is a remarkably less empowered figure than the super-heroic Tally, Tris and Katniss, but her disempowerment works to clarify rather than obfuscate patriarchy as endemic in contemporary culture. There is no hope of even the slightest resistance against the system for freida, who can barely even articulate her rage against the system, let alone enact it. The text places hopefulness entirely in the figure of the reader, expected to discern the text’s critique of patriarchy and take action in a way which is impossible for freida to achieve.



Although empowering in intent, this potentially inscribes the notion of the adolescent girl as a fragile victim of culture. Freida is a remarkably passive protagonist, so desperate to please others that she sabotages her own chances for safety within the system solely to ensure the continued approval of another Eve who despises her. All of the Eves accept the conditions of their society without resistance, leading to the consistent description of them as simulacra, semblances of human beings without the self-possession of living beings, “wound up and wound down, like mechanical dolls” (46), incapable of resisting ideology which has been “carved into us since design” (90). This harks back to the figuring of the adolescent girl in earlier moments of feminism as a victim of patriarchy in need of careful intervention, as in Mary Pipher’s famous claim that “[a]dolescent girls are saplings in a hurricane” (22) due to being raised in a “girl-poisoning culture” which “limits girls’ development, truncates their wholeness and leaves many of them traumatized” (12). Pipher’s notion of adolescent girls as monolithically in a state of crisis accords with the delineation of the Eves, as in both formulations “girls are represented as simply victims of society” (Aapolo, Gonick and Harris 52). This means that although the text is invested in encouraging girls to register the imbrication of patriarchal ideology in the media and culture which surround them, it does so in a manner which provides no space for the possibility that they may engage with either in a less limited or disempowered way. O’Neill presumes that contemporary girls require her to ‘take them by the hand’, and in doing so indicates Trites’ observation that YA fiction encodes a power differential between the adult author and presumed young reader, in which the latter is always positioned as an authority over the other.

This also embeds a recurring framing of feminist generations observed by Astrid Henry in which “young feminists are expected to learn from the wisdom of their elders” (8), embedding a “patriarchal . . . model of authority in which it is the duty of the sage old ones to

pass on knowledge.” (8), and which often fails to provide space for the articulation of young feminist voices. Given that O’Neill was only around thirty herself when this, her first novel, was published, I am not suggesting that she positions herself as a font of ancient feminist wisdom, but I observe this dynamic to indicate how fundamentally hierarchical notions of power are embedded in the narrative form of YA fiction, which presumes a young reader in need of adult intervention and guidance. This is particularly troubling in a text which articulates the dystopian girl as utterly victimised by patriarchal oppression, and which thereby suggests that young women, and particularly girls of colour, are bereft of the ability to speak out against their victimisation. That this is articulated in the context of the postfeminist silence of the dominant model of the dystopian girl is also important, however, as the extremity of O’Neill’s dystopia is an intervention, designed to counterpoint the claims that feminism is unnecessary, race is unimportant, or that girls are free to act and dress as they wish in the context of neoliberal economies in which a “focus on independence and self-expression is now sold back to young women as the narrowest kind of consumerism and self-objectification” (Walter 65). *Only Ever Yours* suggests that very little has changed since Annis Pratt’s claim in 1981 that “there is basically no such thing as a female Bildungsroman” (Trites 12) because in novels delineating female development the protagonist “is radically alienated by gender-role norms *from the very outset* [making her] initiation less a self-determined progression *towards* maturity than a regression *from* full participation in adult life” (36). The text suggests that ancient narratives of feminine identity remain pervasive in a culture in which objectification is erroneously presented as “an expression rather than an imposition of sexuality” (Orenstein 263). Unable to grow up, freida grows down. In the final moments of the novel, she meets her new sisters, incubated eves whose “raucous behaviour” and “raised voices” (390) led to them being removed from society altogether. freida has

learned, now, not to resist. She offers her arm to a scientist and feels a needle puncture her skin, ready to experience the comfort of numbness, to “feel nothing, forever” (390).

#### CONTAINING MULTITUDES: GROWING SELVES IN *SLATED*

*Only Ever Yours* undermines hegemonic narratives of adolescence by suggesting that personal development is impossible for girls under patriarchy, but the *Slated* trilogy both invokes and subverts the common-sense notion of adolescence as an identity crisis which must be resolved into stable maturity. The polyphonic interplay of identities which Kyla expresses throughout the trilogy undermines the notion that coherent selfhood is possible to achieve or maintain, thereby troubling the linearity embedded in the normative framework of adolescence. Kyla is overlaid with multiple iterations of self, as she uncovers past identities which she cannot remember, and which the text suggests cannot be resolved into stable coherence. Rather than presenting Kyla’s identity crisis as a state of liminality which she must progress beyond, the text suggests this is the keynote of her subjectivity and identity. In this sense, the text subverts the message Trites reads as embedded within all YA literature, that “there is something wrong with your subject position as a teenager. Grow up and become someone else” (*Growth* 1). This message is imposed upon Kyla as a *Slated* teen by the dystopian state, but the text tacitly subverts it through the suggestion that linearity itself is a fiction. Rather than endorsing “growth as improvement”, the text invokes the “much less laden concept of growth as simple change” (*Growth* 147), so that Kyla ultimately comes to peace with her heterogeneity rather than attempting to overwrite or deny it. *Slated* thereby evokes a less overt but equally significant critique of patriarchal authority than *Only Ever Yours*, by undermining hegemonic concepts of adolescence which Lesko has shown reify male, white, middle-class identities as normative, and which portray the individualism

demanding by capitalist societies and economies as ideal. In this sense, the text suggestively remodels both the narrative of adolescence and the genre of YA fiction which embeds this narrative. McCallum has observed that YA which delineates adolescent development, which is to say almost all YA, “liberal humanist and romantic concepts of subjectivity” are emphasised through the articulation of “the uniqueness of the individual and the essentiality of the self” (McCallum 67). This humanist notion of identity has been challenged by poststructural notions of “the self as fragmented or plural [and] subjectivity [as] being formed through language in dialogue with social ideologies and practises” (67). Poststructural notions of self are tacitly invoked in the text through Kyla’s identity crisis, in which past and present selves are articulated as being formed in relation to structural power and hegemonic ideology, and in which the notion of a foundational identity which can ‘explain’ the self is ultimately discredited. Kyla represents a modelling of the dystopian girl in opposition not only to the patriarchal dystopian state, but to its ideological imbrication in narratives of adolescent development, and its expression in those institutions designed to develop adolescents into linearity, normativity, and passivity.

The social and cultural understanding of adolescence as a period of personal upheaval has been embedded in the concept since its foundation, evident in G. Stanley Hall’s formal reification of adolescence as a time of “storm and stress” (4) in 1904. The idea that adolescence is both a “crisis of identity” (Coats 137) and a “journey of self-development” (Harter 354) in which individuals are expected to “acquire a clear and consolidated sense of true self that is realistic and internalized” (Harter 354) is widely accepted in western culture. The adolescent identity crisis is typically imagined as being resolved through inculcation into prevailing norms of behaviour and identity, leading Nancy Lesko to claim that adolescence is a discourse which provides “a continuing gloss of and cover for the exercise of subordinating

power” (35). As Phillips observes, the adolescent must come to “embody stability and certainty, lest the structure [of both society and self] come undone” (8). Failure or refusal to develop in a socially sanctioned manner is politically threatening, suggesting an underlying rejection of the social and political status quo.

While *Only Ever Yours* imagines a totalitarian state which wages war specifically against girls, in *Slated* power is asserted against the young more generally. Set in a future Britain which has become a police state governed by the Lords, the trilogy envisions a future in which teenagers are criminalised for political resistance. Those found guilty of such activity are declared delinquent and sentenced to have their memories wiped, or ‘Slated’. Provided with new identities in unfamiliar locations, Slated teens are placed with an adopted family and accorded secondary status, with less rights and privileges than their peers who are also themselves already subject to extensive social control. Slated are easily identifiable because of their Levos, wrist bracelets which monitor their emotional state and which they cannot remove until they are twenty-one. If their Levo reading drops below a certain number because of negative emotions, particularly anger, the Slated will pass out and be subject to further disciplinary procedures for breaching their contract. The Slated are therefore expected to constantly attend to the personal project of maintaining a positive attitude and docile demeanour, an expectation inextricably linked to an acceptance of the dominant power structure. Kyla is monitored at her school by Mrs Ali, an agent of the Lords who reports to them regarding her conduct, and warns her she must ““become a useful, happy integrated member of our society. To do this you must learn to follow rules”” (*Slated* 96). The Slated contract states they will obey ““your family’s rules, the school, your Group, the wider community”” (96) and there is no flexibility regarding this expectation: ““If you break the rules, try to get around the rules or even just give them a little bend, there will be

consequences” (96). When Kyla falls behind at school, Mrs Ali warns her that she must “do your best to integrate and do well at school, with your family and community. You are over sixteen now; if you fail, other treatment options are available” (247). Kyla realises it is “Time to be attentive and ready to learn. Or to get better at faking it, at least” (248). As in *Only Ever Yours*, the dystopian girl is expected to develop into an acceptance of authoritarian power, and the education system functions as an apparatus which disseminates and enforces the ideology of the state.

The abject position of the Slated adolescent is institutionalised through a narrative of development which is differentiated from those of ‘normal’ adolescents. Slated teens are treated like children and expected to attain educational milestones which are tailored in recognition of their perceived inferiority; a nurse tells Kyla’s newly assigned mother that “[s]he may not look it, but in some ways she is really like a small child” (*Slated* 27). This narrative is embedded in the legal system, which assigns Slating as a punishment, the education system, which guides Slated teens away from political resistance, and the medical and psychiatric establishment, in which Slated are carefully monitored by nurses and psychiatrists who assess their progress. Kyla immediately supersedes the infantilised expectations of Slated teens, testing as “age-appropriate before she left the hospital. That is most unusual: most of them are years behind” (*Slated* 27). Kyla’s development is defined by an overriding narrative of linearity and predetermined expectations, by adults imbued with the authority to do so by the state. The text thereby establishes adolescence as a discourse of development against which the individual is normatively assessed, whilst also establishing the individual’s ability to meet this developmental script as involuntary and contradictory. Kyla finds herself unable to conform to type, distancing her from the other, more placid Slated teens she encounters, epitomised by her “brainless” adopted sister Amy (*Slated* 141), who is

entirely defined by her insipid incuriosity. Unlike Amy, Kyla is unable and unwilling to coerce herself into performing the possession of a “happy little Slated brain” (*Slated* 86), so that she is rendered abject on several intersecting levels, both as a teenager labelled Slated, and then again within the social milieu of other Slated teenagers amongst whom she feels unable to meaningfully interact.

Reading the *Slated* trilogy with attention paid to the abject indicates how the text shows adolescent acceptance of hegemony as involving the rejection of those who refuse to comply with social norms, as well as the disavowal of those elements of the personality which compromise the individual’s ability to adhere to social expectation. Abjection is a psychoanalytic concept which denotes “the process of expulsion that enables the subject to set up clear boundaries and establish a stable identity”, primarily experienced in the binary established between “mind and body . . . subject and object” (Coats 140). The abject becomes defined by what is ‘not I’, and in making this distinction, the subject thereby defines the contours of selfhood and its definitive boundaries. Julia Kristeva argues that the abject denotes qualities or entities that can never be fully expelled, but which are instead disregarded to maintain a sense of wholeness and homogeneity. Her reading of the abject identifies this as a quality which “disturbs identity, system, order” (4) in both the microcosm of the individual, and the macrocosm of wider society. Joseph Campbell claims that “[t]he adolescent is told quite clearly time and time again in adolescent literature that they have but one way to remain in the social order: make identificatory moves that clearly show interest in leaving the abject subject positions behind” (“Treatment” 176). Both Coats and Campbell see the rejection of the abject as a central aspect of the delineation of growth in YA fiction, in which personal development is achieved when the abject is finally and definitively expelled.

Social abjection is evident in *Slated* through secondary characters who break the social contract of political conformity and are removed from society as a result. These characters, most notably Kyla's art teacher, Mr Gianelli, represent the threat underlying all Slated existence, that if rules are not abided by then the state will brutally intervene and that "[a]nything outside rigid, expected Slated behaviour - any hint of returning to my criminal ways and I could be returned to the Lords. Terminated" (*Slated* 23). Coats observes that secondary characters in YA fiction often fulfil a cautionary role in order to suggest that "abjection is an unsustainable social position", serving the purpose of demonstrating to the protagonist that "successful adult identity is contingent upon ridding himself of his associations with these abject figures" (10). Here we can observe the synthesis of Trites' claim that growth in YA is always linked to what the adolescent learns about power with Coats's analysis of growth in YA as being intrinsically linked to a rejection of those qualities and persons deemed abject. In *Slated*, these developmental lessons are intertwined, as Kyla learns that the hegemonic power structure operates by forcibly removing abject individuals who refuse to accept normative values, and therefore that her own failed attainment of normative 'growth' must be hidden at all costs.

The most complex intersection of growth, power and abjection in the text is produced through Kyla's self-development. Susan Harter defines the process of achieving coherent selfhood as "a major drama that unfolds on center stage during adolescence, with a complicated cast of characters who do not always speak with a single voice" (353). In *Slated*, this process is illustrated through the competing identities fighting for primacy in Kyla's psyche throughout the trajectory of the trilogy, as she attempts to resolve her internal incoherence into linearity. In the second novel in the trilogy, *Fractured*, Kyla uncovers her previously suppressed identity as Rain, a pseudonym she adopted after being groomed into



terrorist activity by Nico, the abusive leader of a radical fringe group. Rain competes with Kyla's other previous identity as Lucy, the birth name given to her by her parents, as a signifier of a determinant past which can 'explain' her 'true' identity. In the third novel, *Shattered*, Kyla ventures to her hometown to find her birth mother, adopting the new identity of Riley Kain as a combination of all her names. In becoming Riley, she changes her appearance to disguise herself, so that this attempt to unify her identity is suggested to be a dissembling coagulation rather than a 'true' or 'complete' sense of self, as further suggested when she realises her 'birth mother' is in fact not related to her, and she abandons the Riley persona.

Kyla's previous identities as Lucy and Rain persist beneath the surface of her memory once she has been Slated, and this is explained by Kyla's psychologist, Dr Lysander, as a "dissociative identity disorder. Essentially, a fracking of self into layers" (*Fractured* 252) achievable "only by extreme methods: deliberate trauma or abuse of a nature so severe that fracking is the only way for the self to continue" (254). Kyla's complex and confused sense of self is rendered in the language of psychological dysfunction, so that her adolescent identity crisis is heightened to the level of the pathological by those adults imbued with the power and authority to define her. The risk of pathology looms large in the discourse of adolescent psychology and the normative expectation that teenagers "acquire a clear and consolidated sense of true self that is realistic and internalized" (Harter 354). Harter claims that "[f]ailure to integrate these self-concepts may result in a self that is pathologically fragmented" (359), so that it is imperative that adolescents resolve contradicting qualities, defined themselves outside the definitions of others, and learn to "integrate the self across multiple roles" (354). The text links the acquisition of a normative sense of self with a rejection of political radicalism, thereby indicating the connection between conformity to the normative narrative

of adolescence and the acceptance of the social and political status quo. Rain represents the unacceptable extremity of political radicalism, evident in her use of violence against the dystopian government which led to her being Slated in the first place. Kyla must disavow the Rain personality and the violent resistance she embodies as abject in order to achieve the end goal of adolescent development into maturity. The re-emergence of the Rain persona represents the last vestiges of Kyla's refusal to accept Lorder rule, an irruption of the abject which she must accordingly reject to achieve acceptably curtailed transcendence. This means the text adheres to the recurring pattern Trites observes in YA, in which "over-regulation" is challenged by the initial resistance of the adolescent protagonist, who is punished and thereby learns to achieve "transcendence within accepted limits" (34). However, in uncovering elements of her identity associated with Rain, including her determination to oppose the Lords and her physical and personal confidence, Kyla is able to achieve a greater sense of self. Here the text suggests that the abject must be acknowledged and confronted in order to achieve a sense of personal stability, but does not necessarily suggest that it must be entirely rejected or expelled.

Although the uncovering of the Rain persona ultimately leads Kyla to achieve greater self-understanding, her memories as Lucy remain irretrievable, so that linearity remains unachievable despite Kyla's overwhelming desire for completion. Nonetheless, she maintains her desire for a linear story of self until the very end of the text, as epitomised by the epilogue in which she renames herself Hope in honour of the true birth mother she will never meet. Having discovered that this was the name given to her as a new-born before her mother was executed by the Lords, the narrative colludes with Kyla's desire to overcome her fundamentally conflicted sense of identity, attempting to reframe her within a linear path of development and a humanist notion of the essential, knowable self: "I have both been given

and taken so many identities, but at last I am beginning to grow into my one true name” (*Shattered* 304). This reflects McCallum’s observation that when poststructural concepts of identity and the subject are articulated in YA, they are almost always invoked only to “implicitly reassert humanist paradigms”, most notably through “the use of the quest as a primary narrative structure to depict the formation of subjectivity” (67). This accords with Kyla’s development from an “internally fragmented” sense of identity which produces a “quest for a sense of identity which is stable, coherent, unique and whole” (68). Although Kyla has previously been articulated through “[s]tates of fragmentation [and] multiplicity as conditions of the possibility of subjectivity rather than as aberrations” (77), she ultimately attempts to overcome this sense of self in her continuing desire for completion and wholeness. Registering the same tone as Katniss’s numbed assertions of domestic bliss in *The Hunger Games*, Kyla’s final articulation of selfhood is a faint-hearted attempt to reassert humanist paradigms in a text which has previously articulated the poststructural sense of self as formed within society and the state, as well as the interplay of past, present and future. The trilogy’s prior emphasis on “intersubjectivity, fragmentation and alienation, and of social and linguistic influences on the subject” (McCallum 97) means that Kyla’s desire to resolve her quest for linearity fails to convincingly resolve this fragmentation through the definitive containment of the overarching narrative structure.

This is supported by the fact that the notion of a foundational, essential identity is one which Kyla consistently seeks throughout the trilogy, but which is always revealed as impossible to achieve. Her desire to find her mother is rooted in her desire for a sense of completion, but when she meets the woman who raised her as Lucy, she is surprised by her discomfort. Her instinctive lack of emotional response evidences that Kyla remains unknowable to herself, and when she ponders this ineffability of self she also articulates

linearity as a narrative which she will never convincingly attain or embody: “I don’t know why I’ve been remote to Stella [. . .] To her, our relationship is real and immediate; to me it is a bare echo, like a song I’ve half heard once but can’t really remember” (*Shattered* 86). Kyla later discovers that Stella is not her birth mother at all, and this revelation throws her back into identity crisis: “So I’m back to this: as if I’ve been Slated all over again. To not knowing who I am. No parents, no place I come from. There is not even a name that is really mine. [. . .] I’m numb. Nothing” (*Shattered* 142). Her quest for a comprehensible and explanatory beginning produces only a deepening sense of entrapment in a temporal loop, like a song on interminable repeat. Rather than amplifying the distance between herself and Stella once she is revealed as an ersatz originating figure, this revelation brings them closer together, producing a new and empathetic interrelation outside the biological tethering of the maternal bond. Here, the trilogy suggests that Kyla’s attempt to achieve a coherent and linear selfhood is futile, thereby troubling the epilogue’s later claims to coherence.

Although Kyla attempts to resolve her disorientating incoherence, the achievement of her ‘one true name’ remains perpetually beyond reach. Becoming is tacitly maintained as a core aspect of Kyla’s identity, and by extension, identity itself, in her description of the *desire* for completion rather than the affirmation that this has, or can be, achieved. In her criticism of patriarchal, humanist paradigms of identity, the feminist philosopher Christine Battersby advocates the rethinking of identity as “‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’” (7) claiming that this reworks the projection of female identity as aberrant because of the perception of women and girls as unstable due to their over-determined associations with the body. In the delineation of Kyla’s identity as a palimpsest which is perpetually overwritten and can never be fully completed or comprehended, the text articulates the dystopian girl as a self which “is not a ‘thing’- a ‘substance’ that remains permanent through change [but] more like an ‘event’ that

is ‘born’ in the space and time of interactive forces” (Battersby 8) and which “has to live with uncertainty - both with respect to its own motives and even with regard to its own past” (208). Although Kyla’s narrative capitulates to the disciplining device of the epilogue and its insistence upon enclosure and containment of both narrative and subject, it also resists the certainty this attempts to embed. Ongoing ambiguity is maintained both on the level of identity and in the context of the political, in which Kyla articulates the unknowability of the consequences of the political change she has helped to instigate: “Will everything be all right now? Time will tell, but already I’m not sure everything is good” (*Shattered* 301). Naming herself Hope anticipates the unknowable with optimism, indicating identity as an ongoing process of negotiation and interrelation in which the self can never truly fix itself into a pose of finality or certainty. Kyla indicates how the liminality and ambiguity of the dystopian girl means she is able to articulate a sense of self outside the humanist paradigms embedded in patriarchal ideology, while also showing how this possibility is strained by the narrative structure of the commercial trilogy format.

The critique of patriarchy enacted within the text is also evoked more overtly in the delineation of the Slated contract. This operates as an enforcement of heterosexual monogamy, as it is a “requirement of your contract that you have two parents, to guide your transition to home and community” (*Slated* 180). The paternalistic inferences of the contract are further suggested when Kyla is dissuaded from romantic relationships by her father, later revealed to be a Lord, who tells her “[t]here is real concern that you can’t handle those sorts of feelings so soon after Slating” (*Slated* 251). It is also forbidden for Slated girls to become pregnant, and this results in enforced termination of the foetus, on the justification that otherwise “[e]very Slated girl in the country would get pregnant on purpose to get out of her sentence” (*Fractured* 200). The trilogy therefore imagines how patriarchal ideology

functions through the enactment of “bio-power”, that is “techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault 140), in this case adolescent girls specifically. Biopower also operates through the Levo, the wristband which monitors Kyla’s emotions and which she cannot remove. Anyone can see the Levo reading which indicates Kyla’s mood, and an unacceptably negative state of mind results in the Slated being induced into a permanent comatose state. The Levo indicates female adolescence as a panopticon in which the subject is constantly monitored and assessed by both the self and others to ensure she remains passive: “the main purpose of a Levo is to stop the Slated from acting in anger, to prevent violence against self and others” (334). As in *Only Ever Yours*, Kyla learns to internalise the unacceptability of anger, so that when she is enraged by the marginalisation of Slated at her school, “instead of getting more angry I crumple inside myself” (186). However, she finds it increasingly difficult to control her rage, particularly when the Rain persona begins filtering into her perspective. When she sees a Lorder in the second novel, “[r]age fills me inside: roiling, hot rage [. . .] If I had a gun in my hand, right now, I could raise it. Shoot him. He deserves it. They all do” (*Fractured* 77). Kyla learns to “Use the rage” (64), both against the state, and Nico, the radical male terrorist who initially groomed her into the Rain persona. The novel suggests the efficacy of rage as a means of resisting the patriarchal insistence on feminine restraint. Kyla’s rage “has nowhere to go, and so it grows” (*Fractured* 272), becoming a utopian force for personal and political change. However, as previously discussed, Kyla must ultimately reject the Rain persona and the radical opposition it signifies, so that the text invokes the power of female rage only to ultimately curtail it, affirming Trites claim that rebelliousness in YA becomes inhibited as part of the genre’s process of mapping growth as the acceptance of institutional power over adolescents.

Nonetheless, unlike freida, Kyla is able to manipulate this system of power and subvert its disciplining apparatus. She discovers that physical exercise tricks the Levo, allowing her to mask her emotions and the resistance to state which they express. This means that Kyla is able to assert agency over her body in a manner unavailable to freida, and the text produces a more optimistic vision of the dystopian girl as being able to successfully resist the system. Kyla realises that “deception isn’t impossible, just difficult. Like being a magician and drawing attention away from the very thing [her psychiatrist] would like to examine” (115). Power is therefore not presented, as in *Only Ever Yours*, as inflexible, absolute, and impossible to meaningfully oppose, but something which the dystopian girl is able to wield as well as endure. Marilyn French has argued that the dominant expression of power in patriarchal culture is what she terms “power-over”, that is power which necessitates “coercion, fear, and sometimes violent cruelty” (444). French positions “power-to” as an alternative manifestation associated with “expressiveness and a degree of autonomy” (44). Power-to is unavailable to the eves, who are incapable of expressing any sense of autonomy or selfhood outside the reiteration of the School’s ideology, but is evident in Kyla’s skilful negotiation of oppression, which enables her to enact resistance to the dystopian regime and its disempowering ideology.

If Kyla is in this sense a more utopian iteration of the dystopian girl than freida, this is countered by the fact that she reiterates rather than challenges normative whiteness. Kyla is explicitly white, as affirmed when she describes her skin as “perfect and white [. . . ] Pretty” (215). Her whiteness is earlier suggested when she contrasts herself with her adopted sister and fellow Slated, Amy: “I am small and slight with wispy blond hair; hers is dark and thick and heavy. She is *va-va-voom*” (9). This description encodes racist notions of the black female body as encoding heightened sexuality, in contrast to the purity and fragility encoded

by white femininity. The text subsequently implies Amy is much more sexually active and experienced than Kyla, so that her characterisation affirms rather than challenges Kyla's racist perceptions of her body. The differences she perceives between herself and Amy are also articulated on the level of political awareness. While Kyla struggles to accept her marginality and disempowerment as a Slated teen, the "brainless" (141) Amy is defined as the epitome of the passivity of other Slated teens. Kyla contrasts her rebelliousness with Amy's cheerful docility, so that the text articulates the white dystopian girl's desire to transform her society by contrasting this with the inanity of a black female peer. Kyla has "a compulsion to observe and know *everything*", but Amy "just doesn't question anything" (141). Kyla later discovers that Amy was subject to "Victim Slating", volunteering to have her memories wiped after being raped and impregnated at thirteen. The Lords enact this practice in the belief that "[s]ome young people are so damaged by their early lives, that the only way to make them useful members of society - to break the chain, to stop the patterns of abuse and violence being passed to their own children - is to take the pattern away. Make it as if it never happened" (265). In this case, this involves Amy being removed from a black family and placed with a white one, so that the dystopian state implicitly attempts to solve a social problem which emerges in the context of a black community through inculcation into the normative values of the white, nuclear family. Through the figure of Amy, the text suggests the racist practices of the Lord state, while also indicating how these are obscured by an insistence on colour-blindness. When Kyla asks why Amy is "so different" compared to the rest of her new family, she is "told sharply that race is irrelevant and no longer worthy of notice or comment under the glorious Central Coalition" (7).

The text's suggestive evocation of the racism which colour-blindness both denies and restates is complicated, however, by the fact that the text also embeds racist notions of black



femininity as unintelligent and hypersexual through the contrast drawn between Amy and Kyla. The failure to register the problematic inferences of Kyla's white normativity is most evident when she assumes the new identity of Riley in *Shattered*, which the text encodes as an assumption of non-whiteness as a disguise. Kyla uses illegal Image Enhancement Technology to request "thicker hair. Like Amy's gorgeous dark hair" (4) which "*feels* different, foreign" (7), stating that "[t]his dark-haired girl is *other*" (9). The suggestion that the white protagonist can assume the identity of a racial other works to embed whiteness as neutral and invisible state. Furthermore, the post-racial insinuations of the Lords are implicitly affirmed by the fact that Kyla experiences no racist treatment as Riley, despite the fact she travels alone to a distant city under an illegally assumed identity, a position the text explicates as particularly vulnerable. The text's disinterest in exploring the racist implications of the imposition of the patriarchal Lord state indicate that Kyla, like the dystopian girls of the trilogies discussed in the previous chapter, embeds post-racial colour blindness and white centrality. It is worth noting that although *Shattered* implies Kyla adapts black physical features as Riley, the cover of the mass-market paperback edition of the novel presents her with impossibly alabaster skin and ice blond hair. In fact, each of the covers of the trilogy bleach Kyla into an increasingly exaggerated whiteness, drawing a link between the growing vulnerability implied by the titles, *Slated*, *Fractured* and *Shattered*, and the fetishized emphasis on her increasingly delicate, increasingly white femininity.

## CONCLUSION

Both of these texts indicate how the intersecting generic frames of YA and dystopian fiction work to empower the presumed adolescent reader, and particularly the adolescent girl, to challenge institutions which oppress them. The confined identities imposed upon the dystopian girl as an eve and Slated respectively registers the gendered specificity of institutionally dictated narratives of adolescent development, thereby undermining the credibility of postfeminism. If “dystopian literature asks [young people] to look critically at the power structures that envelop and seek to constrict them” (Campbell *Order 2*), then these texts work to encourage girls to reject conformity to culturally mandated scripts of femininity. However, both texts also indicate the continuing problem of race in the articulation of the dystopian girl as a figure of white normativity. The rarity of freida as a non-white dystopian girl whose racial identity indicates how endemic racism is in contemporary life, and the typicality of Kyla as a white dystopian girl who embeds colour-blindness, illustrates how deeply ingrained white supremacy is in both mainstream YADF and contemporary culture. Nonetheless, both girls indicate the value of considering the dystopian girl in the context of narratives of adolescence, which show she is able to operate as an emancipatory figure, indicating a resistance to the insistence that adolescent girls transform their identities into facsimiles of patriarchal dystopian prerogatives.

## CHAPTER FOUR: NEOLIBERAL SUBJECTIVITY IN *THE CARBON DIARIES* AND *THE 100*

### INTRODUCTION

Having considered how the rhetoric of postfeminism is projected, internalised, and occasionally effaced by the dystopian girl, I now focus on how neoliberal ideology underpins her subjectivity. Gill and Scharff claim that “postfeminism is a sensibility that is at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideals” (7), and this affinity is most palpable in the subjectivity which both venerate, and which the dystopian girl often embodies. In this chapter, I will analyse Saci Lloyd’s *The Carbon Diaries* duology (2009-10) and the television adaptation of Kass Morgan’s trilogy *The 100* (2014-present) to consider their complex and contradictory engagement with neoliberalism through the figure of the dystopian girl. My use of the term ‘neoliberalism’ is rooted in David Harvey’s understanding of the term as a now hegemonic ideology in the west which “proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms” (2), and is characterised by a resurgence in free-market capitalism. This ideology emphasises individualism and consumerism, projects the world as inalterably corrupt and beset by crisis, and denies the possibility of systemic change. Although these qualities are all symptomatic of capitalism more generally, ‘neoliberalism’ here indicates an intensification of these ideas as neoliberal policies and practices became embedded in the governance of late twentieth and early twenty-first-century western states, in this case the UK and USA specifically.

Set six years in the future, *The Carbon Diaries* imagines how neoliberal shrinkage of the British state might produce terminal crisis in the event of an ecological disaster. This means the text critiques the specific iteration of neoliberalism which became structurally embedded during Thatcherism in the 1980s, and to which the text explicitly calls attention. Although less explicit in terms of its criticism of specific neoliberal policies, *The 100* maps a

post-apocalyptic imaginary onto the now destroyed site of contemporaneous American power, Washington DC, and in doing so formulates a more implicit critique of the pervasive neoliberalisation of the American government. In particular, this series engages with neoliberalism's intensification of the notion that humans are innately selfish and competitive, and that individualism is therefore the only viable form of social interaction. In the following chapter, I consider how the dystopian girls of these texts, Laura and Clarke, vacillate between individualism and collectivism, analysing how these texts register social solidarity as both utopian and dystopian, and contextualising this within neoliberal discourse and ideology. In particular, I will analyse how political violence is framed as either unacceptable in *The Carbon Diaries* or inevitable in *The 100*, indicating how this produces markedly different political meanings, and linking this to the wider sense of possibility, or impossibility, of utopian transformative change in these texts.

Neoliberalism is rooted in the idea that the public sector is less competitive and efficient than the private sector, and neoliberal policies are designed to reduce the power and responsibility of the state in economic affairs in favour of corporations and the free market. When the Keynesian policies which had dominated governance in the United Kingdom began floundering during the 1970s, the Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, elected in 1979, turned to neoliberal ideas which had become influential as part of the Chicago school, led by Milton Friedman. The Chicago school had inducted several South American states into the implementation of aggressive privatisation as a posited solution to crises which had beset them. This was no coincidence: Friedman believed that it was only in times of crisis that systemic change could be forcibly imposed: "Only a crisis – actual or perceived, produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around" ("Milton Friedman"). Perceiving the three-day working week and widespread

strikes as just such a crisis, Thatcher set about privatising public services, dismantling trade unions, and reorganising the British state in accordance with neoliberal ideas. This led to the United Kingdom becoming the first fully integrated European neoliberal state by the early 1990s, an arrangement left unchallenged by the New Labour government which followed (1997-2010). The Republican administration concurrently led by the American president Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) also led to neoliberal ideals becoming prevalent in the US government through 'Reaganomics', a term denoting the administration's economic policies of deregulation and reduction of public spending. This ushered in an era of domestic American neoliberalism, so that by the time period denoted within this thesis, neoliberal ideals had become commonplace in western states. This meant that even when the neoliberal deregulation of the finance sector led directly to the Great Recession of 2008, western states continued to pursue neoliberal policies and economic practices in the ostensible absence of viable alternatives.

The twenty first century dominance of neoliberalism is in part attributable to the collapse of Soviet communism and the attendant conviction that this was, as famously stated by Francis Fukuyama, the 'end of history'. By this, Fukuyama meant that the discrediting of state communism as a viable alternative to liberalism and capitalism produced "the universalization of western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" and "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution" (Fukuyama 4). The discrediting of communism as an oppositional ideology and system of governance allowed neoliberalism to become projected as the logical conclusion and Platonic ideal of the capitalist system. The sense of a lack of viable alternatives to neoliberal policies were further ensured by the mechanisms of the World Bank and the IMF, whose structural adjustment policies forced

indebted countries to accept aggressive neoliberalisation of their economies through privatisation and deregulation in exchange for bailouts and loans.

Boas and Gans-Morse observe that the term neoliberalism signifies “*economic reform policies*” which engender a reduction of state intervention, a “*developmental model*” which envisions a utopian project of modernisation, and an *ideology* of individualism and self-interest which underlies these ideas and practises (143-44). Chandler and Reid argue that neoliberalism is also “a theory and practice of subjectivity” (2), as its values become internalised by individuals and reified by communities, thereby becoming increasingly difficult to challenge. They claim “the neoliberal subject can be defined as possessive of three essential attributes: resilience, adaptivity, and vulnerability” (7). Gill and Scharff define the neoliberal subject through the idealised qualities of personal autonomy and individualism, claiming this subject is “exhorted to make sense of their individual biographies in terms of discourses of freedom, autonomy and choice - no matter how constrained their lives may actually be” (Gill and Scharff 6). Linking these two definitions enables us to apprehend neoliberalism as producing the subject as someone who accepts that challenging contemporary power systems through collectively driven change is both undesirable and impossible, so that neoliberalism “calls forth a much degraded subject, one defined by . . . diminished capabilities for autonomy and agency” (Chandler and Reid 1) in political life. The emphasis on self-improvement is a privatised form of utopian transformation which ensures deepening personal imbrication in consumerism, individualism and the apolitical. The neoliberal subject is encouraged to ‘empower’ themselves through personal gain while accepting the terms and conditions of neoliberal capitalism as the end of history, an unassailable edifice which can be navigated, but not overcome. At the same time, corporations and the private sector are projected as agents of the only viable form of systemic

utopian transformation in neoliberal ideology: the continual shrinking of the state in favour of the market.

The dystopian girl epitomises the paradoxical interrelation of empowerment and disempowerment embedded in neoliberal subjectivity. She is both a heroic individual railing against a dysfunctional state, and a grim survivalist forced to eke out an existence in a catastrophic world. The delineation of the social and political as dangerous, chaotic and drained of utopian possibility often means the girl internalises apathy and cynicism, and regards hope for the future with deep ambivalence. Yet YADF also moves beyond the neoliberal notion of the subject as “a resilient, humble and disempowered being” (Chandler and Reid 3). The girl’s desire to change the political system she has inherited registers the desire for transformative change as utopian, and the collectively driven nature of the upheaval she precipitates means that her striving for change cannot be read as a straightforward iteration of neoliberal individualism and antipathy to the state. Despite the liminality of the girl between the polarities of hope and despair, I argue that in these texts she indicates the latent utopian potential of collective solutions to wide scale predicaments which neoliberalism has in many cases intensified, while simultaneously projecting them as inexplicable and irresolvable.

In this chapter, I analyse the contrasts between Laura, an apathetic teenager forced to confront political reality because of seismic structural change, and Clarke, who has political prominence thrust upon her and who strives to improve the conditions of her people. Firstly, I consider how the development of each girl stages a debate between neoliberal individualism and an antithetical notion of collective identity. While Laura grows linearly from self-interest to embracing communal life, I show that Clarke’s engagement with the tension between the self and the collective is more complex and contradictory. I then consider how the distinction

between each girl is most striking in their differential attitudes to the acceptability of political violence, ultimately showing that Clarke learns to internalise neoliberal ideology, while Laura learns to reject it.

#### LAURA, CLARKE AND LIMINALITY

I have chosen to focus on the television adaptation of *The 100* in my analysis rather than the original YA trilogy (2013-15) written by Kass Morgan for several reasons. Clarke is much more central to the narrative in the series than the novels, which balance four narrative perspectives, most of which were expunged for televisual adaptation. The focus on Clarke in both the storytelling and the promotional materials of the television show realigns *The 100* to participate in the media trend for dystopian girls popularised by *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*. This also reconfigures the narrative to focus on the theme of the burgeoning political subjectivity of an adolescent girl. While the literary trilogy is more concerned with a heterosexual romance plot discarded by the series, the television adaptation is concerned with the nature of social action, the problems which arise from collective identities, and the impossibility of transformative change. These themes resonate directly with those which will be discussed in this chapter, making it a more suitable text for analysis than the originating novels.

The analysis of a television show alongside a novel series in this chapter also allows me to register the fact that YADF operates across media platforms and is not limited to published fiction. Despite this confluence, identifying YADF as a mode of transmedia storytelling produces complications of definition which must be acknowledged, particularly when thinking about the “YA” aspect of the narratives. The labelling of novels as YA has often been largely determined by the promotional and pedagogical apparatuses surrounding



the literature, such as shelving decisions made by gatekeepers like librarians and booksellers, marketing decisions made by publishing companies, and promotional decisions made by all of the above, as well as the choices of the authors themselves. Considering a film or television show as an example of YADF is more problematic given that these media operate outside the categories of the publishing industry. In the case of *The 100* television show, however, this can be justified given that it is based on popular novels published, shelved and promoted as YA, as well as the fact it airs on the CW channel, which airs prominent teen shows including *The Vampire Diaries* and *Riverdale* and which has a “declared target audience [of] young women between the ages of 18 and 35” (Lausch 53).

Set ninety-seven years in the future, *The 100* imagines how humanity might survive when the Earth has been rendered unliveable by nuclear war. Forced to eke out existence on a space station orbiting the earth named The Ark, the survivors are ruled by an oppressive regime which punishes even minor violations of the law with death. Those under the age of eighteen are imprisoned rather than killed for their infractions, but when the Ark’s oxygen supply begins to deplete, a hundred such ‘delinquents’ are sent to Earth to test the viability of life. There they find that humanity has not only survived, but that several warring tribes dubbed ‘the Grounders’ now occupy the west coast of the former United States. These tribes immediately begin warring with the hundred, who attempt to eke out a collective existence on the camp they name as their own, Arkadia, in the face of widespread antipathy to their presence. The ensemble cast of *The 100* means the series is able to provide multiple iterations of the dystopian girl, including the warrior Octavia, the techie Raven, the Grounder queen Lexa, and Clarke, who emerges in the first few episodes as the de-facto leader of the group. Clarke, Lexa and Octavia are often positioned as mirroring and shadowing one another in the series, so that when one of Clarke’s compatriots claims that Lexa’s people are “being led by a

child”, another character replies, “so are we” (“Remember Me”). This strategy of doubling and paralleling dystopian girls means that the television show complicates the singularity of her literary iterations, appearing to present multiple possibilities through its various female adolescent characters.

*The 100* began airing on the CW in March 2014, the year that YAD media franchises hit a peak of public prominence due to the wide-scale releases of cinematic adaptations of *The Giver*, *The Maze Runner*, *Divergent* and *Mockingjay Part One*. First published in 2009, Saci Lloyd’s *The Carbon Diaries 2015* was at the forefront of this craze, and although the rights to the series were subject to a bidding war between Johnny Depp’s production company Infinitum Nihil and Company Pictures, the planned adaptation to be aired on the BBC has not come to fruition (Thorpe). This is perhaps attributable to the fact that, unlike most YADF, the duology is remarkably more transparent in its political aims and affiliations, and the protagonist Laura ultimately embraces radical collective action in a manner which renders her unique in the canon of dystopian girlhood.

The *Carbon Diaries* novels are presented as the diary entries of Laura, a budding punk musician from a self-confessed middle-class background in London. Set only six years in the future, the text envisions life in the UK during an environmental and economic crisis, in which the country undergoes steep decline in the face of widespread scarcity and discontent. By imagining what life in the UK might be like in the very near future, *The Carbon Diaries* is able to comment much more directly and specifically on contemporary politics than *The 100* and most other YADF. The implementation of neoliberal policies during Thatcher’s government are explicitly identified as the root of the predicament the country faces, and the novels often ventriloquize direct critique of neoliberal policies through the characters. Laura claims that “the electricity grid is old and completely messed up cos the private companies

have been bleeding it dry since forever” (2015, “Mon, Jan 26th”), and the scarcity of drinkable water in London is attributed to the fact that ““the water industry got privatised in 1989”” (2015, “Thurs, July 2nd”). This critique of Thatcherism embeds an unusually overt criticism of capitalism in the text. When a member of a far-left group gives a speech in which she claims, “[t]here can be no liberation, no hope for the future of the earth while capitalism still exists” (2017, “Thurs, Nov 16th”) this is implicitly validated within the text, which openly castigates the ravaging of both Britain and the planet by neoliberal capitalism.

It is significant, however, that Laura rarely articulates this criticism of neoliberalism herself. Her delineation in the first novel epitomises the notion of the teenager as cynical and apathetic, uninterested in the state of the world and reluctant to move beyond the deadened comfort of passivity. Laura is living in a moment of organised resistance against widespread systemic change, but she remains a political sceptic for most of the duology, and the cynicism expressed in her diaries is the keynote of the text. As the country enters political turmoil following the imposition of ‘carbon rations’ by the government, Laura refuses to become involved in political life, despite her evident dissatisfaction with government policy: “I’m being dragged in against my will. I don’t even believe in politics, all that left and right...it’s all crap” (2017, “Sat July 29th”). This means that although the duology expresses critique of contemporary political and economic structures much more openly and directly than is typical in YADF, the dystopian girl is positioned ambivalently within the context of this critique.

Laura’s apathy provides a stark contrast with Clarke, whose immediate immersion in social and political crisis means she does not have the privilege of such disconnected passivity. Although it takes both novels for Laura to accept that political indifference is no longer viable, Clarke is forced to think and act politically from the very beginning of the narrative. Both series anticipate the end of ‘adolescence’ as a protracted period of

development which will become unavailable in the dystopian future. As Laura's father puts it near the end of the duology, "The useless teenage layabout", and with it the stereotypical notion of the politically disconnected teen, "is officially a thing of the past" (2017, "Tues, Oct 3rd"). For Laura, only a few years into the possible future and still able to remember the comfort and pleasures offered by consumerist excess, this loss is painful. For Clarke, accustomed to a life of scarcity on the Ark in the deeper future of *The 100*, the unavailability of 'adolescence' is accepted as reality. However, while both girls' societies no longer recognise the need for a protracted period of adolescence, their development in the texts accords with the notion of adolescence as a linear period of growth culminating in maturation. By the end of the duology, Laura participates in an explicitly leftist revolution against the government and finally embraces radical collective action. Adolescent growth is mapped as a rejection of the neoliberal insistence that systemic change enacted by individuals and collectives is impossible, so that unlike the texts of the previous chapter, development is not experienced as repression. Laura develops into a conscious refusal to accept neoliberal subjectivity, and into the subsequent acceptance that collectively driven change is both feasible and necessary.

If Laura learns that she has the power to challenge neoliberalism, then Clarke learns that her only power lies in accepting and reiterating its ideas. *The 100* develops Clarke into learning to endure and internalise the brutally violent political ideology which prevails among the Grounders, one which accords with the neoliberal insistence on individualistic survival as the only mode of communal interaction. Although both texts reiterate the narrative pattern Trites observes in YA, in which "growth . . . is inevitably represented as being linked to what the adolescent has learned about power" (*Disturbing x*) this is enacted to remarkably different political effects. In *The Carbon Diaries*, Laura's growing acceptance that the power structure

of her society must be collectively challenged inducts her into an acceptance of communist principles, towards which she has previously been scathing and dismissive. *The 100* maps an oppositional political conclusion onto Clarke's growth, as her acceptance of the imposition of violent power and the impossibility of preventing war projects her as a figure of conservative nationalism. The disparity between these texts' mapping of growth and power evidences how the dystopian girl is able to signify oppositional political meanings. Clarke's development is steeped in the American neo-conservatism which emerged during the Bush era, while Laura's development hinges on a re-emergence of the radical left which became relegated to the side-lines of British political life during Thatcherism, and the consequent restructuring of the opposition as neoliberal New Labour.

The distinction between Laura and Clarke also signifies the political vacillations which manifest in contemporary neoliberal states. Ulrich Beck has identified modern western states as iterations of what he terms the "risk society", defining this as "a catastrophic society [in which] the exceptional condition threatens to become the norm" (24). Although published before the televised catastrophes of 9/11 and the Iraq war, the way in which the constant fear of terrorist threats has become normalised in western societies epitomises the sense of pervasive crisis which Beck observes as already endemic in late capitalist modernity. Beck relates this sense of crisis to the perception of the world as pervasively hazardous, which he argues leads to a fundamental sense of apathy and disempowerment. This "allows the pendulum of private and political moods to swing in any direction [. . . as t]he risk society shifts from hysteria to indifference and vice versa. Action belongs to yesterday anyway" (37). In their ultimate commitment to diametrically oppositional political ideas, Laura and Clarke indicate the veering political extremity of neoliberal risk societies. Both girls share a sense of

individualistic apathy struggling against a repressed desire for communality, even as they ultimately resolve this struggle in oppositional ways.

#### HOW NEOLIBERAL IS SHE, ANYWAY?

Using ‘neoliberalism’ as a term of analysis demands clarification, as the term has been used in such a variety of contexts and disciplines that it has become “a catchall for anything that smacks of deregulation, liberalisation, privatisation or fiscal austerity” (Rodrik). John Clarke suggests that the ubiquity of ‘neoliberalism’ in political, economic and cultural accounts of the contemporary means that it “has been stretched too far to be productive as a critical analytical tool” (135). His concern is rooted particularly in the danger that “[i]f everything is neo-liberal, then Bondi and Laurie are right that ‘there is no uncontaminated form of, or space for, political resistance’ which can be seen as remaining ‘wholly outside neo-liberalism’” (138). This note of caution seems particularly relevant when considering the view of critics like Evans and Giroux, and Chandler and Reid, who identify neoliberal discourse as so ubiquitous and all-encompassing that it is difficult to perceive, let alone challenge. Ironically, this may only consolidate the sense of disempowerment which these critics argue neoliberalism is designed to engender, imbuing it with a “sense of inevitability” and “oppressive and overwhelming weight” (Clarke 137). Clarke’s note of caution will inform my own analysis, in which I will attempt to capture not only the neoliberal resonances which underpin the delineation of the dystopian girl, but also the sites of resistant potentiality which reside in her articulation.

The dominant analysis of neoliberalism has been as a mode of economic policy, and there has been a paucity of considerations of neoliberalism as a precondition of subjectivity or an ideology which operates not only in the economic and political spheres, but which resonate

in the popular, the cultural and the psychological. Gill and Scharff note that “a focus on the psychosocial seems to be missing from most work on neoliberalism” (8), and consequently advocate analysis which considers how “governing practices quite literally ‘get inside us’ to materialize or constitute our subjectivities” (8). Attempting to understand how neoliberalism operates as a mode of subjectivity can be aided by consideration of YADF, as this genre has not only emerged within the context of neoliberalism, but is primarily invested in considering how the individual develops a sense of self in relationship to dominant power structures. The dystopian girl enables us to see how neoliberal ideals are imagined as interpellating the subject, as well as how resistance to this interpellation is enacted through the girl as a figure both complicit and mired in neoliberal ideals of society and the self. David Harvey claims that for an ideology to become hegemonic, “a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and desires” and, if successful, “becomes so embedded in common sense as to be taken for granted and not open to question” (5). Popular culture is a prime site of such inscription, and my analysis of these texts is based on the acceptance that to “understand the construction of political consent, we must learn to extract political meanings from their cultural integuments” (Harvey 40). As I consider the interplay of neoliberal ideas and resistance to these ideas in *Carbon Diaries* and *The 100*, I consider to what degree neoliberal ideology is conveyed as ‘common sense’ in both YADF and mainstream western culture.

Evans and Giroux identify neoliberalism as “the picture of the world that dominates the realities of our present condition [. . .] a world that has lost all faith in its ability to envisage -let alone create- better futures, condemning its citizens instead to a desolate terrain of inevitable catastrophe” (1). Evans and Giroux account for the increasing prevalence of narratives of disaster, dystopia and post-apocalypse in western popular culture as emerging

from the cultural imaginary engendered by neoliberal regimes. This indicates that neoliberalism is itself a dystopian narrative, one which “has radically altered our sense of the world such that we are taught to accept insecurity as the natural order of things” (11). Reading dystopian fiction as the quintessential literary expression of the neoliberal imagination troubles traditional understandings of the genre as invested in *critique* of contemporaneous power structures. Baccolini and Moylan claim dystopias are primarily designed to encourage the reader to think critically about the world around them, because the textual focus “on a character who questions the dystopian society”, means “the text is built around the construction of a narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of resistance” (5). This definition requires reconsideration in the context of the neoliberal investment in rendering the idea that the world is dystopian as common-sense. If “the normalization of dystopian narratives” in both fiction and political discourse, “offer[s] no possibility of escape” from a world conveyed as “insecure by design” (Evans and Giroux xiii), then this raises serious questions about the efficacy of dystopian fiction as a politically resistant genre. Dystopian narratives may now fit all-too easily into mass-mediated images of the world as beset by inescapable, inexorable catastrophe.

In this context, the protagonist and the denouement become more crucial than ever in the generation of political meaning. The classical dystopian ending of abject defeat may only work to consolidate the neoliberal notion that the hope for a utopia outside the terms of late capitalism is impossible, and that attempting to resist existent power structures is futile. This was the underlying suggestion of the cyberpunk fiction which emerged during Reaganism. Like much contemporary YADF, this sf sub-genre imagined life in a “post-apocalyptic cityscape” (Mousoutzanis 461), but this was more forcefully articulated as a space both defined and defiled by the legacy of capitalism and consumerism. Jameson claimed that the



nihilistic outlook projected by cyberpunk suggested that “premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by the senses of the end of this or that” (*Postmodernism* 1). The bleak settings and pessimistic denouements of cyberpunk denoted a loss of utopian hopefulness in the context of the systematisation of neoliberal policies in the United States, producing a sense of enclosure in neoliberal capitalism despite the palpability of its rampant destructiveness. As Moylan states, drawing on Peter Fitting’s analysis of the earlier feminist utopias of the 1970s, “[n]arrative closure . . . works formally against the very activism that the textual positioning of these utopias encourages” as it “short-circuits a more didactic approach that could stimulate the reader’s interest in political action” (55). By contrast, the dystopian girl is more typically envisioned as succeeding in her desire to overturn the power structure she has inherited. In this sense, she may provide a crucial counterpoint to neoliberal defeatism and the notion that the only imaginable systemic change is deterioration and decline.

Regarding the dystopia girl as a figure opposed to neoliberal apathy also requires a deeper consideration of the values her success embodies, however, and to what degree she is able to successfully challenge hegemonic ideology in the same way she violently dismantles its apparatus. As evident in the example of Clarke, however, the dystopian girl may still perpetuate neoliberal narratives of youthful disempowerment, so that “[i]nstead of symbolizing vibrant potential, many youth now represent and internalize a loss of faith in better times to come “ (Evans and Giroux 57). Clarke establishes herself as a political leader outside the entrenched hierarchies of the Ark, but is nonetheless revealed to have internalised the norms of this power structure to the degree that she is unable to enact political change outside its dehumanising logic. This indicates that escaping or destroying the dystopian state structure does not necessarily encode a resistance to neoliberal ideology; in fact, in her

antipathy to existent centralised governance, the dystopian girl is emphatically neoliberal. Her emergence as a figure of future possibility enmeshed in oppressively bleak social and political contexts indicates the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas, while also signifying the desire to move beyond them. YADF can therefore be read as signifying the possibility of moving beyond neoliberal enclosure, even its deep-seated ambivalence also means it may also perpetuate a neoliberal world-view.

The ambiguity of the dystopian girl, and her open-endedness as a figure of variant political meanings, indicates that the relationship between dystopian fiction and neoliberal ideology is more complex than Evans and Giroux acknowledge. YADF illustrates that dystopian narratives may not only engender a neoliberal sense of the social and political as impossible to productively change, but also provides a space for the imagining of transformative possibility outside the neoliberal framing of hope for the future as limited to “imagining simply how to survive” (15). Evans and Giroux maintain faith in the capacity of art to “create a multiplicity of ruptures that opens up new political spaces between our spectacularised present and a different future” (43), and the dystopian girl is surely at the forefront of this possibility. Yet YADF also evidences the perniciousness of neoliberalism as a “*a hidden structure of politics that colonizes the imagination, denies critical engagement, and preemptively represses alternative narratives*” (Evans and Giroux 32). Clarke and Laura typify the rendering of the dystopian girl as an innately contradictory political figure who both reiterates and supersedes neoliberal discourse. The challenge these girls pose to neoliberal ideology is qualified by the surreptitious acceptance of neoliberal ideas in other aspects of the texts, indicating the insidiousness of these ideas and the difficulty of moving beyond them.

For example, both texts couch their consideration of political subjectivity in a language of freedom which has been extensively appropriated by neoliberal rhetoric. Harvey

argues that the lexical elision between the expansion of free trade and the promotion of political freedom evident in such rhetoric has worked to render neoliberalism as ‘common-sense’. Harvey draws upon Gramsci’s notion of common-sense as “profoundly misleading . . . disguising real problems under cultural prejudices” (39) to argue that the neoliberal call to ‘freedom’ is designed to provide the ideology with an illusory utopian gloss. Both *Carbon Diaries* and *The 100* envision the dystopian girl as a campaigner for freedom, but Harvey’s caution regarding the vulnerability of discourses of ‘freedom’ to neoliberal practice necessitates consideration of what ‘freedom’ represents and entails in these texts.

In *Carbon Diaries*, Laura’s first mentions of freedom represents nostalgia for consumer luxuries and personal space no longer available to her due to the regulatory actions of the state: “[a]s a special Sunday treat we watched separate movies in separate rooms. That was so the best thing about unrestricted carbon. The freedom” (2015, “Thurs, Jan 22nd”). Here freedom is articulated as being synonymous with individualism, and the more collective style of living enforced upon the family is experienced as a loss of self: “I don’t know if our family can survive being together” (2015, “Thurs, Jan 22nd”). Laura idealises a notion of freedom which is in opposition to the intervention of state power in people’s lives, even as the restriction of carbon is conveyed in the novel as an unavoidable necessity. In doing so she articulates the neoliberal notion of ‘freedom’ as the ability of the depoliticised individual to enjoy consumer-driven entertainment whilst disengaged from those around them. As Laura grows towards political opposition, however, a notion of freedom decoupled from neoliberal ideals emerges. This is first presented by a member of the squatting community in which she lives in *Carbon Diaries 2017*, who claims “the most important thing is that we’re free and our ideas too, they are free [. . .] It’s so easy to forget how vulnerable and beautiful is our freedom. And soon maybe we must fight for it” (“Sun, Feb 5th”). This notion of freedom is

articulated in explicit opposition to the landscape neoliberalism has created, as the characters overlook the “half-submerged mass of abandoned buildings, a wreck of capitalism and greed” (“Sun, Feb 5th”). Laura’s development of a more political sense of self therefore recuperates a notion of freedom in opposition to neoliberal ideology.

Use of the word ‘freedom’ is less prevalent in *The 100*, and this signifies the more claustrophobic sense of enclosure in intractable warfare in the series. The notion of freedom as a political motivator does begin to emerge, however, in the third season, when the disgraced former chancellor of the Ark, Jaha, sets out to find the fabled City of Light, a supposed utopia hidden in the desert. Jaha discovers that the City of Light is not a literal space, but a state of mind entered into by swallowing a computer chip which embeds itself in the brain, providing a sense of blissful well-being. Swallowing the chip connects the mind to Alie, a computer program visualised as a holographic woman, and Alie becomes a pseudo-religious figure for those who are subsequently devoted to her desire to solve humanity’s problems.

The utopian promise of the City of Light soon emerges as illusory, however. Those who ingest the chip begin to lose their memories and personalities, becoming part of a hive mind driven to enforce conversion to Alie’s creed of togetherness. The City of Light signifies anxiety regarding collectively determined identities, and a rejection of the notion that collectivism might represent a utopian counterpoint to the anarchy of individualism. In her opposition to the City of Light, Clarke is reconfigured as an avatar of individualism, valorising this quality by imbuing it with heroism and couching it in the neoliberal language of freedom, as when Clarke states: “[Alie] took away our choice. Human beings have free will. We get to decide how we should live” (“Perverse Instantiation- Part Two”). Unlike the definition of freedom which emerges from the *Carbon Diaries* as being based on social

solidarity and collective resistance to exploitation, Clarke's rhetoric of freedom remains nebulous, defined entirely through opposition to the troublingly unified subjectivity of the City of Light. In its configuring of collectivism as connoting a sinister loss of individuality, the City of Light reflects neoliberal antipathy towards the notion of collectively driven political action. Collectivism is not only rendered as a loss of freedom in the series, however. The next section will indicate the more pervasive conveyance of social solidarity as a keynote of subjectivity in *The 100* in a manner which also undermines neoliberal individualism.

#### BETWEEN COLLECTIVISM AND INDIVIDUALISM

One of the core political consequences of neoliberalism is to render collective notions of identity unthinkable, due to the "insistence that there are only individual solutions to socially produced problems" (Evans and Giroux 53), and the "the gradual desacralization of social life [and] the erosion of grand political narratives" (Gill and Scharff 8). This means that opposition to neoliberalism is frequently identified as residing in the recuperation of collective identities, as in the question which animates Evans and Giroux's analysis: "by what means might social conscience be awakened, and how might its rousing lead to social formations that can . . . successfully challenge systems of subjugation and power dominating society today?" (244). The delineation of the dystopian girl in these texts poses similar questions, in that her identity is articulated as being developed within emerging social formulations produced in opposition to dystopian states. Clarke and Laura both develop a sense of themselves as political actors, motivated by the desire to change the world around them, as part of a collective struggle in which their identity and action is inextricably tied to that of a larger group. In *The 100*, Clarke always acts in what she believes to be the best interests of "her people", those who, like her, hail from the Ark and live in Arkadia.

Although, as shown in the example of the City of Light, Clarke is occasionally reconfigured as an individualist, the notion of identity and subjectivity as inextricably tethered to the wider collective is central to the character and the series. Similarly, although initially conveyed as the prototypical self-absorbed teenager, Laura also develops a sense of social solidarity and political resistance through communal endeavour. This is tempered, however, by her persistent cynicism regarding collectively driven change, which both texts suggest may also produce dystopian political outcomes. In *The Carbon Diaries*, openly expressed communist principles are often dismissed by Laura as palpably ridiculous, so that even when she joins in the collective struggle against the British government, this is not paired with an intellectual acceptance of the viability of communist political ideas. In *The 100*, Clarke's belief that she must represent the interests of "her people" perpetuates dehumanising tribalism in which those not classed as belonging to the in-group are expendable. Through Clarke, we see how a sense of collective identity defined in opposition to other groups all too easily atrophies into virulent nationalism, in which those defined as outsiders are dehumanised, legitimising the enactment of violent power against them.

In *Carbon Diaries 2015*, Laura consistently vacillates between cynicism and hopefulness regarding the potential of collective action for political resistance. Although her band play explicitly political songs, their lyrics are all written by the lead singer Claire, and Laura finds her commitment to radical politics irritating rather than inspiring: "[b]loody Claire. I don't want everything to be political" ("Weds, Feb 11th"). Claire is the first character in the text to challenge Laura's political passivity, and although this galvanises her into action, it also mires her first gestures of resistance in personal pettiness rather than grounding them in any real political conviction. When protests begin "spreading over London" ("Thurs, March 19th"), Laura is more concerned with attracting her crush, and she makes feeble

excuses not to attend. When Claire reports that police prevented witnesses from making recordings, Laura's response is not outrage at these actions, but annoyance at Claire: "[m]an that girls gets to me. I'm so jealous and so mad at her all the same time" ("Tues, April 14th"). The notion of attending a "big anti-capitalism demo" produces a "sinking feeling inside", and Laura protests in her diary: "I don't want to be radical anymore" ("Weds, April 15th"). Given her reluctance to attend protests and her insistent avoidance of politics, the reader might be forgiven for expressing confusion about when exactly Laura ever *was* radical in the first place. Although she eventually attends protests, her scepticism about their effectiveness is consolidated by the punitive response they receive, which leaves her feeling numbly apolitical: "[e]xhausted, can't watch the news any more" ("Mon, Aug 24th").

Despite her scepticism and disinterest in political protest, the end of the first novel also provides an alternative view of communally-driven political action as potentially transformative. Laura's neighbours band together to protect their area from imminent flooding, responding collectively to the crisis in recognition that they will share the consequences. Laura marvels that "[e]verywhere you look there's people zooming about with wheelbarrows, chopping, digging, clearing, slinging sandbags [. . .] and the strange thing is everyone keeps throwing back their heads and laughing" ("Weds, Dec 16th"). The residents also work together to supplant an opportunistic criminal who capitalises on the crisis by establishing an extortionate black market, an ousting is made in recognition that "[t]he Law might not be able to touch you, but we can" ("Thurs, Dec 31st"). Their actions signify hopefulness in the ability of a small-scale community to collaborate towards a mutually beneficial goal, while also indicating a loss of faith in the state's ability to protect citizens from exploitation and the consequences of ecological crisis. Their rejection of the black market trader also produces a symbolic response to what Naomi Klein has termed "disaster

capitalism”. Defining this as “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting marketing opportunities” (6), Klein claims that the mechanisms of disaster capitalism explain how neoliberalism has been able to achieve global prominence. Reading the rejection of the black marketeer as encoding a rejection of neoliberal implementation is countered, however, by the fact that this is presented through Laura’s perspective. She remains deeply ambivalent about the resistant possibility of social solidarity, refraining from endorsing her community’s collective achievements with utopian possibility: “I made it thru- but my family, the angels, college, the future...I don’t know [ . . . ] it’s just one day at a time from now on” (“Thurs, Dec 31st”).

In the second novel, *Carbon Diaries 2017*, the breaking of the Thames barrier leads to the evacuation of London’s elite, producing a new norm of communal living in spaces of previous consumerist excess: “there’s an anarchist collective in the old Harrods depot” (“Mon, Jan 16th”). This is reflected by the fact that Laura now lives in a squatting community, and although this means she is surrounded by communists and the ardent far-left, this only intensifies her political cynicism. When she attends a squat meeting and hears a man discussing his “great hope to build a new future for the workers”, this is met with bafflement by Laura, who “glanced up quickly, expecting it to be a joke, but no-one was laughing. *The workers? Revolution?*” (“Thurs, Feb 2nd”). The impression that communist ideas are patently ridiculous is heightened by the fact that the character who most frequently articulates them in the text does so in comically hesitant speech ridden with ellipses and question marks, conveying Marxist principles as hopelessly impractical, impossible to achieve and disconnected from reality.



As with the previous novel, *Carbon Diaries 2017* culminates with a victorious moment of collectively driven action, but here its implications are far-wider reaching, and openly rather than implicitly political. The worsening conditions of London and the growing oppressiveness of the central state leads to wide-scale political protests and the dismantling of the government. Laura articulates this with vituperative glee: “[t]hose lying, cheating bastards who tried to beat their own people into submission are finished!” (“Tues, Dec 19th”) She experiences the moment in which the Houses of Parliament are stormed as a euphoric moment of utopian potentiality: “[w]e hugged each other tight, shivering like little kids, grinning. I’ve never felt so alive!” (“Mon, Dec 4th”). This final “surge of hope” (“Sun, Dec 31st”) is embattled and incendiary, rooted in Laura’s new conviction, won through experience, in the transformative potential of collective resistance. The last words of the duology are: “[a]ll I want is a straight-up fight with all the crooked, thieving, lying, two-faced, cheating bastards. That’s the only thing that matters to me anymore. Revolution!” (“Sun, Dec 31st”). Her final embrace of a word she has previously mocked signifies her development from political cynicism to avowed commitment to radical opposition to neoliberalism. However, although Laura is galvanised into revolutionary action against the state through an acceptance that change must be collectively driven, her cynicism regarding the viability of a system of life outside capitalism is temporarily deferred rather than entirely effaced: “I don’t know what the future will bring, and I don’t care anyway” (“Sun, Dec 31st”). The text maintains her liminality by refraining from explicating the system of governance which follows the revolution, or from enclosing Laura’s development within the framing of the epilogue which typically ends the YAD trilogy and defines the girl within stable adulthood.

While Laura develops from individualism to collectivism, Clarke’s trajectory in *The 100* series operates in reverse. Beginning her narrative committed to collective action, this

gradually erodes in the face of the seemingly endless cycle of violence experienced once the hundred reach earth, and the hopelessness of achieving a better future this articulates. Collectivism is portrayed as highly dysfunctional, and groups are consistently shown to be incapable of collaborating effectively, instead succumbing to internecine struggles for individual power. While the ending of *Carbon Diaries* valorises the collective struggle for revolution, in *The 100*, collective political action is only ever corrosive and destructive. Whenever a group attempts to improve their conditions it ends in disaster, and political projects which seek a more collaborative and peaceful path are quashed in the face of continual catastrophe. If Laura must grow from individualism to collectivism, then *The 100* suggests that embattled individualism is the only option in a world beyond viable transformation. This inference becomes even more disturbing the third season of the show, first aired in 2016, in which collective identity re-emerges as a utopian political idea, this time revamped as nationalism by the conservative isolationist Pike, who fights his way into power in Arkadia. This plotline occurs alongside the development of the quasi-religious utopian City of Light movement, and the intersection of these plotlines means that the third season of *The 100* suggests that collectives produce either a disempowering loss of individuality, or a nationalist nightmare which dehumanises both its participants and those it construes as others.

Pike emerges as a staunchly militaristic nationalist, using the superior technology possessed by Arkadia to establish dominance over the Grounders. He is uninterested in the nuances of Grounder identity previously articulated in the series, because as far as he is concerned, anyone who is not a member of Arkadia is an enemy. This emergence of nationalist rhetoric occurs in the context of the political change occurring among the Grounders. Having previously battled extensively with Arkadia, the Grounders finally accept them into their alliance. Pike rejects this development as a loss of coherent 'national' identity,

promoting isolationism among his followers and exaggerating differences between Arkadia's culture and that of the Grounders, casting the former as innately superior. Pike's worldview proves to be wildly popular, leading to him winning by a landslide against the moderate incumbent who forged the alliance with the Grounders. The implication of this plotline is that tribalism and jingoism will always find a democratic mandate, outperforming moderate calls for peace and acceptance of diversity.

Pike's outlook coheres with several aspects of neoliberal ideology, particularly the assumption that both democracy and collectivism are dysfunctional and dystopian. Pike's violent and destructive leadership shows social solidarity to be highly vulnerable to an inhumane strain of identity politics, in which a sense of national unity hardens to the detriment of all those who fall outside its remit. Through Pike, *The 100* exhibits concern regarding exclusionary political rhetoric, indicating the vulnerability of democracy to xenophobic imaginaries, particularly in the context of a neoliberal perception of the world as in perpetual crisis. His ideology is able to achieve a popular mandate in the context of the defeated cynicism of Arkadia's residents in the face of interminable violence. The series develops its implied critique of neoliberalism through the suggestion that authoritarian nationalism is able to emerge as a unifying utopian narrative in the context of individualistic survival. Pike's utopian rhetoric, in which he claims adherence to "[o]ne sacred goal: the creation of a self-sustaining, prosperous and safe Arkadia", legitimises the ruthlessness of its consequences, in which those who "[r]esist . . . will be met by force. Fight, and you will be greeted by death" ("Hakeldama"). Although Clarke is distanced from this nationalist project, my analysis in the next section will indicate how her development consolidates rather than challenges the notion that violence is inevitable and society is always, ultimately, dystopian.

## VIOLENCE AND POLITICAL POSSIBILITY

In this section, I consider how *The Carbon Diaries* and *The 100* interact with another essential element of neoliberal subjectivity: “the internalization of violence in ways that render it an integral element of the human condition” (Evans and Giroux 66). The mass-mediation of images of violence and catastrophe in western states engenders a sense of collective disempowerment, defining the world, and social interaction, as unpredictably violent and inalterably dangerous. This is reflected by the delineation of violence in *The 100* as an unavoidable consequence of both social interaction and political action, to which there is no alternative. By contrast, *The Carbon Diaries* portrays the use of violence to achieve political ends as unacceptable, further distancing Laura from the internalisation of neoliberal ideas. Laura maintains her antipathy towards violence throughout the duology, and the text rewards this stance by suggesting that systemic change can be peaceably won. By contrast, Clarke’s commitment to ethical political conduct is consistently suggested to be naive and impossible to maintain, and her inability to escape being inducted into the cycle of political violence appears to affirm that such a hope is beyond possibility.

Laura’s aversion to political violence in *The Carbon Diaries* is expressed through her aversion to ‘the 2’, a radical left group who advocate the use of violent means of opposing the government. ‘Joining the 2’ becomes shorthand in the novels for becoming committed to radical politics, and her antipathy to the group signifies her reluctance to think politically. When her boyfriend Adi joins the group, he justifies his decision in militarised language, criticising Laura for thinking of the conflict between the government and the populace in less combative terms: “‘you can’t deal with reality [. . .] in the end, you’re just scared [. . .] You’re such a baby. War is coming *here*. In the end even you might have to fight.’” (2017, “Fri, Oct 20th”). Laura maintains her opposition to violent methods, indicating that she views this as

futile and unnecessary, and drawing from a real-world example of an anti-neoliberal political movement to support this conviction: “[the 2] are prepared to kill the Prime Minister to bring the Gov down. I mean, the guy’s an idiot, but where are they gonna get by killing him? At least those Zapatistas in Mexico have got a plan, they’re not just threatening to kill people like a bunch of thugs” (2017, “Sun, Nov 12th”). Laura maintains that the intention to cause violence cannot meaningfully impose existent regimes of power without capitulating to its dehumanising ideologies, and this is validated by the text in the narrative denouement. Although members of ‘the 2’ participate in the protests which result in the collapse of the government, this is presented as a success of non-violent protest, mounted in opposition to the bombings which the 2 enact. When Adi attempts to take credit for this success -““You think this Gov would’ve backed down without us?””- Laura opposes the implication that violence was or is a necessary evil: ““In the end, yeah. There were 4 million people on the streets. It was them, not you.”” (“Thurs, Dec 28th”). Here, the political actions of the dystopian girl refute rather than capitulate to the acceptance of violence which Evans and Giroux identify as endemic in the catastrophized neoliberal imaginary.

By contrast, Clarke’s staunch belief that violence is not necessary is expressed in *The 100* as admirable, but ultimately futile. I will focus on two specific plotlines which typify Clarke’s learning to accept the use of political violence: her interactions with Lexa, the leader of the Grounders, and her refusal to accept torture as a method of state-sanctioned violence. Both examples legitimise my reading of *The 100* as a parable of neoconservatism, an ideology which David Harvey claims has emerged from the crucible of neoliberalism. Harvey has analysed how the anarchic individualism engendered by neoliberalism paves the way for conservatism to re-emerge, satisfying the perceived need for a restoration of order through an emphasis on “militarization as an antidote to the chaos of individual interests” (82). *The 100*

enables us to see how neoconservatism “makes the anti-democratic tendencies of neoliberalism explicit through a turn into authoritarian, hierarchical, and even militaristic means of maintaining law and order” (Harvey 195). Although the political implications of neoconservatism are critiqued through the figure of Pike, Clarke’s development suggests the text implicitly accepts its tenets as the only viable ideology during embattled times.

In the twenty-first century United States, Harvey observes that neoconservatism has become expressed through a notion of the nation as “besieged and threatened by enemies from within and without” (82-3). This paranoid world-view became prevalent during the terror wars which followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks, led by the US and the UK. It is also embedded in the imaginary of *The 100*, through the text’s delineation of the social world as a ruthlessly competitive Darwinian battleground. The series articulates violence as an inevitable facet of social action in the context of a future in which pseudo-nations are locked in an eternal warfare, and in which participation in the cycle of violence is the only viable means of achieving safety. In *The Carbon Diaries* the dystopian girl becomes a figure in which the recuperation of utopian possibility outside neoliberalism becomes possible, but in *The 100* she becomes a site of the gradual erosion of this hopefulness, harking back to the cyberpunk of the Reagan era, which was unable to envision any hope for the post-capitalist future.

In the second season of *The 100*, Clarke falls under the tutelage of Lexa, the Commander of the Grounders who has managed to forge an uneasy alliance between twelve tribes. Political cohesion rests solely on Lexa’s wise leadership - “You are the Coalition, Commander” (“Remember Me”)- and it is her political savvy that keeps internecine warfare at bay. Despite her youth, Lexa is a seasoned and experienced political leader, and she mentors Clarke into acceptance of her world view and model of leadership. Lexa’s authority is absolute, and her political vision is pragmatic and conservative, explicitly connected to the

logic of warfare which she articulates as impossible to escape or transcend. She encourages Clarke to accept that emotions are synonymous with weakness, and that they have no place in making the rational decisions necessary for the collective benefit of the people they represent. The implication of Lexa's tutelage is that this is the only feasible model of political leadership in a society which is under constant threat from both internal fragmentation and external enemies.

Lexa's political education of Clarke suggests that if the dystopian girl is to play a meaningful role in public life, she must mould herself into the shape demanded by the culture which has produced her. This implication reiterates the neoliberal insistence that systemic change is impossible, so that change can only be envisioned as operating on the microcosmic level of the individual, typically envisioned as the gradual internalisation of neoliberal ideals by the subject. The supposed impossibility of structural change produces the neoliberal subject as one measured by her capacity for adaptation to external factors which are beyond transformation. Clarke is educated into an acceptance of a brutal and dehumanising worldview, and into an understanding political action as the interminable negotiation of unpredictable, external events beyond apprehension or control. Her development indicates the elision of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, in that as part of Lexa's tutelage she also learns to prioritise the protection of her 'national' group above everything else. In the imaginary of the series, political action is always motivated by the selfish desire to act in the interests of the collective one represents, regardless of its wider impact.

The anti-utopian delineation of the dystopian girl in *The 100* is further suggested by the fact that the series configures her as a figurehead and mouthpiece of patriarchy. Although the series imagines a future in which young women are celebrated for their acumen as political leaders, the endless cycle of warfare over which they preside is devoid not only of

utopian possibility, but feminist principles. If, as Marilyn French has argued, “[t]he only true revolution against patriarchy is one which removes the idea of power from its central position” (444), then in *The 100* this has evidently not occurred. The young women who hold power in this series do so in a manner which accords entirely with patriarchal valuation of violently enacted power: “[i]n a patriarchal world, power is not just the highest but the only value” (French 126). In fact, the importance of power over others as an organising principle of society is imagined as intensifying under Lexa and Clarke’s leadership. This works to suggest that when young women occupy such seats of power, they are only able to maintain their positions by internalising and perpetuating a patriarchal worldview. *The 100* is unusual in its delineation of the dystopian girl as an established political leader rather than someone who rallies against such leadership, yet this articulation maintains the idea that political leadership in its contemporary formulation is itself a position of patriarchal authority. The patriarchal nature of the power Lexa wields is symbolised by the seat of her power, a single phallic skyscraper in an otherwise destroyed cityscape.

Lexa’s mentoring of Clarke culminates when they discover a pivotal meeting between the Grounder clans and Arkadia will be targeted by a missile by a shared enemy, Mount Weather. Although Clarke wishes to evacuate everyone present, Lexa insists that this cannot happen as it will reveal the existence of their spy within Mount Weather. Lexa insists that as leaders they possess greater political value than other citizens and must therefore “slip away” unannounced, saving themselves whilst condemning others to die. This decision marks a grim acceptance of mass death as an unavoidable consequence of war, which the dystopian girl must accept in order to lead: “Sometimes you have to concede a battle to win a war” (“Rubicon”). When Clarke protests on moral grounds, Lexa reminds her of the importance of ignoring emotions when making political decisions: “This is war, Clarke. People die. You



showed true strength today. Don't let emotions stop you now" ("Rubicon"). Clarke submits to Lexa's insistence, and in doing so capitulates to the militarised logic of warfare and violence as necessary and inescapable, the notion that "victory stands on the back of sacrifice" ("Resurrection").

The intersection between personal development and acceptance of violence is reiterated in a parallel storyline, in which Octavia, another of the hundred, is mentored by the Grounder warrior Indra. When Octavia learns of Clarke's decision, her anger is tempered by Indra's insistence that "Lexa's a great leader because she's ruthless". When Octavia's protests, Indra replies, "That's war" ("Bodyguard of Lies"). The mirroring of Octavia's development with Clarke's works to consolidate rather than challenge its messages, heightening the sense of political enclosure within the text. The dystopian girl's coming of age becomes synonymous with the acceptance of violence and the repudiation of emotion, and there is no viable alternative to the logic of Darwinian survivalism and defeated acceptance of the brutality of war. This episode's title, *Rubicon*, suggests that Clarke cannot move back to an earlier state of potentiality: she has now been inalterably moulded into an acceptance that political leadership must be enacted in this mode.

Clarke's mother Abigail, herself a politician, is horrified by Clarke's decision to condemn so many of their people to certain death, insisting that "Their blood is on your hands" ("Rubicon"). When Abigail laments to the elected Chancellor of the Ark, Kane, "how could she do this?" Kane answers: "because she grew up on the Ark. She learned what to do from us" ("Resurrection"). The pervasive acceptance of violence as a means of political control is identified as limiting the possibility of even thinking outside its brutal remit. Clarke "made a choice", but this is presented as one founded in existent ideology which it is

suggested she is unable to supersede. Clarke therefore represents a particularly limited rendering of subjectivity as mired in the repetition of dominant norms.

Although she does begin to reject Lexa's model of leadership, this only heightens her articulation as a limited political subject. She refutes Lexa's insistence that they are elevated above the rest of the populace because of their position as symbolic figures who people can "pour their hopes and dreams into", and the attendant presumption that they have earned this elevation because they are special ("Bodyguard of Lies"). Lexa's idealisation of the role of political leadership, and of herself, works to gloss the brutal acts she commits under her belief that she, and by extension her people, are superior. This means that even in her role as representative of a wider collective, her ideology is rooted in selfish individualism. Clarke counters Lexa's claim with the insistence that she views political leadership as based in nothing more than pragmatism: "I'm just trying to keep us alive" ("Bodyguard of Lies"). Having learned to internalise apathy and defeatism, Clarke has accepted the notion that even as a leader she can only endure reality. In response, Lexa acknowledges that her "harsh" outlook is also "our way of surviving", further consolidating the disbaring of utopian possibility. Although Clarke responds by suggesting that "Maybe there's more to life than surviving", this is articulated not as a desire to move beyond the repressive and destructive political realities over which the girls have come to preside. Instead, it is an invitation to romance, and the kiss between the two characters suggests that romantic love is the only kernel of hope imaginable in the midst of entrenched political chaos.

The mapping of romantic love onto political meaning is a familiar gesture in YADF. The dystopian girl is often educated into her convictions by an eroticised male mentor, and these texts often resolve by suggesting that heterosexual romance offers an alternative from the brutality of political life. *The 100* subverts this pattern by imagining a romance between

two dystopian girls who are already political leaders, so that romance is represented neither as an escape from public responsibility, nor an affirmation of normative heterosexuality.

However, the notion of romance as utopian is soon extinguished when Lexa betrays Clarke, striking a deal with Mount Weather that ensures her own people will be saved and Clarke's will be killed. Her decision is rooted in a strongly nationalistic sense of self, in which others like Clarke may be temporarily collaborated with for the greater benefit of the in-group, but are ultimately discarded. This decision is the final affirmation of Lexa's commitment to both emotionless rationality and the selfish cause of her people: "I made this choice with my head and not my heart. The duty to protect my people comes first" ("Blood Must Have Blood, Part One"). Rather than leading Clarke to a more compassionate mode of political decision-making, the betrayal accelerates her own path towards ruthless self-interest. She subsequently murders the leader of Mount Weather, Lexa's collaborator, and condemns all of its residents, children included, to death, exposing them to radioactive air and saving her own people in the process.

Although the series conveys this decision as horrific, it also implicitly affirms Clarke's insistence that she has no alternative course of action. The leads the second season to end on a note of utter defeat, in which morally sound decision-making is beyond possibility. Clarke tearfully tells her mother that "she tried to be a good guy", and this is met with a cynicism which implies that her enactment of brutality is forgivable because it is normative: "Maybe there are no good guys" ("Blood Must Have Blood, Part Two"). While the series does not celebrate Clarke's actions, it refuses to condemn her, suggesting that her actions are inevitable, and stripping her of meaningful agency as a result. Previously discussed iterations of the dystopian girl have been free to reject the ideologies of their culture and insist upon alternative modes of living and thinking, but no such possibility is available to Clarke. The

series thereby uses the dystopian girl to register the deepening pervasiveness of the notion that violence is inescapable, as well as a turn to neoconservatism in which the selfish interests of the in-group are emphasised as the only significant matter in political life.

In the climactic moments of the *Hunger Games* trilogy, Katniss assassinates the new leader of Panem, Alma Coin, for her willingness to abandon ethical principles in favour of achieving political power. Coin leads the rebellion, ultimately deposing Snow by targeting Capitol children with bombs which appear to have been dropped by the government, turning the population against him. What is perhaps most disturbing about *The 100* is that it envisions how Clarke might *become* Coin rather than oppose her. Both characters enact ruthlessly pragmatic leadership based on military and nationalistic logic, protecting a favoured group united by place of origin in favour of an enemy at war, and legitimising mass-murder in the process. This parallel also suggests that in the genealogy of the dystopian girl from 2005 to the present moment, we can detect a depletion of the conviction that positive political change is possible. Earlier iterations of this figure position her in opposition to the dystopian system as a radically ethical figure, but *The 100* suggests that such a position is no longer possible, indicating that all political actions will eventually lead to violence and brutality, regardless of intention. Clarke signifies a darker turn in the dystopian girl and in the western culture which continually produces her. She ends the second season of *The 100* much like forebears, retreating from the cruelty demanded by public life and unable to bear the decisions she has been forced to make.

The series' evacuation of utopian hope is further consolidated in the following series when Lexa and Clarke are reunited. Clarke again attempts to remodel the political culture of the Grounders, and again, this leads to her becoming inducted into a cycle of violence. The faint provision of hope provided by the rekindling of their romance is crushed when Lexa is

almost immediately murdered in front of Clarke. This received ire within the fandom of the show, who pointed out that Lexa's death reiterated the televisual trope of abruptly ending a lesbian romance through violent death. The series creator and executive producer Jason Rothenburg was forced to write an apologetic open letter in response, in which he acknowledged that the "positive step of inclusion" the relationship between Clarke and Lexa represented was now "something else entirely- the perpetuation of the disturbing 'Bury Your Gays' trope". In attempting to justify the creative decision as "thematic (it's a show about survival)", Rothenburg claimed that in this world, "all relationships start with one question: 'Can you help me survive today?'" This indicates that the show's projection of neoliberal survivalism is also a rejection of the tenets of romance fiction. In her history of the romance novel, Pamela Regis claims the genre contains "'a *definition of society*, always corrupt, that the romance novel will reform'" (12). *The 100* shares this definition of society, but rejects the notion that romance can reform or transcend such corruption. In her analysis of romance in YADF, Beauvais observes the recurring implication that "the increasing erotic tension between the two teenage bodies is the physical manifestation of a political desire to modify the configurations of their dialectical world" (62). This tension is resolved in *The 100* through the imposition of the violence which consumes everything in the series. That this also involves the destruction of the show's only queer relationship indicates that the nihilism which Rothenberg identifies as lying at the core of the series' projected view of the world, and which may only further embed neoconservative values.

*The 100* participates in what Evans and Giroux observe as the media normalisation of violence in neoliberal regimes. In particular, the series reflects the trend for "fetishising hyper-violent young girls [who r]ather than being depicted as gaining stature through a coming-of-age process . . . are now valorized for their ability to produce high body counts and

their dexterity as killing machines in training” (141). The delineation of Lexa and Octavia strongly parallels this trend, as Octavia develops into a brutally efficient warrior, while Lexa’s political power rests entirely on her ability to decimate opponents in physical combat. Clarke occupies a more ambivalent space in this cultural imaginary of the hyper-violent girl. In the third season, her decision to exterminate those living in Mount Weather becomes mythologised, and she is recast as a folk legend, a “symbol” named Wanheda, meaning “Commander of Death.” However, her use of violence is always articulated as pragmatic and regretful, and the label of Wanheda is one imposed upon her, rather than one she embraces. Perhaps most disturbing is the fact that, in contrast to Evans and Giroux’s claim, her role as a ‘killing machine in training’ does not replace ‘gaining stature through a coming-of-age process’: instead, adolescent development is presented as learning to accept murder as inevitable. Each of the dystopian girls in *The 100* learns to accept, embrace, and enact violence, and this is presented as their pathway to mature subjectivity.

An interrelated aspect of Clarke’s development to accept violence as a political necessity is evident in the recurring theme of the acceptability of torture in the show’s second season. This begins when the Ark survivors capture a soldier from Mount Weather, an enemy which seeks to destroy them and which holds many of their people hostage. When Clarke refuses to torture him, she is accused of “weakness”, but she maintains her conviction that “[t]orture doesn’t work” (“Coup de Grace”) and is supported by her mother Abigail. The former leader Kane is adamant, however, that if Abigail wants to replace him as Chancellor then she must “act like one”, implying that political leadership necessitates acceptance of torture as an acceptable means of “getting information” (“Coup de Grace”). The torture debate is intercut with a graphic sequence of Bellamy, one of the Ark survivors, being captured and imprisoned by Mount Weather. In this hi-tech compound, prisoners are beaten,

experimented upon, killed with impunity and kept in cages. The implication of this narrative interlacing is to legitimise Kane's belief that the torturing of the soldier is justified, by indicating that Clarke's belief in ethical treatment of captives is not one shared or respected by their enemy. This is consolidated when Clarke swiftly changes her mind about the efficacy of torture when she discovers Mount Weather's dehumanising treatment of the Ark captives. Enraged, she attempts to murder the captive soldier in retribution. That this does not contradict her earlier rejection of torture as an ineffective means of gathering information is precisely the point. Clarke learns to accept the true value of torture: to punish an enemy through the cathartic enactment of violent power against them, an acceptance further enabled by the fact that her original opposition was pragmatic rather than ethical. The torture debate is staged as a decision between the pragmatic and the punitive, suggesting that even before her experiences with Lexa, Clarke has already lost all hope of enacting any form of empowerment other than that which is held cruelly over others.

## CONCLUSION

Neoliberalism has fostered an acceptance of violence as politically necessary and paved the way for intensifying militarisation and the emergence of neoconservative ideologies. These texts indicate that the dystopian girl sits uneasily within these developments. Both Laura and Clarke express opposition to implicitly or explicitly neoliberal ideas, but the end result of their resistance varies, and *The 100* envisions Clarke's development as a process in which this opposition is gradually eroded. In this sense, Clarke is the quintessential neoliberal subject, someone for whom defiance of brutal social norms becomes an increasingly distant prospect. And yet, the dystopian girls who populate *The 100* indicate a shared desire to protect and improve the lives of those around them. This means

they each represent a sense of self forged in connection with a wider collective, in a manner which implicitly resists the self-interest of neoliberal ideals. Both *The 100* and *The Carbon Diaries* present the dystopian girl as seeking to move beyond individualism, even as the former reiterates neoliberal framings of the world as an inalterably dangerous place in which only resilience and resignation are achievable. The possibility of utopian transformation persists through a commitment to collective ideals, but both texts refrain from imagining better systems of social organisation, or how the girl might participate in them. In this sense, they indicate the pervasiveness of what Mark Fisher names “capitalist realism”, meaning “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it” (*Capitalist* 2).

However, while Clarke epitomises the notion of the dystopian girl reduced to survival and brutality, Laura provides a more hopeful counterpoint. The celebratory tone of the ending of the duology conveys an attendant conviction that the dystopian girl can and must act as a political subject, not as a glamourized symbolic figurehead, but as an anonymous participant in a wider collective struggle. Laura is one of “thousands of protestors surging forward like a giant wave, smashing over massed lines of police” (“Mon, Dec 4<sup>th</sup>”), and she experiences this loss of self as the height of euphoria. Laura develops from a selfish isolationism which the text shows is no longer possible, to a recognition of her responsibility as a subject. Yet this moment also freezes her in a moment of liminality, and protects her revolutionary zeal from more prosaic realities. For Clarke, invested with the responsibility of political leadership from the beginning of *The 100*, utopian ideals are a luxury she cannot afford.

I have identified the dystopian girl as a figure who anticipates hope for a political arrangement outside repressive hegemony, yet who nevertheless rarely achieves this within



the space of her text. Laura is a rare example of a dystopian girl who, in her gradual development way from neoliberal models of subjectivity, embodies their antithesis. In *The Carbon Diaries*, the dystopian girl achieves the status of what Chandler and Reid name “the psychopolitical subject”, that is those who “do not merely live in order to fit in with and adapt to the times [. . . but] resist those conditions, and where successful, overcome them, transforming them in ways that conform with the transformative work their imagination demands of them” (Chandler and Reid 20). If the dystopian girl is often fundamentally ambivalent regarding the possibility of political change, then Laura indicates how this ambivalence might be overcome, through conviction, confidence and collective upheaval.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE LEGACY OF THE DYSTOPIAN GIRL IN *THE SELECTION*, *THE FANDOM* AND *THE POWER*

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will analyse Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016) and Anna Day's *The Fandom* (2018) as two recent texts which remodel the dystopian girl, producing an implicit critique of the political meanings she has generated. Both novels indicate cultural shifts which have occurred in the decade since she first emerged, and which they suggest means she must be remoulded if YADF is to continue to engage critically with the contemporary. The novels focus their critique on two differential but intersecting elements of her delineation: her configuration as a romantic heroine, and the media celebration of her as a figure of violent power. By parodying these elements, these texts subvert the notion of the girl as a reluctant revolutionary who must be coerced or assiduously mentored into action, imagining instead how she might stake a claim for herself in political life outside adherence to patriarchal expectations. Although I have previously indicated how central romance is to the delineation of the dystopian girl, I have yet to analyse a specific example of the sub-genre of YAD romance, which emerged in response to the burgeoning popularity of YADF, and in which the romance plot becomes the most prominent aspect of the text. In order to consider how *The Fandom* criticises YAD romance, I will analyse this text alongside Kiera Cass's *The Selection* trilogy (2012-2014), situating this text as epitomising this sub-genre and the dystopian girl's role within its imaginary.

*The Fandom* and *The Power* both indicate the genre's growing distance from postfeminist pretence, developing the dystopian girl by allowing her to embrace rather than suppress the rage produced by living within systems of power explicitly articulated as patriarchal. They are therefore closely affiliated with the upsurge of feminism which has occurred in the west and which has been dubbed a "fourth wave" in the movement (Munro),

beginning around 2012 and intensified by the election of Donald Trump in 2016. In an article on the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment and assault which spread virally online in October 2017, five days before *The Power* was published in the United States (Burke), Lindy West cited the movement as evidence of her claim that “[f]eminism is the collective manifestation of female anger.” This chapter will resist the simplicity of the suggestion, widely made in discussion of *The Power*<sup>6</sup>, that these novels have ‘predicted’ #MeToo and other concurrent feminist movements, or even that they are directly reflecting the politics of these developments. It is notable, however, that this new surge of feminism has insisted on the efficacy and legitimacy of anger against patriarchy in the same way that the texts develop the girl to channel and hone her rage. Situating both of these novels in the context of feminist thinkers such as Audre Lorde, Sara Ahmed and Prudence Chamberlain, each of whom argue that embracing anger is key to feminist action, I will argue that these texts position themselves as remodelling the dystopian girl in accordance with the recognition that patriarchy persists and pervades in dystopia, and that angry indignation may become the gateway to utopian transformation.

Kim France has claimed that “[w]hile our culture admires the angry young man, who is perceived as heroic and sexy, it can’t find anything but scorn for the angry young woman, who is seen as emasculating and bitter”. The lingering residue of discomfort with unambiguous female rage is evident throughout the delineation of the dystopian girl, as a resistant political figure who most typically learns to suppress, rather than unleash, the anger which initially motivates her participation in the political. Laura’s indignation at the loss of the good life in *The Carbon Diaries* is presented as comic and futile; Freida and Tally’s shared fury at their powerlessness in *Only Ever Yours* and *Uglies* is recirculated back upon themselves as self-harm; and Katniss’s anger at the grotesque inequality of Panem is only

occasionally able to bubble to the surface of the text, weighted down by her grief, trauma, and exhaustion. In *The Fandom*'s remodelling of this figure, anger is not an emotion which must be contained, but the fount of the dystopian girl's heroic prominence and the utopian possibility she embodies and engenders. The latency of the dystopian girl's rage erupts to the surface, as its heroine, Violet, learns to channel her anger at the dystopian system. Embracing anger is envisioned as a consciously enacted development, rather than a temporary explosion of emotion which must ultimately be contained. This indicates how the text's investment in reworking the narrative structure of YADF also revises its political inferences and effects. By contrast, although *The Power* imagines how girls enraged at patriarchal oppression might destroy this system entirely, the queasy hesitancy with which the text registers this enactment of incendiary rage works to suggest that predicating political action on righteous fury may only reify dystopian systems of power.

I argue that the remodelling of the dystopian girl in these texts implicitly registers her as a figure imbued with what Lauren Berlant has termed 'cruel optimism'. Berlant identifies cruel optimism as a response to the growing social and economic precarity of the neoliberal world-system, signifying an increasingly untenable attachment to the hope of achieving the 'good life' of prosperity and comfort. Berlant argues that cruel optimism means that "while people comfort themselves with stories about beating the system or being defeated by it, they "continue the struggle for existence in painful, costly and obsolete forms" (10). The dystopian girl is often invested with contradictory fantasies of achieving the good life and registering the fact that this is no longer achievable within the dystopian system. In this sense, she embodies the impasses of the present political moment, in her vacillation between striving to achieve the projected ideal of how life should best be lived, whilst negotiating an underlying awareness that this fantasy may no longer be attainable. *The Fandom* registers her delineation

as a romantic heroine as a form of cruel optimism, indicating how the dystopian romance places faith in the ‘good life’ of heterosexual marriage as a means of overcoming, and obscuring, dystopian reality. *The Fandom* rejects this narrative pattern to insist that the girl is only able to meaningfully enact social change by resisting the lure of romance, reworking her primary affective affiliations from the enclosure of the romantic couple to the more open spaces of kinship, friendship and citizenship. If *The Fandom* therefore also favours the vision of the dystopian girl as an embattled revolutionary seen in texts like *Divergent*, then *The Power* critiques this modelling of the dystopian girl as another form of cruel optimism. This text suggests that YADF’s investment in projecting the girl as successfully dismantling the dystopian state works to idealise rapidly and violently enacted social and political change, to the detriment of more carefully enacted ideological opposition.

Considering YA fiction in the context of Berlant’s work also allows me to register how YA functions as an “intimate public”. Berlant identifies this as a space which “operates when a market opens up a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people’s particular core interests and desires” (*Female Complaint* 5). In its purported claim to speak for and to contemporary adolescents, and particularly adolescent girls, YA fiction can be identified as a “[c]ommodified [genre] of intimacy” which Berlant argues is always “juxtapolitical” (x). This means that these texts operate in proximity to the political whilst rarely crossing its borders, functioning instead as “as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response . . . as achievement enough” (x). Berlant’s formulation of the intimate public suggests a certain dissonance between the emotional and the political in popular culture which solicit an intimate public. She suggests that the solicitation of emotion circulates the desire to contest injustice and inequality back into the depoliticised realm of the private, ensuring that it does not trouble the political status quo. This separation of the

emotional and the political is tacitly rejected by the dystopian girl, whose socially significant acts are predicated on an emotional response to dystopian power. Yet this emotionality is often mapped onto romantic love, leading the girl towards the stultified utopia of heterosexual monogamy, and away from political expression, or even the passionate kinship which often is the initial font of her affectively driven resistance. Although *The Fandom* maintains the primacy of emotional response to the girl's political actions, reiterating the narrative pattern of personal sacrifice motivated by ardent kinship seen in *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*,<sup>7</sup> this is divorced from romantic union and rechannelled back into the political realm. The novel further underlines the political potency of the dystopian girl's capacity for empathy by showing this to stimulate an explicitly political rage. In this sense, the novel is closely attuned to the notion that "feminism is the continual staging of the collision between personal feeling and political affect" (Chamberlain 81), and in both *The Fandom* and *The Power*, dystopian girls are the site of this continual staging.

Berlant's observation that mass cultural products often sentimentalise public life echoes the work of Marxist cultural critic Fredric Jameson, who claimed that "the ideological function of mass culture [is] a process whereby otherwise dangerous and protopolitical impulses are 'managed' and defused, rechannelled and offered spurious objects" (*Political Unconscious* 287). The scepticism enacted towards the dominant model of the dystopian girl in *The Power* and *The Fandom* suggests that, rather than galvanizing her legion of girl readers into political action, she may also be designed to manage potentially unruly grievances and ambitions, idealising adolescent development into a suitably containable subjectivity. This accords with my own reading of these texts against the grain of the projection of the revolutionary girl as an aspirational figure, as someone who often works to obscure rather than clarify contemporary political predicaments. These textual remodellings of dystopian

girlhood registers how YADF often leaves the underlying ideology of hegemonic power untouched, even as the genre celebrates the girl blasting her way through its structural trappings. Although these texts indicate the dystopian girl in her mainstream configuration as a spurious political object, they also suggest she may be recuperated through a more open engagement with contemporary systems of power. In his critique of mass culture as a repressive apparatus, Jameson reserves a space for utopian possibility latent in the fact that the very act of managing resistant impulses means they must be articulated: “these same impulses -the raw material upon which the process works- are initially awakened within the very text that seeks to still them.” (287). Both Berlant and Jameson argue that the tacitly repressive engagement with political desires in popular culture is, nonetheless, an aperture as well as an enclosure. The dystopian girl is able to reveal aspects of the contemporary even as she conceals others. What is at stake in this chapter, and in these texts, is the legacy of the dystopian girl as a figure resonant with political possibility, and to what degree she functions to reveal or conceal political realities and the possibility of transforming them.

As this thesis has shown, the dystopian girl has frequently been articulated as a figure of ambivalence, indicating a tension between the desire to transform existent political culture and the anxiety that this might not be achievable. Her political uncertainty is produced by a consistent hesitancy to register political problems beyond sub-textual inference, particularly when it comes to the issues of racism and sexism. This means that the girl is consistently unable to articulate explicit opposition to contemporary structures of power and inequality. The recurrent strategy of ambiguity and inference has a silencing effect, leaving the girl unable to articulate resistance to the dystopian power structure outside the spectacular force of reciprocal violence, or else through the private utopia of romantic bliss. Both texts attempt to move beyond this political paralysis, either by imagining how the girl might develop beyond

the interminable liminality of political uncertainty in *The Fandom*, or else by undermining her framing as a utopian figure because of her proximity to political violence, as in *The Power*. In this latter framing, the text capitulates to the neoliberal insistence that transformative utopian change is impossible to achieve, which, as the previous chapter has shown, the dystopian girl is already deployed to articulate. This means that although the text provides a space for the imagining of vengeful action against patriarchal brutality, it does so in a manner which leaves no possibility for this to develop into a utopian remodelling. The *New York Times* reviewer of the novel initially describes feeling “hungry for the victory of these women — two of whom are raped in their first scene — over those who would hurt them,” but notes that this subsides into the difficulty of “bear[ing] the conclusion that the horrors of our times are inevitable and inescapable” (El-Mohtar). The novel’s capitulation to neoliberal anti-utopianism indicates the deeply ingrained nature of certain repressive elements of the dystopian girl’s delineation, even in texts which seek to rework her to channel more directly resistant political meanings.

This suggestion is heightened by the fact that although both texts indicate that the postfeminist myth is no longer tenable, both continue to render race unspeakable. This means they remain complicit in racist structures of power even as they turn against its patriarchal moorings. *The Fandom* positions its heroine as gradually unlearning the notion that romance is the only viable utopia while encouraging her to enact the rage stimulated by rampant social inequality. However, in doing so, it positions her within a white saviour narrative in which she assumes the mantle of leadership over a group of racialised others she presumes to be unable to successfully enact resistance to their own oppression, a presumption the text implicitly validates. Furthermore, her cultivation of rage as political affect is contrasted with the unacceptability of the ‘excessive’ anger against the system of the only explicitly black character in the text. The absence of race is even more insidious in *The Power*, as the novel



often does seek to decentre white perspectives in its envisioning of a global uprising of dystopian girls. However, it does so in a manner which reifies western stereotypes of those outside its borders, while also failing to consider the racial identities of its western, non-white characters beyond superficial description. These texts indicate that while YADF no longer implies that gender is not an important aspect of dystopian power, recognition and confrontation of racism remains beyond the pale. There is a dreadful irony to the fact that texts so closely attuned to the notion that “identifying as a feminist is dependent upon taking . . . anger as the grounds for a critique of the world” (Ahmed 171), nevertheless fail to register their complicity in the cultural unacceptability of non-white and particularly black rage, or even that this concept emerged from the specific concerns and experiences of black feminists. As Audre Lorde has argued in her observation of the persistent refusal of white feminists to accommodate or register black rage, a strategy of silence and wilful ignorance is “merely another way of preserving racial blindness, the power of unaddressed privilege, unbreached, intact.” The remodelled dystopian girls of these texts are more openly ‘feminist’ than her previous iterations, but this remains a white feminism which maintains complicity in white supremacy through pervasive silence and racist narrative tropes. These texts therefore indicate the ongoing difficulty of resisting or reworking fundamental aspects of contemporary political power in dystopian imagining, particularly those pertaining to race.

#### THE DYSTOPIAN ROMANCE AND THE JUXTAPOLITICAL

*The Fandom* is both YADF in its own right and a satire of the dystopian romance which became popular once the genre had become established as commercially successful. Although almost all iterations of the dystopian girl correlate the political with the romantic, the dystopian romance often relegates the political to the narrative backdrop, or else maps the

girl's political awakening onto her romantic life. A common device is to envision the locus of social control as the management of adolescent love lives, as in Ally Condie's *Matched* (2010), in which teens are assigned spouses, and Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* (2011), in which love is considered pathological. To consider how *The Fandom* critiques this permutation, I will first analyse Kiera Cass's *The Selection* trilogy, indicating how this typifies the way in which the centrality of the love plot in the dystopian romance mollifies the girl's political ambitions. In particular, I will register how falling in love is imagined as shedding an intemperate desire for revolution in favour of moderate reform, thereby achieving the good life of depoliticised heterosexual monogamy.

*The Selection* is based around the courtship of the heroine, America, with Prince Maxon, the heir to the throne of Illéa, a state which now occupies the North American continent. Candidates for queen are chosen through a national lottery, 'the Selection', following which those picked vie to be chosen for marriage. America enters the Selection process reluctantly, only doing so because her family situation is becoming desperate, although she couches this in denial: "It wasn't that our situation was so precarious that we were living in fear of survival. We weren't destitute. But we weren't that far off either" (3). This indicates how the Selection process, and the idealisation of romantic love it symbolises, operates as a form of cruel optimism for the 'good life' enacted in the context of deepening economic precarity: "That stupid letter could lift me out of the darkness, and I could pull my family along with me" (5). The fantasy of being selected by the prince is America's only hope of bettering her social situation, and rather than querying or challenging this cruel optimism, the text endorses America's fantasy of social mobility as achievable. Although it soon becomes clear that "[t]his lottery isn't much of a lottery at all" (33), America's success works to maintain the illusion of meritocracy, supporting the idea that, "[a]nybody could be our

next queen. It's kind of hopeful. Makes me think that I could have a happily ever after, too.”

(15). The text typifies how dystopian romances project cruel optimism through the fantasy of a good life envisioned as being achieved through heterosexual marriage. America's name is significant; the text projects her as a symbol of the quintessential American ideals of wealth, celebrity, meritocracy and monogamy, indicating romance as the means by which the dystopian girl is able to gain access to these spoils.

The text's primary concern with romance distances both America and the reader from the rebellion fermenting among the lower classes at the same time as the Selection process. Although the rebels continually attempt to sabotage the Selection, their motivation remains unknown to America, and when Maxon attempts to explain their actions, he continually finds himself unable to do so. He marvels that “[t]he Southerners appear to want us demolished. I don't know why, but I'm guessing some dissatisfaction or another” (159) and concedes that “[i]t seems they won't stop until they get what they want, [but] we haven't the faintest clue what it is” (321). A distinction is eventually made between northern and southern rebels, resting largely on the notion of the northerners as reasonable moderates, and the southerners as both unacceptably radical in their methods and disturbingly communal in their identity. The positioning of the southerners as a thinly veiled analogy for communism is tacitly affirmed by the description of their agenda, which is the closest the text comes to articulating their political goals: ‘I know for a fact that once the Southerners get control, they have no intention of sharing the wealth. When in history has that ever happened? Their plan is to obliterate what Illéa has, take over, make a bunch of promises, and leave everyone in the same place they are now’ (*The One* 40). The narrative distance from the southern rebels legitimises this sceptical definition of their agenda, indicating a wider tendency in the text to endorse the maintenance of the political status quo over radical upheaval. Instead, absolute

monarchy is endorsed as a more stable and less disruptive means of enacting liberal social change. If this seems strange in a text which casts the dystopian girl as the epitome of American ideals, then this is because the romance plot works to imagine how the outspoken America forces cosseted Prince Maxon to adapt his leadership to ensure that it becomes more democratic. Maxon represents hope for representative leadership to persist through an acceptance of social responsibility, as when he “invent[s] an entire support system for the country based on [America’s] stories of being hungry” (*Selection* 277). His kindness and openness to suggestion leads America to gush that, “Maxon Schreave is the epitome of all good things. He is going to be a phenomenal king” (248).

The contrast between the portrayal of Maxon as a perfect ruler and the southern rebels as demonic demagogues works to delegitimise the political resistance of those excluded from wealth and power. The aims of the rebels are wilfully obscured, so that they are defined solely by their antagonism towards the system, and their impatient refusal to allow the ruling class to change this system is projected as condemnable. The textual faith in noblesse oblige is predicated on the idea that the wealthy and privileged are simply unaware of their imbrication in a system of inequality, suggesting that once they are made aware, they will immediately seek to redress an imbalance which advantages them. By offering no alternative approach to effecting political change outside America’s conversations with the Prince, the text suggests that the only acceptable approach for the underprivileged to effect change is to persuade those who hold power to change the system from within, by meekly evidencing their existence and awaiting compassionate rescue. If “[p]olitics require active antagonism” (Berlant *Female Complaint* 11), then *The Selection* provides no space for the legitimate articulation of such antagonism. Casting the southerners as embodying the unruly discontent of the underprivileged and disenfranchised, the text villainises them for attempting to take systemic

change into their own hands, and refuses to provide textual space for their agenda. Here *The Selection* indicates the political scepticism Berlant observes within intimate publics, which work to cast “the political sphere . . . as a field of threat, chaos, degradation, or retraumatization [rather] than a condition of possibility” (*Female Complaint* 11). In *The Selection*, the varying disinterest and contempt with which the southern rebels are discussed bespeaks a wider sense distance from, and discomfort with, the political impulse.

This distance is consolidated by the fact that America’s development leads her away from expressing this impulse, or indeed, any impulse whatsoever. As a consort, she must learn patience and moderation, not only as a wife, but as a political actor. Her desire to change Illéa’s brutally unequal caste system is suggested as evidencing unacceptably immoderate anger, and Maxon chastises her for articulating this desire, outlining his classically liberal approach to social change: ““Did you not pay attention at all to the way I’m doing things? It’s quiet and small. That’s how it has to be for now. You can’t go on television complaining about the way things are run and expect to have my father’s, or anyone’s, support”” (*The Elite* 279). The text validates Maxon’s call for America to silence herself and defer political decisions to his superior judgment. When he laughs, “Lord knows what would happen to this country with you at the helm,” America laughs along with him, agreeing, “he was right. I’d probably ruin it.” (*The Elite* 294). His chastising leads America to feel ashamed of herself, accepting that rather than trying ““to change the entire country”” she must ““stop questioning every decision”” (*The Elite* 316). She ultimately matures into a supportive and secondary role appropriate for her position, and her patience, like Griselda’s, is ultimately rewarded, when Maxon decides not only to marry her, but also to end the caste system as a token of his affection for her. This is a model of political change which fails to provide anything meaningful or useful for its readers, other than to suggest that blind faith in those who hold

power, in this case rich and explicitly white men ruling over a patriarchal system, will prove fruitful for those willing to suspend impatience and outrage, and perhaps even less edifyingly, that heterosexual girls must accept the greater wisdom of their male partners. Political change is effected through gentle feminine persuasion and interpersonal influence, and America is rewarded for learning to suppress and dispel her anger at injustice, and to await appropriately male intervention in political change: ““Since the day you called me into the hallway and told me about being hungry. I’ve been working on this. It was one of the reasons I got so upset after you did your presentation; I had a quieter way of reaching the exact same goal.” (*The One* 313).

The conservatism of this message is most overt when, in a stark inversion of the Katniss model, America gives a televised message encouraging the populace to arm themselves *against* the rebellion, in favour of the existing power structure: ““Fight. The rebels are bullies. They’re trying to scare you into doing what they want. And what if you do? What kind of future do you think they’ll offer you?”” (*The One* 69). Her political rage is redirected from structurally embedded inequality to those who seek to act upon their own anger at the system: ““I was ready to attack the rebels myself. I’d had enough. They’d kept us all in terror, victimized out families”” (69). This speech is praised by other characters in the text as ““empowering”” because it encouraged citizens to arm themselves in anticipation of hostile intruders: ““[n]o matter the caste, everyone seems to have found some way to arm themselves, just in case”” (107). America is emotional at the idea: ““I wanted to cry. For maybe the first time in all of the Selection, I’d done something right”” (107). Here, ‘doing something right’ is synonymous with advocating violence in the rhetoric of self-defence. America’s speech reveals that, contrary to its condemnation of the rebel uprising, the text endorses violence so long as it is deployed to protect the existing power structure. It predicates the enactment of

violence on conservative paranoia, sentimentalising the home ownership of weapons as the epitome of individual empowerment. This suggests that, rather than functioning as an aversion of the political, the love plot functions to redirect the political instincts of the girl into the conservatism which informs both her world-view and her self-image. This is particularly troubling given that, as Nathan Wuertenberg has argued, the “right to bear arms” originated in “the right of white men to exercise authority over black men and women by violent means if necessary, and their right to a ‘well regulated Militia’ was the right to do so in large groups.” Here we see how the dystopian romantic heroine develops into complicity in white supremacy, both in her distance from barbaric hordes of underprivileged rebels, and in her advocacy of the right to bear arms against them. The deployment of this dystopian girl’s political development to advocate the arming of citizens to protect themselves from unknowable and unacceptably furious hordes of others indicates her imbrication in white supremacist political fantasies, in which “apocalyptic xenophobia, anti-Semitic conspiracies [and] racist fear-mongering” abide (Ian Allen).

America’s name indicates that her development into an acceptably moderate world view of slow-moving, institutionally supervised political change bears wider resonance. This it is implied, is the ‘American’ way, the direction the country should be moving towards to evade the dystopian threat of social chaos. *The Selection* trilogy allows us to see how the dystopian romance participates in the tradition of juxtopolitical sentimentality via its endorsement of “compassionate liberalism” (*Female Complaint* 6), in which the girl’s participation in “romantic conventions of individual historical acts of compassion . . . imagine a nonhierarchical social world that is postracist and ‘at heart’ democratic because good intentions flourish in it” (6), while also indicating that this fiction belies the unacceptably of political resistance from those outside normative whiteness. America indicates how the

dystopian girl may function as a locus of containment as much as she registers a desire for radical change. The romance plot of the *Selection* trilogy supervises America's development from uncontainable political rage to moderated calm and acceptance of both male superiority and the political status quo. This allows her to win the reward of financial and marital stability, and with it to achieve the fantasy of the good life which Berlant argues works to ensure that individuals navigating precarity will not challenge the structural foundations of economic and social instability.

#### *THE FANDOM AND THE LEGITIMACY OF POLITICAL RAGE*

In the dystopian romance, the desire to escape into the romantic fantasy of the good life renders the dystopian girl, and the text itself, increasingly distant from the political impulse. It is this narrative patterning, and its attendant effects, which Anna Day's *The Fandom* satirises, openly positioning itself as a metatextual commentary on contemporary YADF and the mainstream modelling of the dystopian girl. The text parodies the dystopian romance as a depoliticised fantasy, and identifies the dystopian girl as an ideologically conservative figure whose beauty and heterosexuality are preconditions of her public visibility. The novel insists upon clarifying the political values this girl embodies, demanding that she plays a more substantive role in political life than is typically envisioned when her primary textual value is as a romantic lead. The heroines of dystopian romances typically learn to curtail their anger, but the protagonist of *The Fandom*, Violet, learns to kindle her anger as the basis of political action, and the text encourages her to embrace her rage as appropriate, instructive and imbued with utopian possibility. The novel offers an alternative pattern of development to that offered by the dystopian romance, suggesting that for girls to think and act politically, they must reject the repressive notion that they must moderate their



emotional response to inequality. Rather than retreating from public life into the safety and comfort of romantic validation, Violet insists upon the primacy of the political to her sense of self, and the propulsive power of her rage.

Violet begins the novel as a passionate fan of the text-within-the-text ‘The Gallows Dance’, projected as the epitome of hyper-commercialised “‘dystopian chick lit’” (128). In this novel, society is divided between the lower caste, named Imps, and the privileged elite, called Gems. The protagonist, Rose, is an adolescent Imp who is recruited by rebels when they need an attractive girl to seduce a Gem prince, Willow. Rose falls in love with him, however, and is caught and executed by the state. Public outrage leads to the overthrow of the government, because, as in *The Selection*, this awakens the ruling class to the injustice of their privilege and power, and the Gems join the Imps in dismantling the system. Violet idolises Rose, and this worship is central to her sense of self despite the fact that her adoration is frequently belittled, as when her father mocks her for enjoying “‘that dystopian drivel’” (375). Violet visits Comic-Con to meet the cast of the film adaptation of the novel, and through a plot conceit is magically transported into the world of the story, where her presence leads to Rose’s premature death. Violet learns that the only way to escape back into the real world is to play-act as her hero and fulfil the narrative established by ‘the canon’. Yet her dive into the narrative of the story also becomes an act of literary criticism, as her rejection of the romance plot leads her to resist its disempowering effects, as she carves herself as a “‘new protagonist’” (363).

Rose was selected by the rebels to participate in the rebellion because they needed “‘a beautiful Imp girl [and] recognized her irresistible mix of fragility and courage’” (41). This passive involvement adheres to the typical rendering of the dystopian girl as someone coerced into assuming the mantle of political significance and whose ambivalent disinterest in the

political results in her retreat back into the private at the end of her text. It is “*Rose’s death* [which] *sparked a revolution*” (9), as opposed to her actions, and her political significance lies in her value as a symbol of “[a] love so strong and pure it transcended the Imp-Gem divide, and eventually reunited mankind as one.” (109). Once she begins play-acting as Rose, Violet rejects this passivity, insistently carving a new model of personal and political development. At first, Violet attempts to embody the mainstream pose of dystopian girlhood, telling herself, “*I am Rose. I am strong and fearless.*” (148) and resolving to have ““balls of steel [. . .] Like Katniss, like Tris, like Rose”” (290). This means she initially defines the dystopian girl as an aspirational image of strength and power she longs to inhabit, and she is initially successful, because “pretending to be confident and sexy makes me feel confident and sexy [. . .] It feels liberating” (151). Here the ‘liberation’ of the dystopian girl is understood as a kind of postfeminist sexiness, a pose of availability in which personal confidence is rooted in physical appeal. Rather than leaving Violet’s development here, however, the narrative indicates that this produces cognitive dissonance, as she struggles to continually inhabit the pose of dystopian girlhood, recognising the impossibility of internalising this predominantly visual projection of strength: “I . . . try to make my body look lean and sexy, but the nerves flicker in my stomach and I struggle to keep my limbs from fidgeting” (171). The text eventually parodies the superficial projection of the girl as an avatar of postfeminist self-confidence by indicating how this is accompanied by a lack of political conviction.

Before entering the story, Violet is particularly invested in Rose’s tragic romance with Willow, and the textual positioning of her as a YADF fangirl works to suggest that romance is the predominant concern of the genre’s readers: ““Surely it’s utopian . . . if Willow’s there [. . .] Gale . . . Four . . . they’re all utopias in my mind”” (19). This description reflects Radway’s observation that “the romance creates its utopia by fantasizing about a new kind of male-

female relationship where a man cares for a woman as she cares for him” (128), while also tacitly subverting this projection by indicating that all this utopia is able to offer its heroine is death. Once in this story, Violet finds herself unable to perform Rose’s infatuation with Willow, as she finds herself angered by his careless privileges: “I know I should stay on script . . . but I feel this anger welling up inside me like something dark and evil, and I can’t seem to stop it pushing up my gullet and forcing out my own words” (173). In *The Selection*, America’s voicing of her anger at Maxon’s spoiled existence results in her being scolded and chastened, paving the way for the path to development, romance and the privatised utopia of the good life. Violet, however, learns to embrace rather than suppress her rage, and it accordingly blooms to the detriment of any romantic sentiment: “I feel anger inflate my entire body, making me twenty, thirty, forty feet tall. I don’t want to tell him I love him, I want to throttle him” (234). This leads to her rejection of the love plot altogether, as well as the notion that this might represent political renewal: “I thought it was romantic, the way Willow gave up Gem intel so he could be with Rose. Now I just think it was a bit pathetic” (269). Violet’s perception of her prince as a cosseted coward intensifies rather than dissipates, and the novel punctures the absurdity of romanticising the ruling class by claiming they are simply unaware of the inequality over which they preside.

The generic confusion of the dystopian romance produces an identity crisis, as Violet struggles to navigate the conflict between her desire to fulfil the idealised model of the dystopian girl as a romantic heroine and her growing rage at the inequality of the dystopian setting: “I feel like a Russian doll. Layers of different Violets reducing in size”, [including] Violet the Imp, repressed, assaulted and full of rage. I’m not sure who I am anymore” (299). This crisis is ultimately resolved when Violet chooses to accept and embody this persona, embracing anger as the basis for political action while also expressing a preference for

dystopian narratives over traditional romance plots. She cultivates a sense of self as a “singular Russian doll forged from anger and righteousness, a doll which belongs solely to the Imps. Its lacquered shell grows hard and strong, encasing me with a sense of purpose” (331). This purpose is explicitly political, a determination to challenge injustice through the collective dismantling of a corrupt political structure. Although not explicitly connected to a critique of patriarchal misogyny, this development of the dystopian girl in opposition to “the canon” of the Gallows Dance plotline coheres with contemporary feminist notions of anger as an emotion which is “mediated rather than immediate” (Ahmed 171), and a “response to . . . injustice; a vision of the future; and a translation of pain into knowledge” (Ahmed 175). Violet’s rage begins with the interpersonal, through her interactions with Willow, but “moves outwards [and] begin[s] to circulate with a wider, and public world” (Chamberlain 104), becoming the basis of radical public action. This means Violet is positioned as transforming the canonical representation of dystopian girlhood, by embracing her emotional responses to injustice rather than, as America does, correcting herself until she is suitably stultified, able only to express anger against the underprivileged from which she initially came. Violet’s embrace of rage leads her to remodel her story from romantic death to refusal to participate in the tragic love plot any further, the feminist resonances of which are heightened when her best friend, Alice, steps in to recite, and rewrite, Willow’s lines in Rose’s climactic death scene. The girls’ revision of the canon works to reframe the love plot as being “about a greater love than the love between two people” (376), becoming the love between female peers, but also the “the love of my people” (376) whom Violet seeks to represent.

*The Fandom* seeks to awaken the dormant political desire of the dystopian girl, lulled into slumber by romantic lullabies. If “the romance is an account of a woman’s journey to female personhood as *that particular psychic configuration is constructed and realized within*

*patriarchal culture*” (Radway 138), then *The Fandom* rejects this configuration and with it, patriarchal ideology. Although the plot culminates with “the heroine successfully establish[ing] . . . the now-familiar female self, the self-in-relation” (Radway 139) as in romance tradition, this self-in relation is not “the self-in-relation demanded by patriarchal parenting arrangements” (147). Instead, it is connected to female peers and the wider social collective, who form a firmer base of support than the text suggests can be offered by heterosexual unions under delimited patriarchal terms. The novel expresses a longing for a less passive modelling of the dystopian girl, disentangled from self-definition via romantic attachment, and for a recognition of girls more generally as valid political subjects.

In its embrace of Violet’s transformative rage, however, the novel remains complicit in wider pattern in YADF, in which the political prominence of the invariably white or ethnically ambiguous girl is enacted at the expense of the marginality of characters and communities of colour. The forcefulness of Violet’s desire to remodel the dystopian society is rooted in her position as an outsider in the world of the story. This is suggested as meaning she is less willing to accept the injustice with which Imps are treated than those who have grown up within this system and internalised its norms: “I feel like that first frog. Like I’ve been shoved into a pan of boiling water and my arse is on fire. But the other Imps, they’re like the second frog. They’ve sat in that pan for so long, they’ve grown used to the heat” (235). Underlying Violet’s political awakening is a presumption of her centrality in a fight against injustice levelled against the Imps, a disadvantaged group she presumes she can better represent politically than they can themselves. This presumption is not moderated by the fact she is not herself an Imp; in fact, she believes that existing outside the system of power makes her better able to resist it. The text implies that the Imps are passively complicit in their own poor treatment, as when Violet expresses frustration with their acceptance of ill-treatment:

“You get called an ape, carry on as always. You get sexually assaulted, maybe even shot by a guard – just another day in *The Gallows Dance*” (235). The consistent disparagement of Imps as ‘apes’ and ‘monkeys’ invites a reading of Gem prejudice as a thinly veiled analogy for anti-black racism, but this analogy positions black people as passive dupes incapable of resisting white supremacy, in need of a valorous white girl to rescue them from their own passivity, because she is able to better discern what is politically necessary.

This configures the political as a space in which white girls must act as the saviour of racialised others, delineated as too docile to fight against their own oppression. Implicit in the text’s call to embrace anger is a presumption of white centrality which remains complicit in the marginalisation of people of colour. *The Fandom* aptly deconstructs the absurdity of the dystopian romance as a model of political renewal, but fails to register its own complicity in a more insidious, and fundamental, dynamic of the genre, in which the white dystopian girl is placed in the centre of an oppressive system and lauded as the saviour of the generic and racialised masses she claims to represent. The fight is for “‘Imp emancipation” (98), but it is implied that the white dystopian girl is better qualified to lead the charge than those for whom the experience of oppression is not a story to be consumed, or a role to be played, but an ongoing, lived reality. Furthermore, Violet experiences this racialised abuse first hand, described as a “‘good little monkey”” (372) when she is docile and a “[d]ead *ape* walking” (380) when she is not. This works to place the white dystopian girl at the centre of experiences of racial abuse, so that she is both a white saviour and an analogised victim of racism against a group whose identity she has appropriated.

The racial inferences of the novel’s rendering of the political become even more striking when Violet’s characterisation is considered alongside that of Thorn, the leader of the Imp rebellion. Thorn is the only explicitly black character in the text, with “skin the colour

and gloss of coffee beans” (92), and he is also uncomplicatedly portrayed as a “brutal psycho” (258). The racialised elements of this brutality is suggested when he threatens Violet’s brother with a knife, and she describes him as “a peach about to be sliced” (102), registering his whiteness as vulnerable in the moment of his proximity to Thorn’s violent blackness. Thorn advocates an openly murderous approach to the revolution, aspiring to hang criminal Gems in retribution of the public execution of Imps. Violet views Thorn’s murderous ideology as unacceptably inhumane, and condemns it for being predicated on hatred and an intemperate rage: “Thorn’s hate . . . for the Gems [. . .] started as something beautiful . . . and morphed into something ugly. A black, jagged mess of hate” (338). Thorn ultimately dies in a fire, a symbol of his overpowering anger, and this fate provides a stark contrast to the novel’s legitimisation of Violet’s anger as a valid basis for political action.

In its remodelling of YADF, *The Fandom* seeks to validate rage as the basis of political action, but only for its young white heroine. Black rage remains too threatening to be left unpunished, even in narratives which attempt to render it as legitimate for more normative, and less threatening, subjects. This reflects the claim made by Green-Barteet and Gilbert-Hickey that YAD narratives “demonstrate and reify the agency of young white women at the expense of young men of color, who are depicted as frightening others whose bodies and lives must be controlled” (19). Thorn instigates and leads the Imp rebellion, but Violet believes herself to be better placed to assume this mantle, and the text suggests she is right, rewarding her for her anger while annihilating Thorn for his. Violet is able to pilot into the social movement to bring down the apartheid of Imp and Gems and ensure its success, while the black man who began this movement must burn in fire for his inability to suppress a rage only Violet is able to legitimately express. *The Fandom*’s reworking of the dystopian girl remodels the romance plot and tacitly invokes feminist ideas, while leaving the racial politics

of YADF untouched. The failures and silences of this intervention indicate the ongoing pervasiveness of racism and white supremacy, which are proving to be far more difficult to challenge than the genre's waning investment in postfeminism.

#### DYSTOPIAN GIRL POWER

While *The Fandom* is engaged in overt intertextual dialogue with YADF, *The Power* has been widely interpreted as being in dialogue with Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), not least because Alderman wrote the novel whilst paired with Atwood as part of the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Initiative (Frisby). Both *The Power* and the television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* came into public prominence in 2017, and both were seen as being in dialogue with a new upsurge in feminist affect evident in the January Women's March on Washington and the emergence of the #MeToo movement. *The Power* was lauded as "one of those essential feminist works that . . . enrages and encourages" (Charles "The Power"), but critics have also observed that Alderman's text reflects neither the utopian pacifism of the feminist utopian tradition, nor the inescapable patriarchal oppression of Atwood's dystopia. Instead, Alderman imagines a violent upheaval of global governance led by the incendiary might of adolescent girls which subsequently produces a brutal dystopian matriarchy. That critics have failed to engage with the novel as being in dialogue with the dystopian girl is, in part, because of the cultural capital of the novel, awarded the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction, and the contrasting lack of critical esteem afforded to YADF. This is also attributable to the text's narrative format and attendant effects. The complicity of the dystopian girl in postfeminism is averted through Alderman's imagining of an emphatically collective uprising against endemic, systemic misogyny, and individualism is countered through the narrative structure, in which the perspectives of two adolescent girls are



interwoven with a male journalist and an adult female politician, so that no one character has claim to narrative authority. Alderman previously wrote over 200,000 words of a first draft of the novel from the perspective of Roxy, the character who is closest to the mainstream configuration of the dystopian girl as a violent warrior (Armitstead). Alderman eventually rejected this narrative structure in favour of her more complex nested narrative structure, and her text indicates a tacit rejection of the dystopian girl figure, even as it also produces political meanings which align with her imbrication in neoliberal anti-utopianism.

The political violence of Alderman's text has struck many critics as surprising in the context of the feminist utopian tradition. Elaine Showalter described the novel as "a major innovation in the overlapping genres of feminist dystopia/utopia, science fiction, and speculative fiction" because usually "women-authored stories have been nonviolent and visionary". This violence, and according lack of utopian vision, becomes more legible when the text is considered in dialogue with the more recent emergence of YADF. The dystopian girl is almost always a violent figure, and as my analysis of *The 100* in the previous chapter shows, her enactment of this violence often registers a defeated internalisation of dystopian ideology, producing a sense of political exhaustion. At first, violence in *The Power* seems to operate quite differently, suggesting, as in *The Fandom*, the validity of rage against abuse and oppression. The contextualisation of this violence as a response to rape and sexual assault indicates how the novel subverts the postfeminism embedded in the mainstream dystopian girl, explicating the global pervasiveness of patriarchal violence as being impressed upon adolescent girls with particular cruelty and force. In this sense, the novel recasts the dystopian girl as a feminist figure, not in the third-wave or postfeminist sense of the girl as a glamorous symbol of entrepreneurial self-making, but in the modelling of feminism as the articulation of female rage. Yet in doing so, the novel also indicates how the expression of

rage as violence leads to the reiteration of patriarchal brutality, so that the Electric Girls, like Clarke, become replicas of their oppressors. This means that the novel engages with contemporary feminisms in a complex and contradictory way, both endorsing the idealisation of teenage girls as “strong as fuck” (329) while also suggesting that lionising physical strength through the celebration of violence is itself a capitulation to patriarchal ideology.

Much YADF endorses violent revolution as the triumphant overthrow of the ruling class by teeming hordes of the disadvantaged, and this often serves as the exciting climax of the narrative, the moment when the dystopian state is finally, violently dismantled. It is much rarer to find YADF which considers what follows this moment of insurrection, however, and this narrative absence means the genre frequently defers from resolving the tension between its condemnation of state-sanctioned cruelty, and the inevitably violent means by which this is overturned. When the contradiction between the girl’s ethical opposition to systemic violence and the seeming necessity of enacting violence against those who hold power is resolved, it is through the suggestion that violence is an inevitable norm of political life. This leads the girl to internalise this norm in order to continue her participation in the political, as in *The 100*, or more frequently to retreat from it entirely into desirable obscurity, as in *Uglies* and *The Hunger Games*. *The Power* provides no such possibility of retreat. In its evocation of patriarchal violence as an ongoing, systemised ideology of global power structures, the novel suggests that the only solution is for girls to confront patriarchal oppression, violently, mercilessly, and collectively. Yet the text also evidences how the girl continues to function culturally as the site of contradictory political desires, even and especially for feminism. *The Power* is both a paean to the collective power of young women, and an expression of anxiety regarding the political consequences of their empowerment. In particular, the novel registers discomfort with the dynamic which the dystopian girl so often embodies: resisting hegemony

through the assertion of violence. Unlike most YADF, the revolution here is only the beginning of the story. Rather than absenting the girl from the consequences of violent upheaval, the novel shows how such actions ultimately lead to the reiteration of oppressive structures of power. Although it's explication of patriarchy means the text bears no collusion with the postfeminist pretence that gender inequality no longer exists, it also means that the girls ultimately reify a patriarchal modelling of power as the imposition of violence. This means that although *The Power* provides a corrective to the dystopian girl as an avatar of the neoliberal postfeminist masquerade, it does so in a manner which reiterates her attendant pattern of development, as the Electric Girls internalise the neoliberal notion of the world as inalterably bleak and violent.

By imagining how a new global order established by young women repeats the brutality of patriarchy, the text draws attention to the absence of feminist principles or ideas embedded in the mainstream configuration of the dystopian girl as a violent revolutionary. The postfeminism I observe as endemic to the popular YADF trilogies is both effaced and transmogrified. Patriarchy is shown to exist as a globalised system of brutal oppression, yet the girls who rise against it are seemingly unable to draw upon feminist critique of this system, and thereby avoid repeating its injustices; the postfeminism manifest in the YA dystopian state here becomes an absence of feminism or feminists. The political effects of this absence are catastrophic. Girls newly imbued with incredible physical power proceed to rape, torture and murder those classed as the other half of the patriarchal gender binary. This dark inversion of patriarchal brutality implicitly indicates the ongoing necessity of feminism as an intellectual and ethical counterpoint to patriarchal ideology, one which Alderman suggests is troublingly absent in contemporary figurations of the dystopian girl as a hardened warrior railing against the oppressive state. If the dystopian girl is to destroy all that she sees before

her, then Alderman's text implies that feminism must step into the intellectual vacuum created in the wake of her fury, or else patriarchy will, as always, reassert itself even through the exertion of collective female power.

Anger wedded to violence, *The Power* suggests, is not enough to end patriarchy; it must, as Lorde advocates, be “[f]ocused with precision [to] become a powerful source of energy, serving progress and change.” To appropriate Ahmed's use of Lorde's notion of anger, *The Power* imagines the dystopian girl as “shudder[ing] into new ways of being”, her rage “enabling [her] to inhabit a different kind of skin, even if that skin remains marked or scarred by that which we are against” (173). Yet the text also suggests that this renewal might mutate into transmogrification if not wedded to the feminist call for pacifism and ethical conduct, or else prejudice, injustice and violence will continue to be enacted and perpetuated. By expressing suspicion towards the idealisation of girls as avatars of revolution, and subverting glamorized images of girl power by indicating their proximity to violence, *The Power* indicates the dystopian girl as a figure resonant with cynicism and the exhaustion of the political, subverting the projection of her within the genre of YADF as a utopian figure signifying political renewal. The novel suggests that if the girl hero represents the legitimization of political violence, then she is an anti-utopian figure who cannot meaningfully oppose patriarchal values. It suggests that power is a force which can only ever oppress, regardless of the gender of those who capitulate to its logic. This means *The Power* mounts a critique of the popular image of the dystopian girl as an armed iconoclast, questioning the underlying values she may be configured to represent, in particular, western neoliberalism and its complicity in corporate militarism.

In the main plot of the novel, teenage girls uncover the ‘skein’, a hitherto unnoticed organ in their forearms which allows them to emit a deadly electric charge. Girls across the

world rise up and assume political power by violently crushing misogynistic regimes, ultimately using their newfound abilities to rape, torture and kill men in retribution for millennia of misogyny. The novel is projected as being written thousands of years after the events of the plot, told by Neil, a member of “The Men Writers Association” (ix), who cringingly sends Naomi Alderman his manuscript. Neil and Naomi live in the society the girls have created, in which the patriarchal power dynamic between men and women has been reversed. Neil’s manuscript speculates that patriarchy, now smashed entirely with no historical record of its existence, may once have existed, but Naomi pokes fun at his “saucy” inclusion of “male soldiers, male police officers and ‘boy crime gangs’”, suggesting that this “world run by men” would “[s]urely [be] a kinder, more caring and -dare I say it?- more sexy world than the one we live in” (x). Here the novel satirises the projection of the dystopian girl as an ethical driven avatar of utopian renewal, suggesting that her postfeminist sexiness and essentialised femininity means she functions primarily as titillation, leaving the gender binary established by patriarchy untouched and even consolidated. As previously discussed, the delineation of dystopian girls like Tris in *Divergent* as learning to embrace eyeliner while embodying the feminine virtue of abnegation indicates the complicity of the dystopian girl in postfeminist ideas, and *The Power* establishes itself as seeking to move beyond the emptiness of an empowerment articulated primarily through personal expression and complicity in patriarchal notions of beauty and sexuality.

The text opens with a Biblical quote, in which Israel demands a king regardless of the warning that he will only oppress them. Hegemony is not imposed upon the people of Israel against their will, but is requested because this society cannot conceive a collective identity outside hierarchical power and the imposition of violence: “[g]ive us a King to guide us and lead us into battle” (vii). By opening the novel in this way, Alderman invites a reading of the

narrative as indicating that failing to think beyond patriarchal norms and ideals dooms those who oppose them to repeat their inequities. The uprising of the girls against gendered violence leads them only to reiterate it against the now physically weaker men, leading to the suggestion that violence is a grim inevitability of human coexistence so long as some people are able to wield power over others: “[w]elcome to the human race [. . .] They still wanted a king” (320). This theme is most clearly articulated in the figure of Allie, a mixed-race girl abused by her religious step-father, who discovers that her command of the skein is unusually far-reaching. Allie is able to manipulate the electric currents of others’ hearts and brains, and becomes a cult religious figure as a result, rebranding herself as Mother Eve and developing a legion of young female acolytes. As Eve, Allie decides that patriarchy is beyond redemption and must be eradicated, and she uses the nuclear weapons accumulated within patriarchal regimes to wipe out most of humanity, rebuilding society with women and girls now positioned as leaders. Allie’s matriarchy is not the antithesis of patriarchal values, but its inversion, leaving a binary system of gender and its attendant power imbalances intact. The cruel optimism of the dystopian girl’s attachment to patriarchy via postfeminist posturing and romantic entanglement is absent in the text, but this gives way to the nihilistic alternative the girl so often shadows, cruel pessimism, in which the system is articulated as beyond escape, recirculating her back into the disempowering logics of neoliberal enclosure.

The skein emerges first among fifteen year olds who become known as “the Electric Girls” (22), and the sequence in which the power awakens among them all involve responses to male violence and sexual dominance. As the power spreads, revolutions occur in places where the text suggests women are most overtly oppressed: India, Saudi Arabia and Moldova. The principles underlying these revolutions are openly vengeful: a woman in a march in Delhi crows, ““they are the ones who should not walk out of their houses alone at night. They are

the ones who should be afraid” (134). The novel registers gender violence as a global experience, while also indicating the variant ways in which this is expressed: overtly in misogynistic non-western regimes, and covertly in the liberal west. The fracturing of the narrative across various perspectives in these settings works as a corrective to the centrality of the white, western dystopian girl as a model of normative girlhood. In her description of the fourth wave which she posits as emerging around 2013, Ealasaid Munro states that “one of the key issues for contemporary feminism is intersectionality – the idea that different axes of oppression intersect, producing complex and often contradictory results”. In this sense, the narrative scope and structure of *The Power* engages with contemporary feminisms which seek to emphasise the differential ways in which patriarchy is imposed upon the bodies and psyches of women and girls in varying social and national contexts.

The Electric Girls have been moulded by the cruelty of a global system of patriarchal power, and they sit between the desire for vengeance and the possibility of transmogrifying into the shadowy replicas of their oppressors. Knowledge of their power accumulates through social networking, passed secretly and digitally amongst girls who eventually realise that they can also awaken this power in older women. Here, the novel engages with the notion that the internet has produced a new wave of feminist activity, and that this has been led by younger women. Munro notes that “[m]any commentators argue that the internet itself has enabled a shift from ‘third-wave’ to ‘fourth-wave’ feminism [as] the internet has created a ‘call-out’ culture, in which sexism or misogyny can be ‘called out’ and challenged”. The dynamic of girls teaching women also reverses the traditional didactic dynamic, and indicates the political potential of youth-orientated feminism and inter-generational dialogue. It also rejects the individualistic framing of the dystopian girl, who is usually positioned in opposition to her elders, and especially older women, as will be discussed momentarily. The text suggests that

girls may not only empower each other, but also provide an example to older women, as they are less invested in concealing their power, having not yet fully internalised patriarchal ideology. In a discussion of the novel, Alderman states the ability of girls to awaken knowledge of this power in older women, “has been very central to me. We should have a certain humility in the face of the righteous anger of younger women who look at the world they grew up in and say, “No, we’re not going to accept that” (La Ferla). The dynamic of young women educating and empowering older women into ‘righteous anger’ rejects the modelling of feminism as a mother-daughter relationship in which the younger generation are educated by their wise elders. Astrid Henry notes that this “matrophor” is “the central trope in defining the relationship between the so-called second and third wave of U.S. feminism” (2). *The Power* posits a differential modelling of the interaction between different generations of feminists which accords with Prudence Chamberlain’s claim that “[w]hen a new wave is declared, or emerges, it does not eradicate . . . previous waves. In fact, it is purely adding a particular surge to an ongoing fight for equality. As such, waves should not be seen in conflict with one another” (79). The Electric Girls do not use their newfound powers to rebel against their female elders, but to share knowledge among them, indicating that the text anticipates moving beyond the feminist matrophor, which “speaks to a sense of hierarchy and rebellion, creating a feeling of the new replacing the old” (Chamberlain 79). In doing so, it subverts the patriarchal logic of hierarchical authority, and projects the Electric Girls as avatars of an incendiary model of feminism in which girls and women collaborate and share knowledge across generations.

However, the utopian feminist resonances of this sharing of knowledge are not ultimately borne out by the text. Margot, a minor American politician at the beginning of text, is taught the power by her daughter, and this awakens a sense of self-confidence and a desire



to succeed within the existent political system. Margot accepts the idea that to succeed as a politician, she must exhibit “aggression”, telling herself that to attain “more power and influence” would enable her to “change things for the better”, admitting also that “the real reason . . . she can’t stop thinking of the look she’d see on Daniel’s face if she got it. She wants it because she wants to knock him down” (154). When an opponent distresses her in a public debate, Margot momentarily loses control of her skein, shocking him on live television. Rather than ending her political career, she wins by a landslide, as this display of power accords with the ideal of what a politician should be within a patriarchal system: “They said that [Margot] had lost their vote the moment she gave up on reasoned discourse and claim authority. But when they went into the voting booths . . . they’d thought, You know that, though, she’s strong. She’d show them” (169). Margot does not upend the existent political structure as she had initially aspired, but instead bolsters the power of corporations and the military, monetising the power of the girls and using them to lubricate the army with new recruits. Margot accepts the terms of patriarchy, espousing them in order to achieve acceptability and individual power within the patriarchal capitalist system, rather than using her power to dismantle or reconfigure this system to become more equitable or representative. Margot embodies a mistrust and contempt for traditional democratic politics and central governance which runs throughout YADF, embodied in the actions of the dystopian girl, who continually throws herself against the dystopian state structure and its representatives.

The depiction of adult female politicians as untrustworthy agents of the patriarchy in the text is bolstered by the delineation of Tatiana Moskalev, who declares “a new kingdom” (98) in Moldova and establishes her seat of power in a castle by assembling an army and nuclear weaponry. Moldova’s women support Tatiana’s rise to power because so many of them have been raped, trafficked and abused, and her ideology is appealing solely because it

legitimises violent retribution: “I want to humiliate them. Show that this... mechanical power cannot compare with what we have in our bodies” (189). As with Margot, Tatiana apes the system which has previously ensured her marginalisation: “[i]t’s like she’s learned what a President ought to look like from watching too many mafia movies” (220). Alderman has stated that she devised the character as an answer to the question: “What is a female version of Putin? I was also thinking of Berlusconi, or a slightly ridiculous, hyper-macho dictator” (La Ferla). This chimes with the consistent pitting of the dystopian girl in YADF against female power politicians who find success within the dystopian system. Alma Coin in *The Hunger Games*, Jeanine in *Divergent*, and Dr Cable in *Uglies* are all ambitious political leaders presented as antagonists, and who work to suggest the girl will never be able to channel her desire for political change in the conventional political realm without internalising and reifying patriarchal ideology.

Similarly, Margot and Tatiana assume political power by commoditising the power of girls to line their own pockets and grease the wheels of global capital. Margot devises NorthStar Systems, a private initiative to train and subsequently export them for hire as private militaries, epitomising the neoliberal ideal of “public and private initiatives working hand in hand” (148). NorthStar girls are a globally deployable, lucrative vision of female empowerment which projects the illusion of American military intervention as being in the interests of global democracy. When Margot sells NorthStar girls to Tatiana, she justifies this sale by feigning the rhetoric of extending, “[d]emocracy for all . . . America’s fondest wish for the world” (221). The text invites comparison between the NorthStar girls and glossy images of female empowerment in contemporary western media, and in doing so draws attention to the way these images are projected within neoliberal regimes to efface the endemic maintenance of patriarchal values: “There are advertisements on hoardings now,

with sassy young women showing off their long, curved arcs in front of cute, delighted boys. They're supposed to make you want to buy soda, or sneakers, or gum. They work, they sell product" (258). On the surface, this description of advertising images of girls as strong and capable would seem to chime with feminist ideals, rendering self-determination as attractive and aspirational. Yet this girl's 'sassy' self-confidence before her simpering audience merely reiterates the patriarchal binary and its exaggeration of the essentialised differences between men and women, while also shadowing the commercial agenda of the Future Girl myth. The projected meanings of the hoardings mask the way in which consumer images work to foster acceptance of a neoliberal system in which the Electric Girls have their power appropriated and commoditised. They become doubly imbricated into neoliberal power structures, both as luminous images of 'future girl' empowerment, and as evidence of the "growing reliance by . . . corporations, states, and international organizations on military services supplied . . . by the nonsovereign, private market" (Singer 18).

The text suggests the only way for dystopian girls to avoid their power becoming commoditised and recuperated back into the maintenance of that which oppresses them is to reject the postfeminist neoliberalism which Tatiana and Margot most palpably embody. Allie pretends to collude with these women only to betray them, a symbolic destruction of the "corporate feminism" (Foster 12) they represent, in which women are encouraged to seek personal advancement within patriarchal capitalist systems, leaving the ideology underlying them intact. Allie's opposition to this capitulation to the patriarchal system could not be more emphatically expressed. She murders her benefactresses to ensure the dawning of a new world order, an act which symbolically rejects the feminist matrophor by expressing opposition to an older generation of women whose individualised notion of empowerment clashes with her desire for radical systemic change.

Yet *The Power* also refuses to condone Allie's violent methods, instead suggesting that the mobilisation of global female outrage is itself dystopian. Just as *The Power* expresses a contrarian ambivalence regarding the postfeminist commoditisation of girl power, it also queries the legitimacy of anger as the foundation of political action. Girls are now free to embrace their anger against oppression, and this quickly becomes expressed through swaggering bursts of machismo: "[s]ome of them are angry and some of them are mean, and now the thing is out in the open some are vying to prove their strength and skill" (21). Embracing rage only ensures the unending cycle of violence, reflected in the male backlash against the newly empowered girls, who insist that this is a plot to eradicate men which must be resisted by galvanising anger: "[w]e need a Year of Rage [. . .] Bitches need to see a change. They need to learn what justice means" (146). The war of the sexes becomes literalised in the text, in a manner which suggests that embracing politicised anger can lead only to further violence. This is exacerbated by the fact that none of the characters in the novel seem to be aware of feminist critique of patriarchal ideology, leaving the power vacuum left by its destruction to be filled once more with its core principles, including the acceptance of violence and individualist competition, the reinforcement of the gender binary, and the oppression of one gender over the other. As noted by Clare Walsh, one of the striking aspects of this novel is that, despite its paratextual framing as a work of contemporary feminist fiction, feminism or feminists are never once mentioned or implied as existing in the text. This creates an ideological vacuum in which neoliberals like Moskalev and Margot, and apocalyptic religious thinkers like Eve, are able to mould the world's women into accepting their agenda. This absence of feminism may itself be seen as the cause of the carnage which ensues when girls discover their ability to protect themselves is also an ability to punish and damage. If *The Fandom* works to unleash the suppressed rage of the postfeminist dystopian girl, then *The*

*Power* suggests that the political mobilisation of anger may only reiterate systemic brutality and inequality, if this is not carefully modulated by the ethical and intellectual centre which feminism offers. A further layer of meaning is produced by the fact that *The Power* is not only a dystopian novel, but a fantasy, more specifically, a rape revenge fantasy, in which rape victims, trafficked prostitutes and belittled teenage girls are able to avenge these ills with a zap of the finger. It provides a space for the imagining of outlandish vengeance which is potentially cathartic in the context of the steadfast silence on gender inequality in YADF, and in which those texts which do register patriarchal oppression do so in a manner which, like Freida in *Only Ever Yours* and Offred in the original *Handmaid's Tale*, serves to render the female protagonist as a helpless, hapless victim of the system.

However, *The Power* is also animated by a consistently sinister rendering of the female multitude. In critiquing the exuberant enthusiasm for political change denoted by the dystopian girl, the novel also renders the collective political power of young women as threatening and disturbing. The sense of their frightening, animalistic collective power is most pronounced in the text's rendering of the violent uprisings in those countries where women are most palpably oppressed; that is, countries outside the liberal west. This is because three of the four narrative perspectives belong to western women, and the sole counterpoint to this is the black male journalist, Tunde. His perspective provides access to the violent uprisings which occur among those non-western women, producing the most brutally horrific and violent imagery of the novel. As the reader has no access to the individual perspectives of those women who participate in this violence, Tunde's fear and horror continually generates images of their rebellion as particularly monstrous and horrific. By contrast, the power of the western Electric Girls becomes quintessentially postfeminist, playful and erotic, working its way into niches of pornography and ultimately being recirculated back into neoliberal

structures through commercialisation and militarisation. The distinction between these experiences is implicitly rooted in the idea that non-western experiences of patriarchy are more brutal, producing a stronger reciprocal response to oppression. This works to depersonalise non-white and non-western women, suggesting that they are unanimously inert and subjugated victims of patriarchal violence and failing to differentiate between their experiences or consider their variant identities. This depersonalising lack of specificity is further reified when these women become the collectively violent enactors of savage barbarism, articulated through textual descriptions which render them as mobs, crowds, and swarm, as “sinister fuckers, the way they move together” and a “tide of women” (297). This means that although the text suggests a global unity among women and girls in a world-system of variant patriarchal oppressions, it centres western girls’ experiences of this oppression as normative, while reproducing racist tropes of non-westerners as unknowable, nonspecific and animalistic others. It is striking that the racial politics of dystopian imagining in *The Power* and *The Fandom* are not only similar in their rendering of racialised others as an indiscriminately described group, but are also identical to the racial politics of mainstream YADF like *The Selection* and *Divergent*, the exact sort of “dystopian drivel” (*Fandom* 375) these texts position themselves against.

*The Power*, alongside the highly successful television adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, signifies a new wave of feminist dystopian imagining which reject postfeminist silence. This is evident in novels including Christina Dalcher’s *Vox* (2018), the UK hardback edition of which claims it is a “re-imagining of *The Handmaid’s Tale*”, Jennie Melamed’s *Gather The Daughters* (2017), in which “[t]he influence of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is clear” (Moss), and Joanne Ramos’s forthcoming *The Farm* (2019), which resulted in the author achieving a “six-figure deal” and which, seemingly inevitably, is describing as bearing “echoes of *The*

*Handmaid's Tale*" ("Bloomsbury"). As noted by Sian Cain, "[f]eminist fiction drives big money" in the contemporary publishing industry. The author Kiran Milwood Hargrave observes that "there is currently a push for female-led narratives. Just look at Naomi Alderman's *The Power*- it won the Bailey's and it just exploded", while the publishing director of a HarperCollins imprint claims that "people are interested in gender politics because of *The Handmaid's Tale*" (Cain). Reading this wave of feminist imagining as emanating solely from the re-emergence of Atwood and the success of Alderman erases the fact that YADF had already demonstrated the commercial viability of female-led dystopian narratives for over a decade, while also failing to engage productively with the connections and discontinuities between these new 'adult' feminist dystopias and the dystopian girl figure. *The Power* moves a step further than she is able to in its envisioning of girls collectively, and violently, dismantling patriarchal power, but YADF like *Only Ever Yours* had already torn the postfeminist veil. The influence of the dystopian girl is also evident in the reworking of *The Handmaid's Tale* adaptation, in which Offred is no longer presented solely as a vulnerable victim of patriarchal violence, but is also active player in the resistance who incites the other handmaids into collective opposition. However, the expectation established by the dystopian girl model that the female protagonist must develop into an embattled freedom fighter whilst being cultivated as a romantic heroine continues to simplify engagement with patriarchal oppression. The recently published *Vox*, for example, has been criticised for its formulaic thriller plot, romantic rescue and "fairy tale ending" (Charles "Trump"), all of which are inherited from the popular YAD trilogies, and which evidence the indebtedness, for better or worse, of the new wave of feminist dystopias to the YADF which preceded them.

Furthermore, the feminism embedded in this new formulation of the genre largely remains a white feminism which consistently repeats the failures of the dystopian girl's lack

of engagement with racial politics. *The Handmaid's Tale* adaptation, for example, settled on a colour-blind casting strategy which erased the original text's indication that black citizens in a Christian fundamentalist patriarchy would be subjected to particular cruelty, separating the text's critique of misogyny from its intersection with racism. This was a consciously made decision: executive producer Bruce Miller justified the choice by stating, "“what's the difference between making a TV show about racists and making a racist TV show?”" (Mitovich). The well-meant desire to diversify the centrality of a white woman's perspective in the literary text was made on the presumption that "fertility trumped everything", so that dystopian imaginaries continue to separate race from gender and other intersecting identities (Mitovich). Similarly, although *The Power* seeks to provide a space for more diverse perspectives in dystopian futures than that provided by the white dystopian girl, it does so in a manner which, like *The Fandom*, continues to perpetuate the notion that the political actions of 'others' are intrinsically threatening.

## CONCLUSION

*The Power* and *The Fandom* ring the death knell for the postfeminist model of the dystopian girl. These texts provide a space for the enactment and articulation of young female rage as the motivator of political action, and in doing so reject the patriarchal insistence on feminine modulation and capitulation to oppressive systems of power. *The Power* forcefully rejects the implication that gender inequality is no longer important or relevant for western girls. By imagining a revolution enacted by a generation of dystopian girls in the contemporaneous present, it indicates how the present continues to be experienced as dystopian. As Alderman has claimed, "in my world, nothing happens to a man that is not happening to a woman in the world we live in today. So if we find my world to be a dystopia, then we are already living in a dystopia." ("Dystopian dreams"). In the distinction between



the silence on gender in *The Hunger Games* and *Uglies*, and its palpability in *Only Ever Yours* and *The Power*, we are able to discern the re-emergence of feminism in the west after an extended period on the side-lines of mainstream political life. In their encouragement of consciously enacted rage, *The Power* and *The Fandom* seek to develop the dystopian girl beyond patriarchal scripts of becoming, and into political action.

Yet both texts remain complicit in the centring of the dystopian girl as a figure of normative whiteness, and both remain complicit in a white supremacist ideology which does not allow those raced as others to embrace the political anger which becomes her pathway to power. If the remodelling of the dystopian girl in these texts indicates her as a figure able to communicate the ideas of contemporary feminisms, then her continued complicity in white supremacy indicates how pervasive this ideology remains embedded in mainstream feminism, and in political life more generally. Reading texts like *The Power* as ‘predicting’ or inciting contemporary feminisms fails to register how this text falls far short of the intersectionality which has been so central to the resurgence of the movement, and the ongoing battle to de-centre white perspectives both in feminism and fiction. Both *The Power* and *The Fandom* indicate how the dystopian girl remains an evolving figure even after her crest in popularity, while also indicating how YADF must to continue to evolve beyond her complicity in the political illegitimacy of non-white subjects. In a recent *Elle* magazine article which claims “All the Best New Books and Films Are About Female Anger” (Kovan), emerging cultural criticism such as Rebecca Traister’s *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Anger* (2018) and Soraya Chemaly’s *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women’s Anger* (2018) is linked to the celebration of female rage in wider popular culture. Kovan cites the “punitive and righteous rage” (Traister, qtd. in Kovan) of Beyonce’s *Lemonade* album and the forthcoming film adaptation of *The Hate U Give*, Angie Thomas’s 2017 YA novel which

sees its black female protagonist become an activist following the death of her friend at the hands of the police. These texts indicate that popular culture, including YA, is beginning to move not only beyond postfeminism, but postracism and the white supremacy it embeds. If the dystopian girl is to survive, she must continue to advance towards these developments.

*The Fandom* and *The Power* indicate how the dystopian girl continues to be reformulated in the midst of social and political change, while also evidencing that certain political truths appear to remain beyond mainstream dystopian imagining. This reluctance is surely bolstered by one of the most fundamental innovations fostered by the dystopian girl: the emergence of the commercially driven dystopian franchise. This has led not only to endless new attempts at developing the latest dystopian craze, but to the remodelling of the mother in the mould of her daughters. Much to Atwood's glee, the once standalone *Handmaid's Tale* has now "been an opera, it's been a ballet; it's being turned into a graphic novel right now [. . .] You could say the handmaids have escaped. They're out there. And they're coming for you again in season two!" (Gerber). Although *The Fandom* comments wryly upon the development of the dystopian franchise, Day has expressed interest in developing a sequel (Potts), and this openness to a franchising the text also parodies is reflected by the end of the novel, in which Violet feels "an overwhelming desire to write a sequel" (397). The novel is not only a politicised parody, but a paeon to the idea that "the energy from the Fandom created something...something real" (364), and a tribute to those dystopian texts which allow fans to play, invent and create within an adaptable storyworld: "[t]he 'canon' . . . is just a framework, the bare bones of which [are] draped our rich and detailed universe" (363). Violet does not leave this world eager to fight inequality in the real one, but to delve back into the textual fabric and its escapist pleasures. This may lead us to back to the question posed less charitably by 'The Group Hopper' and @DystopianYA: if

YADF is designed primarily to produce an endless spiral of sequels, adaptations and spin offs, is it also able to communicate social and political critique, and to illuminate the predicaments of the contemporary? Those corporations invested in maximising the profitability of these narratives do not appear to think so. As part of the promotion for its *Handmaid's Tale* adaptation, Hulu planted silent handmaids at the SXSW festival who refused to speak when questioned unless specific lines from the novel were used. The head of marketing Jenny Wall claimed, “[w]e don’t want to use politics to promote a show” and that the planting was “not trying to make a political statement at all” (Poggi). These tactics drew on those established by Lionsgate as part of its hugely successful promotion of the *Hunger Games* franchise. Marketers designed billboards aimed at Capitol citizens which only fans would understand as promoting the films, gave Panem’s government its own website, thecapitol.pn, allowed fans to design their own identity cards, and “invited consumers into the games” (Vinjamuri). This invitation demanded ensuring that the “central dystopian conceit –that children are forced to kill each other for entertainment– [was] kept strategically out of focus” (Donnelly 56).

*The Power's* commercial success has meant it too is in development for television, and may well become, like *The Handmaid's Tale*, the latest endlessly serialised adventure into dystopia. Alderman has discussed deliberately seeding elements of the novel as potential points of expansion in episodes of the anticipated television program (Steffens), and the global scope of her tale is also the provision of endless possibilities for an expanded narrative: “Ideally we’re looking at a 10 episode season for five or six seasons, because there’s a lot of world in there” (Armitstead). This open-endedness also plays into the political meanings resonant within the text. Although *The Power* and *The Fandom* evidence the end of the postfeminist silence of the dystopian girl, it is not clear how these novels imagine moving

beyond patriarchy itself. This means that they share her “acute sense of what’s wrong [and] an impasse when it comes to ways of righting it” (Ditum). Allie refutes neoliberal postfeminism, but her brave new world becomes an anti-utopia, and her conviction that girls can change the world mutates from cruel optimism to cruel pessimism. The narrative open-endedness of the dystopian franchise heightens and fosters political ambiguity, while also paving the way for further expansion and adaptation. This may lead us to question, as Ron Charles does in his review of *Vox*: “how many trips to Gilead do we really need?”

## THESIS CONCLUSION

YADF became immensely popular in the context of YA fiction’s Second Golden Age, and the popularity of texts like *Uglies*, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* trace the category’s rise as a publishing phenomenon. As seen in the introduction, YADF has often been described

as the epitome of pop-culture junk, and the perceived poor quality of the genre has legitimised the idea that YA is unworthy of serious consideration or critical appraisal. By contrast, this thesis is predicated on the conviction that analysis of popular texts like YADF is essential to understanding the textures of contemporary political systems, the affects they engender, and the ideologies they instil. In developing a theory of the dystopian girl as a new literary type that signifies the contemporary ideologies of postfeminism, colour-blindness and neoliberalism, this thesis has read against the grain of her projection as a radical and incendiary figure, suggesting that she often masks as much as she reveals about contemporary life. By analysing the dystopian girl as encoding the ambiguities of the present moment, this thesis has also indicated how deeply embedded repressive ideas of gender and race are in the western imagination, even in those texts which seek to critique contemporary systems of power. However, in criticising the consistent evasiveness of YADF's engagement with the political, this thesis has also indicated the utopian possibilities it embeds in the dystopian girl figure. The dystopian girl undermines patriarchal devaluations of girls as frivolous or hysterical, as bodies rather than minds. She challenges intrinsically patriarchal models of structural hierarchies and adolescent development, and strives towards the realisation of brave new worlds, even as she often refrains from entering them herself.

This thesis has shown that YADF is a new form of dystopian imagining which channels the anxieties and aspirations of early twenty-first century western culture through the figure of the dystopian girl. In surveying the genre's rapid cycling through novelty, ubiquity, over-familiarity and reformulation, this thesis has observed the shifting cultural climate on which the genre seeks to comment. The dystopian girl signifies the growing idealisation of girlhood as a state of power and possibility in the early twenty-first century west, and the attendant anxiety about what this might mean for patriarchy, capitalism and the future. The

postfeminist prevarications embedded in the earliest, mainstream iteration of this figure position her in a moment in history which has already changed dramatically. While the foundational examples of the dystopian girl maintain steadfast silence on gender inequality, the emergence of the feminist dystopia in the Trump era indicates that this is increasingly untenable. YADF represents a liminal midpoint between the hopeful resistances of the feminist critical dystopias of the Reagan era, and the unremitting bleakness of the feminist dystopias published in the last two years. If dystopia is now inundated with “misogynistic nightmares” (Charles “Trump”) of “paralysing bleakness” (Ditum), then it is at least no longer pretending that gender is not important or relevant. The emergence of movements like #MeToo, the Everyday Sexism Project and the Women’s Marches on Washington indicate that feminism is circulating ever closer to the political mainstream after years in the margins, and that gender inequality is no longer a deeply repressed subtext of contemporary life. As seen in the last chapter of this thesis, YADF has reflected this shift, and what once whispered on the edges of texts now roars from their pages. Dystopian girls no longer swallow their anger, but enact it. They no longer oppose violence, but enforce it. Although the dystopian girl’s political subjectivity is often glazed over with a veneer of postfeminism, even in these iterations subtext continually chips away at the façade. By the time the dystopian girl became established to the point of cliché, her newer formulations began tearing at the postfeminist veil, and in the most recent texts it lies in tatters.

If dystopia “allows us to apprehend the present *as* history” (Moylan 26), then we can also trace the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas of the subject through the dystopian girl, as well as the frustrated desire to resist this enclosure and the idea that present conditions must be endured rather than transformed. The dystopian girl is a deeply contradictory figure, a signifier of the desire for radical, revolutionary upheaval enacted by formidable young

women, and the countervailing desire to contain this incendiary power in narratives of capitulation and moderation. If the dystopian girl often fails to move confidently from her dystopian present into a utopian future, then her residual ambiguity is nonetheless an aperture of possibility and apprehension. As contemporaneous social justice and feminist movements indicate, a perception of the world as dystopian is not always a signification of defeat. It is also an impetus to fight for, and towards, utopia.

This thesis has shown that the dystopian girl is not a concrete myth, but a perennially shifting figure who has emerged in the millennium, and who denotes the political uncertainty of the first decades of the new century. She indicates that while the problems engendered by neoliberal capitalism are more endemic than ever before, it remains unclear how resistance to this system might be enacted or even imagined. In her signification of cruel optimism and her desire to retreat into the apolitical, she is a figure of capitalist realism, who indicates that it is still “easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (Fisher *Capitalist 2*). She is both a defeated seeker of the good life within the old system and an embattled freedom fighter who strives towards the new. Her reluctance to think and act politically has reified the dangerous myths of postfeminism and postracism, but her actions also register a desire to transcend a mode of politics drawn inexorably towards violence and the dehumanisation of all those it encounters. That YADF remains reluctant to provide an empowering space for queer, non-white or transgender subjects, or to confront or even acknowledge the dystopian force of white supremacy, indicates that there is much more work to do to before the dystopian girl reaches her fullest potential to inspire those most oppressed by dystopian systems with visions of transformative resistance. A more progressive and equitable modelling of YADF requires a society in which marginal and minority identities are not kept at the margins of political discourse. If such a society is ever to come into being,

there is little doubt that contemporary youth will be at the forefront of this change, as those “seeking political change by any media necessary” (Jenkins et al 289).

Much contemporary youth activism is rooted in the conviction that “the cultural is the gateway into the political” (289), but to what degree the dystopian girl has provided such a gateway remains in question. In her recently published typology of female protagonists in YADF as ‘girls on fire’, Sarah Hentges insists that “YA dystopia can inspire consciousness and action. My students prove this over and over; their sparks might just catch fire” (*Girls* 12). Despite all her capitulations, the dystopian girl projects youthful, female-led revolt as necessary, viable and inspiring. When she emerged in the mid-2000s, the dystopian girl was an unusual configuration of adolescence as a state of political consciousness in a culture mired in the idea that teens are intrinsically disaffected and apolitical. In this sense she has anticipated, and perhaps even contributed towards, the widespread understanding of contemporary youth as increasingly political. In 2017, the Oxford English Dictionary declared “youthquake” the ‘word of the year’, defining it as a ““significant cultural, political, or social change arising from the actions or influence of young people”” (Cain). The term “saw a 401% increase in usage year-on-year as 2017 saw the often-maligned millennial generation drive political change” (Cain). This drive intensified only weeks later, when the survivors of a high school shooting in Florida organised the March for Our Lives in Washington to protest gun laws which continue to enable the deaths of American adolescents at an alarming rate. A commonly expressed sentiment following the emergence of March for Our Lives was that it evidenced the political legacy of YADF. This was epitomised in a tweet by English teacher Jennifer Ansbach, which was liked more than 250,000 times: “I’m not sure why people are so surprised that the students are rising up—we’ve been feeding them a steady diet of dystopian literature showing teens leading the charge for years. We have told teen girls they



are empowered. What, you thought it was fiction? It was preparation.” The prevalent reading of contemporary youth activists as the daughters of the dystopian girl indicate the unprecedentedness of YADF’s investment in adolescents, and especially girls, as political actors, and the ongoing legacy of this imaginary.

The celebrity status afforded to March for Our Lives star participant, eighteen-year-old Emma González, indicates that the dystopian girl has established a new aesthetic of the adolescent girl as an embattled revolutionary. In an online edition of *Teen Vogue* dedicated to contemporary female activism, for which González wrote an op-ed, she and other activists stare confrontationally from the cover. Clad in all-black and folding their arms disapprovingly as González tears a gun target in two, the image is eerily similar to the “propos” (*Mockingjay* 42) Katniss performs as the Mockingjay. As with Katniss, González cannily communicates ethical opposition to the government through mass media channels, but not everyone has welcomed this assumption of public prominence. The image was soon doctored online to suggest that González was tearing up the American constitution (Mezzofiore), indicating that girls continues to generate anxiety and the desire for adult control when they assume political prominence. Whether or not this generation of adolescents have indeed been led to resist hegemony by the ‘steady diet’ of YADF fed to them over the last decade, youth activism is moving beyond the dystopian girl’s prevarications and capitulations. González embodies a new model of the dystopian girl, in her opposition to violence, her media-savvy, her open queerness, and her espoused indebtedness to the black and queer activism which has preceded her (Greenfield).

González is not the only female adolescent currently being projected as both a celebrity and a figure of political resistance. Amandla Stenberg, the actress who played Rue in the *Hunger Games*, has also graced the cover of *Teen Vogue*, in the February 2016 issue

dedicated to ‘Power Girls’ and ‘The New Faces of Feminism’. Stenberg has created a prolific internet presence through her articulation of black feminist ideas, including a 2015 viral video made when she was sixteen, “Don’t Cash Crop on My Corn Rows”, in which she criticises cultural appropriation, asking “what would America be like if we loved black people as much as we loved black culture?” In the *Hunger Games*, Stenberg’s character is secondary, and Rue dies to engender Katniss’s path to revolutionary prominence. Stenberg’s subsequent career indicates the shifting terrain of YA narratives, however, as the category moves beyond the absences embedded in mainstream YADF, not least its white normativity. In 2018, she has played the lead role in two YA cinematic adaptations. In *The Darkest Minds*, based on Alexandra Bracken’s trilogy (2016), her character develops superpowers and leads a multiracial adolescent revolution, while in *The Hate U Give* she plays Starr, an African American teenager whose friend is murdered by the police, leading her to rail against the justice system through public protest. These texts evidence the ongoing legacy of the dystopian girl aesthetic, which places girls at the crux of political upheaval as actors and agents, while also indicating that YA is moving beyond YADF’s many pervasive silences.

Whether or not YADF has provided the groundwork for a new generation of emboldened teens to resist the dystopian present and imagine better futures, the genre remains rare as a pop cultural space which articulates youth activism as inspiring and girl empowerment as essential. YADF has consistently articulated the female adolescent as a political actor with utopian potential, providing a counterpoint to the fact that girls, like YADF itself, are rarely taken seriously in contemporary culture. If the dystopian girl is also a figure who, for the most part, adheres to a traditional and increasingly outdated understanding of the political as a “state citizen relation” (Berlant *Cruel Optimism* 263) made visible through “gestures of heroic action” (259), this testifies to the difficulty of registering and reflecting the

discursive and constantly evolving political practises of contemporary youth cultures. These are practises which may require new genres, and new narrative forms, to capture them. The dystopian girl is not only a sign of the times in which she emerged, but an anticipation of times yet to come.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Of the many dystopian girls considered in this thesis, all of them are aged between fifteen and seventeen at the start of their narratives. In the west, these ages denote the last stages of legal childhood, after which the teenager becomes formally recognised as an adult, signified by their new right to vote, get married, and other assorted rights.

<sup>2</sup> YADF featuring adolescent female protagonists published during this time period, but not further discussed in this thesis, include Susan Beth Pfeffer's *Last Survivors* series (2006-13), Catherine Fisher's *Incarceron* duology (2007-8), Gemma Malley's *The Declaration* trilogy (2007-10), Allegra Goodman's *The Other Side of the Island* (2008), Mary E. Phearson's *Jenna Fox Chronicles* (2008-13), Lisa Haines' *Girl in the Arena* (2009), Rae Mariz's *The Unidentified* (2010), Ally Condie's *Matched* trilogy (2010-12), Teri Hall's *The Line* trilogy (2010-13), Caragh M. O'Brien's *Birthmarked* series (2010-12), Ann Aguire's *Razorland* series (2011-17), Anna

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Carey's *Eve* trilogy (2011-13), Kimberley Derting's *The Pledge* trilogy (2011-13), Lauren DeStefano's *The Chemical Garden* series (2011-13), Elena Johnson's *Possession* series (2011-13), Marie Lu's *Legend* trilogy (2011-13), Tahereh Mafi's *Shatter Me* series (2011-18), Megan McCafferty's *Bumped* duology (2011-12), Lauren McLaughlin's *Scored* (2011), Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* trilogy (2011-13), Jeyn Robert's *Dark Inside* trilogy (2011-16), Veronica Rossi's *Under The Never Sky* series (2011-14), Amy Kathleen Ryan's *Glow* trilogy (2011-13), Karen Sandler's *Tankborn* trilogy (2011-14), Maria Synder's *Insider* duology (2011-12), Moira Young's *Dust Lands* trilogy (2011-15), Heather Anastasiu's *Glitch* trilogy (2012-13), Juliana Baggott's *Pure* trilogy (2012-14), Alexandra Bracken's *The Darkest Minds* series (2012-14), Tara Brown's *Born* trilogy (2012-13), Jamie Canosa's *Dissidence* duology (2013-14), Sarah Crossan's *Breathe* duology (2012-13), Kristen Simmons' *Article 5* trilogy (2012-14), Dan Wells' *Partials* trilogy (2012-14), Joseph Bruchac's *Killer of Enemies* (2013), Joelle Charbonneau's *The Testing* trilogy (2013-15), Debra Driza's *MILA 2.0* series (2013-16), Alaya Dawn Johnson's *The Summer Prince* (2013), Lauren Nicolle Taylors *The Woodlands* series (2013-14), Ruth Silver's *Aberrant* trilogy (2013), Suzanne Young's *The Program* series (2013-16), Nadine Brande's *Out of Time* trilogy (2014-16), JP Smythe's *Australia* trilogy (2015-16), and Bella Forrest's *The Gender Games* series (2016-17).

<sup>3</sup> It is worth acknowledging at this point that whiteness is not only a position embedded in the narrative voice of the mainstream dystopian girl: it is also my subject position. This is important to state not only in terms of this chapter, but in this thesis as a whole, as an adult male academic writing about the representation of young women in a genre in which I am not the primary presumed audience. I remain cognisant of the fact that my work builds on decades of work from women and non-white academics, thinkers and writers. In doing so, I am not attempting to erase the value of their work, or position myself as an overriding authority. Instead, I discuss these issues in recognition of the fact that, as a white, male academic, I have a level of privilege which is not available to many of these thinkers and writers. I speak about race and gender because to do otherwise would be to absent myself from using my privilege to discuss issues which are often dismissed when voiced by those raced and gendered as 'other'. In a conversation with Sneja Gunew, the postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak discusses the "idea of earning the right to criticize", indicating that this only absents those with greater privilege, "let's say, a young, white male student, politically-correct who will say: 'I am only a bourgeois white male, I can't speak.'" (Lodge and Wood 597), from thinking critically about their position, or from criticising inequitable systems of power. I believe that white academics, and male academics, must not ignore such issues, or claim that they cannot speak of them. This only absents those of us imbued with the greatest privileges in western society from challenging a power structure designed to benefit us to the detriment of others.

<sup>4</sup> The text stylises each of the eves' names in lower-case, in contrast to the capitalised names of the male characters. I reflect this conceit in my analysis throughout the chapter.

<sup>5</sup> All of the eves share a name with contemporary celebrities renowned for their beauty, with the implicit suggestion that their physical appearance has been genetically modelled after them. In an interview, O'Neill explicated this by stating, "I liked the idea that the girls would have all been designed to look like great beauties from modelling and acting in our day, but that the men (Socrates, Darwin...) would have been named after philosophers, politicians, and great leaders." (Mellor).

<sup>6</sup> A *Huffington Post* review declared *The Power* "A Feminist Dystopia For The #MeToo Movement" (Fallon), while a *Buzzfeed* article noted that "[a]nyone picking up a copy . . . could be forgiven for thinking that it had been inspired by the events of 2017" (Al-Othman).

<sup>7</sup> Katniss selflessly volunteers herself instead of the sister she loves dearly at the beginning of the *Hunger Games* trilogy; Tris sacrifices herself to save the brother she loves from this fate at the end of *Allegiant*.

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