Survival of the Straightest: Reimagining Young Adult Literary Heroines

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For every girl waiting to see herself on the page

Abstract

Young adult (YA) fiction is the gateway to the literary world. Employing coming-of-age themes to welcome adolescent readers into its narratives, YA strives to be relatable, even when dystopian. However, the use of relatability as a tactic brings into question exactly who is being represented on the page-- whose feminism is given a platform and which voices are continuously and systematically excluded from YA narratives? This question is further complicated by dystopian fiction, which projects current political and social anxieties onto the future. In the realm of YA, dystopias serve as a warning for adolescent readers by depicting worlds that seem to look nothing like our own. *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* are products of a distinct era of bestseller YA dystopian fiction in the late 2000s. Known for their spunky heroines and captivating love stories, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* present mixed messages about heroism and femininity. As young women growing up in dystopian worlds, Katniss and Tris are forced to subscribe to certain societal expectations of femininity in order to survive. This manifests itself in straightness as a device for conforming under oppressive governments. As fierce competitors, Katniss and Tris exhibit various stereotypically masculine traits, but their performances of heteronormativity recuperate this gender deviance and keep them alive. These narratives depict dangerously exclusive and binary-affirming versions of femininity, teaching young readers that gender deviance is acceptable only if paired with straightness. This analysis complicates their reputations as feminist heroines, revealing the ways in which romance detracts from their individual power. Using implicit references to sexuality, I make the argument that Katniss and Tris's subscription to straightness is circumstantial, revealing insecurities about body image, sexuality, and intimacy. This research takes the form of a multimodal analysis, employing a symptomatic analysis, a close reading for queer subtexts, and a reception analysis to explore how young readers react to Katniss and Tris. It speculates on the consequences of literary representation on adolescent readers who live beyond binaries and do not have the privilege of seeing themselves on the page.

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and for Hanna: my greatest queero

Table of Contents

Abstract……………………………………………………………………………….2

Acknowledgements…………………………………………………………………...3

Introduction ……………………………………………………………………………… 5

Literature Review……………………………………………………………………..9

Methodology……………………………………………………………………….19

A Note on Feminist and Queer Theory……………………………………………….24

Katniss: The Hunted Huntress……………………..……………………………..…..…...27

Tris: The Selfless Stiff …………..…….……………………………………….……..…...36

Discussion………………………………………………………………………......43

Conclusion………………………………………………………………………....51

Bibliography……………………………………………………………………….54

Introduction

Having grown up in a literary climate defined by escapism to other worlds, whether it be that of Harry Potter, Bella Swan, Katniss Everdeen, or Tris Prior, I rarely took a step back to consider the implications of consuming fantasy, sci-fi, or dystopian narratives. These stories led lives far beyond the bindings of young adult literature bestsellers. Young readers wore, watched, and fully immersed themselves in images of their favorite literary heroes. The fangirl fad ran rampant through middle and high school culture, and mockingjay pins were just about as socially mandatory as having a clear stance on Team Edward versus Team Jacob. The night of *The Hunger Games* movie premiere, I stayed up till midnight with my friends decorating homemade fan t-shirts and mockingjay cupcakes. Few things have humiliated me more than getting picked up by my mom at midnight, not a minute later, while the others packed into a minivan to drive to the theater.

All this is to say that the genre of YA dystopian literature is personal. As a kid raised by two proud members of book clubs, I grew up being all too familiar with the book-sized gift under the Christmas tree that was destined to collect an impressive amount of dust on my bookshelf. There was something different about dystopian narratives, though, as I loved to envision worlds that seemed to look nothing like my own. As a young reader who didn't read nearly as much as her parents wanted her to, I found myself deeply invested in and, more importantly, welcome in Katniss and Tris's stories. *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* are two of my earliest reading memories in which turning pages did not feel like a chore. I found role models in their heroines and can confidently say that they played a formative role in my development as a reader.

While I personally remember *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* as two of the most influential YA books of my childhood, industry giants like Scholastic and HarperCollins have profited off of numerous YA dystopian fiction bestsellers throughout the 2000s. They produced a notable proliferation of these texts in the years following 9/11. This trend is deliberate, as certain marketing aims are met by publishers knowing what will sell and when. In my experience and in that of many of my peers, these tactics have succeeded, as YA dystopian literature represents an accessible and entertaining genre to readers and non-readers alike. These narratives welcomed me into the world of reading with the distraction of a world that did not resemble my own. YA literature marks a crucial transition for adolescent readers developing both emotionally and psychologically as they look to books to make better sense of their own lives. It distinguishes itself from classroom reading with attractive coming-of-age themes, encouraging students to read for pleasure without pressure from parents or teachers.[1] YA is a formative, timely genre that profits off of adolescent interest in fantastical worlds.

Having distanced myself from YA bestsellers for years, now consuming more mature, often darker narratives, I have grown as a reader, thinker, and skeptic. This paper explores the power that dystopian heroines hold in the eyes of young readers. Fans look up to Katniss and Tris as feminist heroines and symbols of girl-power. While I certainly felt the same way as a young reader, today I am more cautious of performative feminism, white feminism, and the manipulative nature of the media. These skepticisms speak to personal and academic interests in female and queer representation in media and popular culture, and my case studies represent avenues to explore these themes. They illuminate exactly whose feminism is visible in American culture. The predominantly white narratives of *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* are indicative of the acceptable contemporary American literary hero. They are meaningful in revealing who we root for, want to succeed, and want to survive. Readers, writers, and publishers feel comfortable with heroines with boyfriends as sidekicks, and this detracts from the power they hold as feminist characters. Katniss and Tris need to be read for the kind of heroine we celebrate: the white, tough, yet heteronormative one. In this sense, the heroine prototype caters to audiences that look just like Katniss and Tris, thereby proving relatable for only a small percent of consumers.

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[1] Karen Coats, “Young Adult Literature: Growing Up, In Theory,” in *Handbook of Research on Children’s and Young Adult Literature,* ed. Shelby A. Wolf (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).

Rather than upsetting the oppressive boundaries and binaries of gender and sexuality, Katniss and Tris's narratives are restrictively heteronormative. This paper will explore how they perpetuate these binaries. As young women growing up in dystopian worlds, Katniss and Tris are forced to subscribe to certain societal expectations of femininity in order to survive. This manifests itself in straightness as a device for conforming under oppressive governments. As fierce competitors, Katniss and Tris exhibit various stereotypically masculine traits, but their performances of heteronormativity recuperate this gender deviance and keep them alive. The following questions will inform this research: In what ways do Katniss and Tris challenge and perpetuate the gender binary? What roles do sexuality and romance play in the survival of these characters? How do young female readers perceive of Katniss and Tris? What do these case studies reveal about the acceptable contemporary literary heroine? While I believe that Collins and Roth have created powerful female role models, I wish to illuminate the significant intersectional shortcomings in these texts by exploring how heteronormativity functions as a recuperation for gender deviance in Katniss and Tris.

Considering how widely read the genre is, YA literature is capable of enacting change through bestsellers like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*. As two of the most popular YA books of my generation, evolving into extensive fan networks, trilogies, and films, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* are indicative of a distinct cultural moment in which the most accessible literary hero is white and straight.[2] While Collins and Roth did challenge the norm of the dystopian male hero, their texts contribute to the perpetuation of the stereotype of the white, heterosexual figure as most desirable and capable. While this paper focuses on the intersection of gender and sexuality, whiteness is always at play in these books to further legitimize their heroines. In consuming *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, readers add yet another white face to their list of role models, for they are not given the opportunity to envision a queer hero or a hero of color in a survival situation. As the myth of the American hero--the patriotic, hard-working, glorified individualist--deeply permeates all aspects of our culture, Collins and Roth's failure to create diverse and intersectional protagonists has considerable consequences for how we envision the contemporary American literary hero.[3]

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[2] For the purposes of my research, I will be investigating only the first books in each of these trilogies: *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*.

[3] The lack of intersectional protagonists in these case studies signals a larger failure on the part of the YA industry; for more information on hero mythology and the hero's journey, see: Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books), 1949.

Literature Review

Young readers are fascinated by other worlds, whether in fantasy, science fiction, or dystopian narratives. Consuming YA dystopian literature in a post 9/11 climate is loaded with social and political meaning, as adolescents turn to fiction as an outlet to envision themselves in futuristic, seemingly unrecognizable settings. As other-wordly as these futures seem, further research reveals that dystopian narratives are grounded in traumatic current and historical events. This literature review will provide context and definitions for YA literature and dystopian fiction, including the distinct environment that has allowed for the recent multiplication of dystopian narratives. This context is crucial for understanding the unique literary moment in which audiences celebrated the heroines of *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* for challenging gender norms. Based on this literature, the texts themselves, and additional feminist and queer theory outlined in the methods section, I will argue that Katniss and Tris's gender deviance is made acceptable through their adherence to heteronormativity, and explore what this indicates about the acceptable literary heroine in the U.S. today.

Young Adult Literature: Intentions and Reputations

YA literature is a largely misunderstood industry. Teachers often shy away from using YA books in their classrooms, dismissing them as undistinguished writing with little educational value. Author Chris Crowe attributes this to the confusion surrounding the industry's intended age group, as "young adult" creates a gray area between books for adults and books for children, "Books for nonadults range from wordless picture books to fairly sophisticated novels, and many libraries and bookstores shelve all these books together in the children's section."[4] While he argues that young adults range from grades seven to twelve, education scholar Karen Coats reveals a similar uncertainty regarding the categorization of the genre. She frames the "lack of a clear demarcation of the field" as a major reason for the lack of critical scholarship on the genre.[5] The question of what separates children's literature from adolescent literature is consistent across many sources and represents a barrier for future scholarship. The age factor is further complicated by the fact that adult targeted books often pass as YA. These ambiguities limit YA consumption to predominantly non-academic reading amongst adolescents.

Though many teachers are hesitant to include YA books in their curriculums, the genre has a special potential to reach adolescent audiences with its inclusion of coming-of-age themes. There is a consensus among literary scholars that YA books are actually capable of having a greater influence on young readers than traditional classroom staples because of the way that they relate to the adolescent experience. Coats defends the complexity of YA narratives, "Young adult literature exerts a powerful influence over its readers at a particularly malleable time in their identity formation, and yet we still pay more critical scholarly attention to *Antigone* (Sophocles, c. 442) and *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925) than we do to the potentially life-changing books our teens read on their own."[6] Advocating for serious consideration of the genre by scholars, Coats highlights how YA's engagement with coming-of-age topics can compliment the formative psychological state of adolescent readers. She employs a Lacanian paradigm to "identify contemporary adolescent literature as a site of working through the physical, psychic, and social abjection of the teenage body seeking meaning and value in a culture that places that body in a liminal space between childhood protection and adult responsibility.”[7] In occupying this liminal space, young readers are highly susceptible to literary influence, making YA books effective primer texts for denser future reading. Through its ability to reach the adolescent psyche in a distinctly different way than canonical adult literature, YA is worthy of scholarly attention.

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[4] Chris Crowe, "Young Adult Literature: What is Young Adult Literature?" *The English Journal* 88 (1998): 121.

[5] Crowe, "Young Adult Literature," 121; Coats, Young Adult Literature, 322.

[6] Coats, *Young Adult Literature*, 316.

Publishing Industry Perspective: Marketing YA Dystopian Fiction

Within the publishing community, professionals seem to take one of two stances regarding the boom of YA dystopian literature: skepticism towards the rapid growth of dark dystopian imagery and praise for the way it challenges readers to look to the future. While classics like *1984* and *Brave New World* have been long-standing staples in American curriculums, the recent consumption of dystopian books outside of the classroom, or for pleasure, indicates distinct growth in the genre’s sales and successes. Karen Springer, a writer for *Publishers Weekly,* attributes this growth to word-of-mouth recommendations amongst adolescent readers, even those “hesitant teens” who may not identify as readers. She emphasizes the importance of the genre’s “what if” themes, which often spark reflection and gratitude in young readers for the privileged lives that they lead.[8] Literary critic Michelle Dean is far more cynical about how the “bleak wasteland of 21st-century publishing” has promoted a proliferation of dystopian literature.[9] To Dean, the industry’s reliance on dystopian content for profit is problematic, for the genre has suffered a decrease in quality as a result of its exponential growth. Despite these competing perspectives, the numbers speak for themselves: *The Hunger Games* trilogy has sold over 65 million copies domestically as of 2014, while the *Divergent* trilogy sold

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[7] Coats, *Young Adult Literature,* 319.

[8] Springen, “Apocalypse Now,” 2.

[9] Michelle Dean, “Our Young-Adult Dystopia,” *The New York Times Magazine,* February 2, 2014, 1.

6.7 million copies in 2013 alone.[10] These case studies represent just two success stories in the YA publishing industry's active promotion of dystopian content in the 2000s and 2010s.[11]

Dystopian Literature: History and Canon

The term "dystopia" was first coined by John Stuart Mill during a parliamentary speech in 1868, meaning "too bad to be practical."[12] Much of the scholarship on YA books uses the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and dystopian fiction almost interchangeably, as *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* shared the 2000s literary spotlight with other bestsellers like *Twilight* and *Harry Potter*. While these genres are all part of a greater YA boom, it is important to ground analysis with a clear definition of dystopia. Literary theorist M. Keith Booker's definition reads:

> Briefly, dystopian literature is specifically that literature which situates itself in direct opposition to utopian thought, warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism. At the same time, dystopian literature generally also constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems, either through the critical examination of the utopian premises upon which these conditions and systems are based or through the imaginative extension of those conditions and systems into different contexts that more clearly reveal their flaws and contradictions.[13]

A similar definition is offered by literary theorist Kay Sambell, who characterizes dystopian societies as "horrifyingly plausible exaggerations of our own" capable of bringing to light social and political anxieties.[14] Sambell's scholarship specifically pertains to young adult consumption of dystopian narratives, so she provides a distinct definition for adolescent dystopias: "to make serious and daunting comment on where we are really going as a society and, worse, what we will be like when we get there. Its primary purpose is to puncture old myths and dreams."[15] When targeted towards a younger audience, dystopian narratives serve as warnings for the future by catering to the innocent adolescent psyche. Through themes such as loss of innocence or death of childhood, YA dystopian books often depict children being forced into a role of responsibility and survival similar to that of an adult. Sambell explores the complexity of author ethics behind this genre, as adults are both storytellers and inherently protectors of children. Dystopian authors are highly critical of the adult world, which can complicate susceptible young readers' perceptions of the future.[16]

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[10] "The Hunger Games," Wikipedia, accessed October 21, 2019, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hunger_Games; "Divergent (novel)," Wikipedia, accessed October 21, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divergent_(novel); The data available on the sales of these books is out-dated and measured differently.

[11] For a list of other recently published dystopian YA books, see: "Best Young Adult Dystopian Novels," Goodreads, accessed December 5, 2019, https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/12408.Best_Young_Adult_Dystopian_Novels.

[12] Joshua Garrison, "Growing Up Dystopian: The Future History of Education and Childhood," *American Educational History Journal* 38 (2011): 56.

[13] M. Keith Booker, *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 3.

[14] Kay Sambell, "Carnivalizing the Future: A New Approach to Theorizing Childhood and Adulthood in Science Fiction for Young Readers," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 28 (2004): 248.

Despite the consistency across definitions of dystopia and the role that dystopian books play as warnings for the future, there is not a consensus in scholarship regarding the date of the first dystopian text. Utopian studies scholar Carol Farley Kessler illuminates the masculine tone of the genre set by early dystopian literature. She highlights the first female authors to contribute to the genre who are typically excluded from its dominantly male canon. Kessler notes the publication of a dystopian narrative as early as 1824 in select chapters of Catharine Maria Segewick's *Redwood: A Tale*.[17] She also cites *The Heads of Cerberus*, written in 1919 by Gertrude Barrows Bennett under the pseudonym of Francis Stevens, as an international dystopian future. The vast majority of scholarship cites Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We,* George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* as canonical dystopian fiction, further revealing the genre's masculine standard. Dystopian imagery, even in widespread contexts beyond literature, is often referred to as "Orwellian," demonstrating the profound effect that *1984* has had on American culture as a whole.[18] Though scholars attribute the origins of dystopian literature to varying texts depending on their fields, the genre's canon reveals nearly exclusively male narratives.

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[15] Sambell, "Carnivalizing the Future," 247.

[16] Sambell, "Carnivalizing the Future," 251.

[17] Carol Farley Kessler, "Bibliography of Utopian Fiction by United States Women 1836-1988," *Utopian Studies* 1 (1990): 7.

[18] Garrison, "Growing up Dystopian," 56.

The Boom in Dystopian Literature: Post 9/11 Climate

Ironically, the social and political conditions of the current environment make readers eager to consume dystopian narratives. Contemporary culture is saturated with dystopian imagery, for it is the familiar elements of current-day life coupled with the escapism of the future that make dystopias so appealing. Authors published more dystopian novels between 2000 and 2010 than in any other decade. Many of these texts center on child protagonists, indicating a communal uncertainty about the future.[19] Historian and education scholar Joshua Garrison reveals how this saturation of dystopian themes has extended into the realm of politics: "In the post-Columbine, post-9/11 mediascape, which is fueled by a fear and panic based discourse, hyperbole has ceased being hyperbolic-- when every statement is an overstatement, our bearings become unmoored and our ability to decode hyperbole atrophies."[20] Dystopian imagery has grown within a greater culture of fear, disseminating into contexts well beyond the literary as contemporary tumultuous national and global events create widespread panic. In this sense, the genre is founded in reality no matter how foreign it may seem, borrowing from and contributing to formative current events and political action.

9/11 shocked the American people into a state of paranoia and security. Feminist theorist and media scholar Melissa Ames examines the role that 9/11 played in creating a dystopian-loving culture, arguing that consumers of YA dystopian fiction are politically inclined adolescents. Like Garrison, she sees the flourishing of the genre as political, deeming dystopian fiction as inherently political due to its basis in current events. Though adolescent interest in the genre is logically indicative of a greater interest in the future, it is important to note that dystopian narratives can be consumed without politicizing readers.[21] As the intended YA audience likely remembers the aftermath of 9/11 rather than the actual attacks, Ames correlates the impact of 9/11 with the strengthening of civic engagement and conscience of young adults.[22] This national tragedy allowed for a popularization of dystopian imagery as well as subsequent civic action, demonstrating the political nature of imaging dystopian worlds and critiquing our current one.

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[19] Garrison, "Growing up Dystopian," 69; 67.

[20] Garrison, "Growing up Dystopian," 59.

Feminism in Dystopian Literature: Female Narration

Since dystopian narratives have historically told masculine stories, the market for feminist dystopias is a fairly recent one. Feminist scholar Dunja M. Mohr outlines the rise of feminist dystopias as parallel to the greater women's rights movement, citing Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937) as the earliest female dystopia.[23] Mohr attributes a renewed interest in dystopian narratives to the political energy of the 1960s, during which authors were eager to challenge masculinity and femininity, as Suzanne Collins and Veronica Roth have been praised for doing. According to Mohr, "Women writers do use the stock conventions of dystopia, but-- carrying patriarchy, technological advances, and the oppression of women to a logical extreme-- they refocus these to expose their interrelation with questions of gender hierarchy, biological reproduction, and women's rights; in short, with sexual politics."[24] Borrowing from the standard predominantly masculine dystopia, feminist dystopias critique structures of power that specifically endanger the female population. The emerging feminist subsection of dystopian literature centers on women's rights, as these are often the first to be lost in a dystopian society.

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[21] This brings into question authorial and genre intent-- should politicizing readers be the intention of dystopian fiction? If a dystopian narrative fails to spark action in a reader, has it failed? I consider YA dystopian narratives to be less inherently political than their adult counterparts because authors dilute content for younger readers. However, dystopian books catered toward adult audiences *should* be expected to contain political themes, politicize readers, and enact political action.

[22] Melissa Ames, "Engaging 'Apolitical' Adolescents: Analyzing the Popularity and Educational Potential of Dystopian Literature Post 9/11," *The High School Journal* 97 (2013): 5.

[23] Dunja M. Mohr, *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005), 34.

These feminist themes are frequently addressed through the unique perspective of the female narrator, who leads readers through a personal and gendered dystopian experience. Feminist scholar Renee R. Curry explores the effect of the "girl 'I' narrator," noting that the female narrator struggles to find a balance between conforming to and rebelling against the patriarchy-- "In other words, girls are continuously resisting both patriarchy's constraints as well as the constraints of feminist portrayals of them as victims."[25] Attempting to challenge the stereotype of the woman as the victim, female narrators of dystopian fiction empower women through rebellious action. Despite this, female narrators are still limited in their expressions of sexuality, navigating a nebulous system of patriarchal boundaries that frown upon female sexual desire. While Curry's text is over twenty years old, it still rings true in its discussion of female sexuality and the female body:

> In popular culture as well as in the literature we study in our college classrooms, the icons of the Girl are constantly being rewritten… Told she can do anything and become anything, she is also infantilized and expected to keep her second place in a patriarchal world of glass ceilings and second shifts. Told to develop her mind, she is simultaneously bombarded with messages that reinforce the ancient message that her body is the primary source of her power, that she is primarily decorative, that she should have a model's body, that she should be beautiful within a narrow range of cultural stereotypes… On the one hand the Girl in popular culture is an endangered species… Yet on the other hand, girlish vulnerability is simultaneously being reinscribed as Girl Power by bands, zines, and films that acknowledge the culture's violence but portray girls as active perpetrators and self defenders rather than passive victims.[26]

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[24] Mohr, *Worlds Apart?,* 36.

[25] Renee R. Curry, "I Ain't No FRIGGIN' LITTLE WIMP: The Girl 'I' Narrator in Contemporary Fiction," in *The Girl: Constructions of the Girl in Contemporary Fiction by Women,* ed. Ruth O. Saxton (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 97.

[26] Ruth O. Saxton (Ed.), "Introduction," in *The Girl: Constructions of the Girl in Contemporary Fiction by Women* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1998), xxi.

Female narrators enter this convoluted literary world defined by mixed messages of empowerment and objectification. While the sheer existence of a female narrator in dystopian fiction challenges the masculine norm of the genre, this character continues to be subject to judgement based on expressions of sexuality and gender deviance. Narration from the feminine perspective represents progress in the genre, but patriarchal expectations strictly restrict just what these characters can express.

Limitations and Personal Contributions

There are plenty of sources that conduct close readings of my case studies using feminist theory, specifically investigating the feminine and masculine traits of Katniss and Tris. However, there is a lack of intersectionality between gender and sexuality in these arguments. Though some scholars criticize the ways in which these heroines perpetuate the gender binary, the scholarship is dominantly positive, depicting Katniss and Tris as gender-bending and progressive. There is also a lack of scholarship on female sexuality in YA literature.[27] While surveys have been done on queer representation in YA literature, the focus is often on male homosexuality, and female queerness is secondary if present at all.[28] Some criticisms of sexuality in these texts scrutinize the excessive presence of romance, an argument I agree with, but few scholars take this a step further to pose questions around sexuality or the possibility of straightness as a survival tactic.

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[27] Exceptions include one primer text and one dissertation: Beth Younger, *Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2009); Caroline E. Jones, “Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature” (PhD diss., Illinois State University, 2006); For the purposes of my research, I will be using “queer” as an umbrella term to categorize those who identify as LGBTQIA+, whether closeted, questioning, or somewhere in between.

[28] Studies on queer representation and sex in YA literature include: Mark Callister et al., “A Content Analysis of the Prevalence and Portrayal of Sexual Activity in Adolescent Literature,” *Journal of Sex Research* 49 (2012); Antero Garcia, *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature: Challenging Genres* (Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2013); Melanie D. Koss and William H. Teale, “What’s Happening in YA Literature? Trends in Books for Adolescents,” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52 (2009): 563-72.

While there is extensive information available on the dystopian heroine and the record-breaking sales of *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, scholars have paid little attention to exactly how fans react to these female characters. Beyond popular sources like Goodreads and Common Sense Media, I have not found a study that surveys varying reception to these texts. I am specifically interested in how young female readers perceive Katniss and Tris, but there is a lack of scholarship available that explores reactions of different readership demographics. I begin with the cultural assumption that readers view Katniss and Tris as I once did-- as feminist, badass heroines. I have not found the scholarship to corroborate this, leading me to instead rely on primary sources accessible to young fans themselves. Information on the identity of the reviewer is not always available on these forums, further limiting my understanding of contemporary perceptions of Katniss and Tris.

Queer narratives are missing entirely from these case studies, and scholars and authors have not envisioned the potential persecution a queer person could face in a dystopian or totalitarian world. I intend to explore the ways in which performances of heteronormativity recuperate gender deviance. I will investigate how straightness is used as a tool for surviving in and subscribing to a violently binaristic world, refusing to treat gender and sexuality as separate entities. This will illuminate how straightness allows for Katniss and Tris’s masculine traits. Thus, my re-reading of these texts serves to recuperate the lack of intersectionality in scholarship on gender and sexuality in YA.

Methodology

In order to understand the intersections of gender and sexuality and the function of straightness in *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, my research will take the form of a multimodal analysis. I will begin with a symptomatic analysis to examine the cultural era in which Collins and Roth published their books, followed by a close reading of how the authors depict gender deviance and heteronormative performances. I will weave a reception analysis into my discussion to highlight how young female audiences perceive Katniss and Tris. These methods combine to form a critical, multiperspectival analysis on survival and sexuality in these case studies.

A symptomatic analysis provides context for the literary genre and climate that these texts belong to. This method seeks to answer the question, "Why this, then?" Symptomatic analysis characterizes a text as a product of a distinct cultural moment and system of distribution, considering factors like production and political economy.[29] This entails determining who produces a text, what cultural and political limitations dictate its content and potential audience, and how that audience may respond. More specifically, for this research, this analysis offers background information on how the dystopian genre has evolved within YA literature. It will inform a close reading by grounding the representations of gender and sexuality in my case studies in a clear historical timeframe. For example, 9/11 was a formative national and global event that contributed to the rise of the genre in the 2000s. Through exploring how the texts reflect their times, a symptomatic analysis questions what made 2000s audiences eager to consume dystopian imagery. One notable limitation of this method is the overwhelming amount of material on the cultural implications of 9/11 and the early 2000s as a whole. It is difficult to accurately summarize the culture of such a tumultuous time period without excluding certain events or cultural trends. I outline the moments that I believe are most relevant to the dystopian genre while also paying attention to the greater cultural and political environment of the 2000s.

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[29] Douglas Kellner, "Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture," in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader,* ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2011), 10.

Close reading analysis questions how texts construct images and express ideological positions. At times, this method manifests itself in careful attention to depictions of identity markers such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. Theories such as Judith Butler's definition of gender performativity aid in feminist and queer readings of these case studies, as I will specifically take note of how authors describe and imply gender, sexuality, and intimacy in these texts to corroborate the dominance of heteronormative narratives.[30] Beyond the few moments of physical intimacy shared by Katniss and Tris and their boyfriends, there are few explicit references to sexuality in *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*. Collins and Roth present Katniss and Tris's sexualities as in tandem with their boyfriend's. This speaks to two conflicting assumptions about children in literature: that they are without sexuality, and that they are heterosexual. In this sense, queer children are doubly negated as sexual and non-heterosexual beings.[31] Representations of young female sexuality face intensified repression based on the intersecting stigmas surrounding female desire and adolescent sexuality.[32] Collins and Roth do not heavily explore Katniss and Tris's sexualities. They instead imply heteronormativity. This reveals a greater trend in YA literature regarding representations of queerness, for narratives of queer romance do not exist in YA unless they are at the forefront of the plot.[33] In other words, queerness in YA does not exist outside of books labeled as queer fiction. This is reflected in the scholarship regarding sexuality and YA, as plenty of studies exist on gay and lesbian YA books, but scholars fail to analyze protagonist sexuality if not explicitly labeled as queer.[34] *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* do not fall under the category of queer fiction. With this in mind, I do not intend to claim that Katniss and Tris are queer characters. Instead, I wish to use a close reading analysis to make space for discussions of female sexuality beyond heterosexuality in these case studies.

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[30] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999).

[31] Jessica Kander, "Reading queer subtexts in children's literature" (PhD diss., Eastern Michigan University, 2011), 5.

[32] Caroline E. Jones, "Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature" (PdD diss., Illinois State University, 2006), 2.

[33] Melanie D. Koss and William H. Teale, "What's Happening in YA Literature? Trends in Books for Adolescents," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52 (2009): 567.

In the case of sexuality in *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, what is not said often speaks louder than what is. Children's literature scholar Jessica Kander writes, "It is the very act of editing or avoiding sexuality or sexual identity in children's literature that reads to subtextualization."[35] Here, Kander is referring to the reading of queer subtexts, a close reading method inspired by the work of queer theorist Alexander Doty. Queer subtexts are informal or implicit references to sexuality in a text constructed through "influences during the production of texts; historically specific cultural readings and uses of texts by self-identified gays, lesbians, bisexuals, queers; and adopting reception positions that can be considered 'queer' in some way, regardless of a person's declared sexual and gender allegiances."[36] This method makes sense of the implicit. It provides an opportunity to imagine a space for queerness in narratives that are otherwise predominantly heterosexual, reversing the "essentializing categories of sexual identity under which most people function."[37] As implicit references to sexuality far outnumber explicit references in these case studies, this kind of close reading helps to ground these references in formal analysis. A heterosexual reading ignores queer subtexts, disregarding how protagonists wrestle with their sexual desires. The subjective nature of queer subtexts means that these readings are not universally recognized or "regulated as stringently as explicit depictions of queerness ultimately allowing for a wider readership."[38] The reliance on the identity of the reader is a limitation of the method, as their race, gender, class, and sexuality will influence which semiotic clues they find meaningful. My positionality as a white, queer woman and feminist places me in a position to criticize the heteronormative scripts in my case studies. In this sense, I am not an authority on the matter because of my positionality.

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[34] For an annotated bibliography of lesbian children's and YA fiction, see: Jones, "Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature," 211-222.

[35] Kander, "Reading queer subtexts," 11.

[36] Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xi.

[37] Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, 15.

To complete the analysis of my case studies and highlight the power of the consumer, I will incorporate a reception analysis into my discussion. While symptomatic analyses examine the cultural and political forces surrounding a text's inception, a reception analysis builds upon this by exploring the subjectivity of reception based on consumer identity. This method considers the political implications of a text, exploring status and those who offer praise versus criticism.[39] Distinguishing between critics and the average consumer offers a useful opportunity to address primary sources in my research, specifically forums like Goodreads and Common Sense Media. It also allows me to gather the opinions of certain demographics that I am unable to access through ethnographic research. I will use citations of book reviews written by young readers to offer a perspective beyond my own and that of scholars: actual consumers. The biggest limitation of this method is the lack of information available on Goodreads and Common Sense Media regarding the gender identity and sex of the reviewer. This will challenge me to include fan perspectives as anecdotes rather than opinions representative of the entire adolescent demographic.

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[38] Kander, "Reading queer subtexts," 44.
[39] Kellner, "Cultural Studies," 13.

The majority of my thesis will consist of a close reading analysis of case studies and a symptomatic analysis will serve to contextualize what preceded and informed the publication of these texts. Coupling this analysis with citations of book reviews both in agreement and in disagreement with my arguments will shift the attention back to consumer perceptions of Katniss and Tris. Together, these methods work to fill gaps in preexisting scholarship, prioritizing intersectionality and the voice of the consumer. This multimodal analysis will elucidate how representations of straightness and femininity in these texts speak to American identity and culture in the 2000s.

A Note on Feminist and Queer Theory

Prior to *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, some of the first well-received images of female fighter characters in the media emerged in *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997). These revolutionary heroines embodied masculinity in their adeptness at shooting and killing, but costuming complicated their gender performance. While Xena and Buffy fought for themselves, they did so in bras and thongs. In this way, they carefully balanced femininity and masculinity. Author Susan J. Douglas writes, “the warrior women were switchboards between conventional male and female traits where the wires got crossed,” simultaneously empowering and contributing to the sexualization of women.[40] The depictions of Xena and Buffy’s bodies reaffirmed unrealistic beauty standards for women, implying that athleticism and wit is only half the battle. Survival was depicted as partially contingent on sex appeal.[41] The legacy of these shows on contemporary depictions of female fighters is crucial in understanding the gender and heterosexual performances in these texts. While Collins and Roth certainly intended to create empowered female role models, they still sexualize Katniss and Tris through their dependency on romantic partners. Rather than fighting off men, they survive with the help of men, a privilege they earn through physical intimacy.

When discussing queerness, it is essential to understand the binary of both gender and sexuality, as well as how these binaries are operable for Katniss and Tris. Understanding identity as male or female, masculine or feminine, and straight or gay excludes all forms of queerness--both within gender and sexuality. Performing mainly masculine traits as fighters while still expressing femininity within interpersonal relationships, Katniss and Tris’s gender performance

[40] Susan J. Douglas, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism: How Pop Culture Took us from Girl Power to Girls Gone Wild* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2010), 100.

[41] Douglas, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism.*

falls outside of the gender binary. Similarly, they present as straight with boyfriend counterparts while also expressing hesitancy to be physically intimate with them, complicating the authenticity of their heterosexual performances. Feminist theorist Judith Butler's scholarship defines the relationship between gender hierarchy and heterosexual normativity. Butler insists that gender hierarchy is responsible for heterosexual normativity, rather than the other way around. The two binaries do not feed off of each other-- there is instead a cause and effect relationship at play between gender hierarchy and heterosexual normativity.[42] Butler also explores the concept of gender performativity:

> The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an 'internal feature' of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, a hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures.[43]

In other words, gender performativity is made up of external cues chosen by an individual to express how they internally perceive their gender. Whether through makeup, clothing, hair, or other forms of self expression, our gender is made physical by how we present our bodies. Gender performance is what makes our gender identity visible to others, and in many cases, attractive to others.

Katniss and Tris are both sexual and *sexualized*. Apart from the explicit depictions of sexuality and intimacy in my case studies that demonstrate how these heroines experience sexual feelings, masculine female characters are often sexualized and perceived as sexually attractive by male audiences. This fetishization is based in their deviant gender performance. Female characters who express stereotypically masculine traits like athleticism and capacity for violence are seen as attractive in the eyes of male consumers. This gender deviance in female characters is

[42] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xii.
[43] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xv.

often paired with straightness, and this intersection serves as a reminder for men that these characters are still objects to be won and consumed. Cultural studies scholar Kelly Oliver describes female characters who hunt as “both hunters and prey,”[44] referring to the contrast between the sense of empowerment associated with surviving in the wild and the ways in which men sexualize these women. Oliver adds, “the question remains, however, whether these equal opportunity killers are new feminist role models or patriarchal fantasies of phallic girls with guns and arrows.”[45] While Katniss and Tris challenge traditional femininity through rigorous athleticism and other stereotypically masculine traits, this puts them at risk of being read as masculine by, and therefore attractive to, male readers. It is important to consider how the intersection of masculinity and straightness exhibited by Katniss and Tris subjects them to fetishization by male audiences.

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[44] Kelly Oliver, “Hunting Girls: Patriarchal Fantasy or Feminist Progress?” *Americana: The Journal of American Pop Culture* 12.1 (2013): 1.

[45] Oliver, “Hunting Girls,” 14.

Katniss: The Hunted Huntress

Katniss Everdeen is raised in the land that was once North America, though it looks nothing like it in *The Hunger Games.* Divided into twelve districts according to wealth, Panem functions as a well-oiled machine with the help of an oppressive government and the annual ritual of the Hunger Games. The governing Capitol selects one boy and one girl from each district to fight to the death in the Games, a televised event meant to entertain the elite and remind citizens of their inferiority. As a resident of the twelfth and poorest district, Katniss is well aware of her inferiority. After the death of her father, she becomes single-handedly responsible for feeding and supporting her mother and younger sister Prim, filling both parental roles at age eleven. Katniss's home environment allows little room for a childhood. She identifies as a hunter and a survivor long before the Games begin.

In many ways, Katniss's circumstances and surroundings define her femininity. She has no choice but to perform stereotypically masculine traits and prioritize supporting her family. Katniss displays gender deviance through her hunting ability, her role as the breadwinner of her family, and her consistent emotional reticence prior to and during the Games. Her romance with her co-tribute Peeta forgives these masculine traits, for Katniss's subscription to heteronormativity reassures the Capitol of her femininity. She is only able to survive by his side, for he presents her with the opportunity to display feminine vulnerability. Despite her ability to successfully feign this affection for Peeta when needed, Collins provides fruitful evidence of Katniss's discomfort with intimacy in multiple contexts, such as her insecurity about her body and her lack of physical attraction to Peeta. This complicates the probability of Katniss subscribing to straightness in any scenario but the Games, as the sole reason she remains invested in the relationship is to keep herself alive. She survives alongside Peeta by promoting a feminine image of herself eligible for heteronormativity.

Katniss's most gender deviant trait is her athleticism, which manifests in a knack for hunting that reflects the demands of her home environment. Certain feminine ideals are unattainable for Katniss amidst living in poverty and difficult familial conditions.[46] In this way, her gender deviance is seen as more acceptable in the context of her district since it is based on her need to survive. Cultural studies scholar Jessica Miller explores Katniss's masculinity as inevitable according to her situation:

> Katniss is an unusual female protagonist in the sense that her behavior, attitudes, temperament, and character seem to fit the norms of masculinity more than those of femininity. Although it's typical to think of fathers handing down certain skills to their sons and not their daughters, it was Katniss's father who taught her to hunt, use a bow and arrow, and forage in the woods for food and medicinal herbs-- the very skills that would be so crucial to her survival in the Hunger Games.[47]

Rather than engaging in stereotypically feminine hobbies, Katniss is a fighter. On the day of the reaping, she wakes up and heads straight to the woods.[48] Beyond a hole in the fence of District Twelve, Katniss has memorized every path, plant, and animal. As the sole provider for her family, she becomes savvy at taking risks and mastering her hunting form. Katniss's comfort with hunting is deviant from the prototype of the stereotypical female but absolutely mandatory in this kind of world, making the behavior less stigmatizing.

Though Katniss's hunting skills primarily serve to feed her family, hunting meant more to her than just survival in her pre-Games life. Archery is a passion for Katniss, for it connects her to the memory of her father and how he taught her to use a bow and arrow. It is also the basis of her lifelong friendship with her hunting partner, Gale.[49] Kelly Oliver notes that "Katniss lives to hunt… She is happiest when she is on the scent of her prey."[50] In the wild, Katniss can be herself, since the woods excuse her from traditional standards of femininity. She is not expected to perform cheerful femininity in this environment and instead proves herself through her capacity for hunting. Upon arriving at the Games, Katniss's masculine tolerance for violence extends beyond the context of hunting animals. Her ease with a bow and arrow and general athleticism serve as major advantages and sources of confidence. Once Katniss is able to get her hands on a bow and arrow, taking them from the body of a fallen tribute, she gains "...an entirely new perspective on the Games. I know I have tough opponents left to face. But I am no longer merely prey that runs and hides or takes desperate measures."[51] Hunting takes on new meaning for Katniss in the Games when humans become her prey. This does not phase Katniss: "*Remember,* I tell myself. *You're the hunter now, not them*. I get a firmer grasp on my bow and go on."[52] Even in extreme circumstances of human combat, Katniss's gender deviance persists, and she proves comfortable with doing what it takes to survive. This speaks to her most masculine traits as an athletic, risk-taking, and rebellious fighter.

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[46] Miranda A. Green-Barteet, "'I'm beginning to know who I am': The Rebellious Subjectivities of Katniss Everdeen and Tris Prior," in *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction,* ed. Sara K. Day et al. (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014), 37.

[47] Jessica Miller, "'She has no idea. The effect she can have.' Katniss and the Politics of Gender," in *The Hunger Games and Philosophy: A Critique of Pure Treason,* ed. George A. Dunn et al. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 146.

[48] The reaping occurs once a year in each district. Representatives from the Capitol draw the names of two "tributes" to determine who will represent the district in that year's Games.

Katniss further defies gender roles by acting as the primary breadwinner for her family, filling a role typically occupied by men. Her relationship with Prim is more than that of a close sisterhood. Katniss is responsible for Prim's survival. She gives Prim the chance to live by volunteering to take her place in the Games, a decision that could be interpreted as a maternal one.[53] However, Katniss is adamant about not wanting to start a family of her own, rejecting one of the main aspects of womanhood.[54] Her mother is alive, but she struggles with mental health while mourning the loss of her husband, "I suppose now that my mother was locked in some dark world of sadness, but at the time, all I knew was that I had not only lost a father, but a mother as well. At eleven years old, with Prim just seven, I took over as head of the family. I had no choice."[55] Katniss is conscious of filling both parental roles for Prim, balancing maternal care with paternal provision. Literary scholar Miranda A. Green-Barteet describes this caretaking aspect of Katniss's childhood as unusual, "Katniss simply does not have much room in her life for the pursuits of typical adolescent girls… Since her father's death, Katniss has been focused solely on keeping her family alive… Katniss has assumed a role most often reserved for men: that of protector and provider."[56] This reality does not allow for typical adolescent femininity. Due to the loss of her father, Katniss has no choice but to behave in ways designated as masculine, growing up rapidly to support her family.

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[49] Gale also functions to establish Katniss's straightness from the start of the book. The significance of this male-female friendship in her life perpetuates heteronormativity in Katniss's narrative, especially as readers later learn that Gale has romantic feelings for Katniss; Kander, "Reading queer subtexts," 24.

[50] Oliver, "Hunting Girls," 14.

[51] Collins, *The Hunger Games,* 197.

[52] Collins, *The Hunger Games,* 214.

Considering this difficult childhood, Katniss enters the Capitol with a tough exterior, hesitating to be emotionally vulnerable for the Games' expansive audience. Rather than embodying the stereotype of the sensitive or emotional woman, she cultivates emotional control for Panem. This is one of the first things that her mentor, Haymitch, notices about her as he tries to figure out how to best market Katniss to the Capitol during the pre-Games ceremonies. He jokes, "I don't know where you pulled that cheery, wavy girl on the chariot from, but I haven't seen her before or since," more often describing Katniss as "sullen and hostile."[57] This hostility is a defense mechanism that she developed over time, often manifesting in anger-- a particularly masculine emotion. Life in District Twelve demands that Katniss conceals more feminine emotions, "I can't let my fear show. Absolutely, positively, I am live on every screen in Panem."[58] Katniss has been trained to not show weakness throughout her whole life, a habit that only intensifies as her success in the Games depends on how she is perceived on screen.[59] She deviates from the standard of an emotional woman through exercising control over the emotions she lets Panem see, presenting herself as tough, confident, and competent.

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[53] When Prim's name is chosen at the reaping, Katniss exercises her right to volunteer as tribute, a sacrifice made so rarely that the representatives from the Capitol do not know how to proceed with protocol; Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 22.

[54] Ellyn Lem and Holly Hassel, "'Killer' Katniss and 'Lover Boy' Peeta: Suzanne Collin's Defiance of Gender-Genred Reading," in *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy*, ed. Mary F. Pharr et al. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2012), 126.

[55] Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 27.

[56] Green-Barteet, "'I'm beginning to know who I am,'" 38.

Katniss balances masculinity in her public life, presenting as a resilient fighter, while privately internalizing femininity through various insecurities. These feminine traits are therefore far less apparent in her daily life than her masculine traits. Literary scholars Ellyn Lem and Holly Hassel describe Katniss as a "male-identified character" in deconstructing the balancing act of her gender performance, "First, we contend that Katniss Everdeen is a female character who balances traditionally masculine qualities such as athleticism, independence, self-sufficiency, and a penchant for violence with traditionally feminine qualities such as idealized physical female beauty and vulnerability."[60] She is reliant on her athleticism for survival while themes of beauty and vulnerability tend to only come to the surface in instances of romance or intimacy. Katniss is tough to a certain point, but the difficulty she experiences with being vulnerable, open, and intimate with others is indicative of her femininity.

Katniss reveals her femininities in moments of intimacy wherein her body is the center of attention. One of the first signs of Katniss's vulnerability regarding intimacy takes place when

[57] Collins, *The Hunger Games,* 116-117.
[58] Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 223.
[59] Lem and Hassel, "'Killer' Katniss and ' Lover Boy' Peeta", 122.
[60] Lem and Hassel, "'Killer' Katniss and ' Lover Boy' Peeta", 118.

she is preparing for the pre-Games ceremonies and interviews at the Capitol. Her stylists and mentors seek to transform her into a glamorous, eye-catching tribute according to the beauty standards of the Capitol. They literally wash away her past and the way she previously presented herself. Katniss describes this humiliating grooming process: “This has included scrubbing down my body with a gritty foam that has removed not only dirt but at least three layers of skin, turning my nails into uniform shapes, and primarily, ridding my body of hair… leaving me like a plucked bird, ready for roasting. I don’t like it.”[61] Katniss expresses discomfort with her body being rendered stereotypically feminine, serving as yet another reminder of her deviance from typical feminine beauty. Growing up, she experienced a repression of agency in expressing her gender performance. Beauty was far from Katniss’s biggest priority in District Twelve since luxuries like hygiene and fashion were unattainable. Dressing her in a full-length gown and heels for the first time in her life, the stylists create a hyper-feminine, unrecognizable version of Katniss.[62] Ellyn Lem and Holly Hassel refer to this construction of Katniss’s femininity as “artificial,” recognizing how drastically different Katniss’s own gender performance is from the one that her stylists force upon her.[63] The feminine transformation that Katniss undergoes at the Capitol foreshadows her future intimate experiences and the anxiety she feels surrounding her body.

As Katniss grows closer to Peeta throughout the pre-Games celebrations, her mentors begin to promote a romantic relationship between the two of them. They tactically convince Katniss and Peeta to present as a couple rather than a team in order to gain a following in the Capitol. By doing this, they reinforce the “cultural construction that proclaims young women cannot be happy nor have an identity without boys."[64] This construction dominates romance narratives within YA literature, for Katniss realizes that she will survive better with Peeta than she will on her own. Her role in this relationship reaffirms her femininity in the traditional sense, making her eligible for heterosexual romance. Judith Butler refers to this theme as "the heterosexualization of desire," in which "discreet and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine'" are "understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female.'"[65] Regardless of Katniss's gender deviance, she fills the feminine role in this relationship. When Peeta admits to having feelings for Katniss on live TV, the pair gain rapid notoriety as "the star-crossed lovers from District Twelve."[66] Katniss is hesitant of this fake partnership from the start, though, for Haymitch admits "it's all a big show."[67] Still, the Capitol worships their performance as lovers, rewarding Katniss with material benefits like medicine and food for playing the part of devoted girlfriend. With this encouragement, Katniss consciously subscribes to Capitol standards for femininity and heterosexuality by feigning a romance with Peeta. These standards are demanded of her in order to survive.

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[61] Collins, *The Hunger Games,* 61.
[62] Collins, *The Hunger Games,* 115.
[63] Lem and Hassel, “‘Killer’ Katniss and ‘ Lover Boy’ Peeta,” 124.

Katniss's subscription to straightness pleases both her mentors and the public, but it clearly does not come naturally to her as her relationship with Peeta is devoid of romance. Writer Kailyn McCord categorizes their relationship as "practical," noting that "she [Katniss] approaches love like she approaches everything: with a practical survivalist attitude."[68] In this sense, McCord does not describe romance, but rather tactic, as Katniss subscribes to ideals of heteronormativity to help her survive. Literary scholar Jane Pulliam notes how this relationship advantageously positions Katniss as “Panem’s sweetheart,” though “Katniss must be schooled in how to play this stereotypically feminine role, which does not come to her naturally.”[69] Katniss’s relationship with Peeta is grounded in her unchanging first priority-- survival. This romance serves to feminize Katniss’s masculine character, helping her win praise from the Capitol that she would otherwise be unable to attract on her own.

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[64] Beth Younger, *Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2009), 91.

[65] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 23.

[66] Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 135.

[67] Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 135.

[68] Margaret Skinner and Kailyn McCord, "*The Hunger Games*: A Conversation," *Jung Journal: Culture and Psyche* 6 (2012): 112.

Katniss’s hesitancy to be intimate with Peeta presents their relationship as functional over authentic. She has no real reaction to their first kiss other than that it was “probably overdue anyway since he’s [Peeta] right, we are supposed to be madly in love.”[70] Katniss engages in small acts of intimacy simply for material gain, frequently forgetting that she is even expected to be affectionate with Peeta. She cynically refers to their relationship as “the romance thing.”[71] In this way, her subscription to femininity and heteronormativity is disingenuous and unfamiliar, complicating the likelihood of her being with Peeta in any scenario but the Games. Katniss’s survival is hugely dependent on how the two of them depict their relationship to the public. Her romance with Peeta is circumstantial. He enables the forgiveness of Katniss’s masculine traits by helping her present as feminine, heterosexual, and therefore attractive to the public.[72]

Katniss’s reluctance to share physical intimacy with Peeta has deeper implications beyond her commitment to survival. She is physically repulsed by Peeta’s body, “And, all right, maybe the idea of him being naked makes me uncomfortable.”[73] When he asks her for a kiss, Katniss notes, “I burst out laughing because the whole thing is so revolting I can’t stand it.”[74] These moments serve as distinct clues about Katniss’s sexuality, representing the possibility that she could in fact identify as queer. Her explicit lack of attraction to Peeta is not only emotional, but physical. She resists fully embracing their relationship, feeling more comfortable as Peeta's caretaker than his intimate partner. These references to sexuality represent the possibility of queerness in Katniss's narrative. Her relationship with Peeta functions to recuperate her gender deviance, allowing her to present as straight, subscribe to the Capitol's demands, and survive.

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[69] June Pulliam, “Real or Not Real-- Katniss Everdeen Loves Peeta Mellark: The Lingering Effects of Discipline in the ‘Hunger Games’ Trilogy,” in *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian,* ed. Sara K. Day et al. (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014), 178.

[70] Collins, *The Hunger Games,* 260.

[71] Collins, *The Hunger Games,* 264.

[72] This mirrors reader, writer, and publisher’s attraction to, and comfort with, the same.

[73] Collins, *The Hunger Games,* 256.

[74] Collins, *The Hunger Games,* 257.

Tris: The Selfless Stiff

Beatrice Prior is raised to be selfless and modest. Her family instills these values in her according to the greater culture of the Abnegation faction. Defined by selflessness, Abnegation serves the community, leading modest and simple lives. In *Divergent*, factions are sorted by values rather than race or class, "Decades ago our ancestors realized that it is not political ideology, religious belief, race, or nationalism that is to blame for a warring world. Rather, they determined that it was the fault of human personality… they divided into factions that sought to eradicate those qualities they believed responsible for the world's disarray."[75] In a seemingly post-race society, each faction is defined by a core value-- Amity are the kind, Erudite are the intelligent, Candor are the honest, and Dauntless are the brave. Children are born into factions but take aptitude tests at the age of sixteen to sort them into new factions-- if they make the choice to abandon their own.[76] Leaving Abnegation epitomizes selfishness. Beatrice shocks herself and her family by choosing Dauntless and leaving a familiar space for a dangerous one. As a Dauntless recruit, gender deviance isn't an option-- Beatrice adapts to the faction's hypermasculine environment through physical strength, bravery, and resilience. She recuperates this by manipulating her femininity to attract a boyfriend ranked highly in Dauntless, using straightness to secure her spot in the faction.

Abnegation wear gray everyday, for anything more decorative attracts too much attention. The faction teaches Beatrice obedience and conformity, deeming any attention to appearance as vain. These values stunt her identity formation, "The gray clothes, the plain hairstyle, and the unassuming demeanor of my faction are supposed to make it easier for me to forget myself, and easier for everyone else to forget me too."[77] Identity in Abnegation is not individual, and there is little room for self expression, exploration, or deviance. This has considerable implications on Beatrice's gender performance, for she has no agency in what she wears or what she looks like. In a society that claims to be post-race, post-gender, and structured according to values, Abnegation's uniformity also reveals how dependent factions are on the gender binary and the structural oppression of women. In this way, Tris's childhood experience with gender performance deviates from the norm, in which many kids self-regulate their gender expression to avoid being perceived as "non-normative," or queer.[78] Adherence to faction standards is a stricter societal pressure than adherence to gender norms in Abnegation.[79] This hinders Beatrice's understanding and expressions of femininity and masculinity, for she is unable to manipulate her appearance according to her gender identity. The Abnegation values instilled in Beatrice prompt a difficult transition, as well as a sense of opportunity, upon entering the realm of Dauntless.

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[75] Veronica Roth, *Divergent* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2011), 42.

[76] Rarely, test results are inconclusive, identifying those individuals known as "Divergent," or outside of the faction system. When Tris fails the aptitude test and learns that she is Divergent, her decision between factions becomes even more consequential. Divergent people are seen as outsiders and often end up factionless living on the street. Being Divergent is an undesirable trait that puts people at risk of homelessness and even government persecution, as leaders are unaware and fearful of what Divergents are capable of.

Defined by bravery and physical strength, the Dauntless headquarters are a masculine environment. The militant expectations set by Dauntless only intensify Judith Butler's understanding of the "unity of gender" as a "regulatory practice," which enforces a "compulsory heterosexuality."[80] In this way, Dauntless sets standards for how recruits should perform both gender and sexuality. Beatrice first attempts to conform to this masculinity after completing the first stage of initiation, introducing herself as "Tris," thinking, "A new place, a new name. I can be remade here."[81] With a distinctly less feminine name, Tris cuts ties with her birth name and faction. Athleticism, another key value of the Dauntless faction, presents challenges for Tris. Unlike Katniss, physicality does not come naturally to her, so strength is a learned masculine trait rather than an innate one. Tris develops a reputation of being a weak recruit, and fellow Dauntless mock her Abnegation roots and gender by calling her "Stiff."[82] Like Katniss, she refuses to let others see her pain, displaying an emotional control when teased that is deviant from traditional femininity.[83] She grows tougher both physically and emotionally, rapidly improving in training. Tris surprises those around her with her mastery of and passion for combat. She rejects feminine signifiers, joking, "I can't fight in a dress," and acknowledges her body's physical change, "Dauntless initiation has stolen whatever softness my body had."[84] Tris works hard to meet the masculine standards for strength and bravery embodied by Dauntless, expressing gender deviance in order to transform into a skilled fighter.

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[77] Roth, *Divergent*, 6.

[78] Kander, "Reading queer subtexts," 24-25.

[79] Green-Barteet, "'I'm beginning to know who I am,'" 43.

[80] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 42.

Tris's femininity plays a unique role in *Divergent* as Tris associates femininity with sex appeal. Butler claims a causal relationship between gender and desire, indicating that the way an individual experiences and acts on desire is rooted in their own gender expression.[85] In this way, Tris turns her femininity on and off to attract Four, a menacing Dauntless leader. She balances her gender deviance to impress him, manipulating her gender performance to appear more conventionally feminine and attractive. Tris uses femininity to her advantage, for while she predominantly presents masculine with the aforementioned gender deviant traits, she equates being sexy with being feminine. Though she cannot fight in a dress, Tris's wardrobe in Dauntless is drastically different from the gray dress of Abnegation. The tighter, more revealing Dauntless uniform exposes new parts of Tris, and she enhances this by getting multiple tattoos.[86] She uses clothing and makeup to have control over her gender performance and insecurities about her appearance, "I am not pretty--my eyes are too big and my nose is too long."[87] Tris's expressions of femininity mainly lie in the use of clothing and tattoos to counter her insecurities and to attract Four's attention. This is an interesting departure from the physical masculinity she otherwise presents, revealing how dynamics of power and romance shape her gender expression.

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[81] Roth, *Divergent*, 60.

[82] Casey Cothran and Robert Prickett, "Divergent Complexity: Veronica Roth and the New Dystopian Heroine," *SIGNAL Journal* 1 (2014): 28.

[83] Roth, *Divergent*, 72.

[84] Roth, *Divergent*, 170, 167.

[85] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 30.

Reciprocating Tris's interest and taking a liking to her early on in training, Four plays a significant role in Tris's success and ability to move through the Dauntless rankings. He remains hard on her, though, treating her as cruelly as he would any other recruit, "You and I will *never* be in the same faction."[88] From the first moment that Tris sees Four, she is simultaneously intrigued by and afraid of him. Tris's fear converts to attraction in a curious way as they start to develop a closer relationship. While Four remains emotionally abusive towards Tris as her superior, he also starts flirting with her, representing a sexualized display of authority. This complicates her understanding of Four as an authority figure capable of determining her future, as Tris also sees him as a romantic prospect. In this sense, Four "simultaneously embodies desire and danger for [Tris]" as her attraction to fear intensifies.[89] Tris is candid about her fear of Four-- "You're a little scary, Four"-- as she comes to terms with her feelings for him.[90] Her skewed understanding of romance and power becomes clear as their relationship shifts from one of a superior and a recruit to one defined by that *and* romantic interest. Four simultaneously represents power, fear, attraction, and protection for Tris, complicating the romantic quality of their romance.

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[86] Cothran and Prickett, "Divergent Complexity," 28; Tris's tattoos accentuate her femininity and sex appeal.

[87] Roth, *Divergent*, 87.

[88] Roth, *Divergent*, 106.

[89] Sara K. Day (Ed.), "Docile Bodies, Dangerous Bodies: Sexual Awakening and Social Resistance in Young Adult Dystopian Novels," in *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014), 87.

[90] Roth, *Divergent*, 287.

Tris's complex association of fear with attraction speaks to the way she was raised and taught about sexuality. The modest nature of Abnegation translates into distinct codes for sexuality and intimacy, deeming affection as private and taboo. Because of this, Tris saw no representations of intimacy growing up, "My parents love each other, but they rarely show affection… They taught us that physical contact is powerful, so I have been wary of it since I was young."[91] Her understanding of intimacy is skewed from this repression of sexuality instilled by her family and faction. As a result, Tris is uncomfortable not only with engaging in intimacy but also with watching others engage in it, to which her friends mock, "Your Abnegation is showing. The rest of us are all right with a little affection in public."[92] Tris has a discomfort with intimacy that her peers from other factions do not share, reinforcing how Abnegation not only restricts expressions of femininity and masculinity but also represses expressions of sexuality. Sara K. Day adds, "Despite the fact that she throws herself into the risky physical challenges of the Dauntless initiation, furthermore, Tris expresses hesitation when confronted by the more emotional challenges that result from her attraction to Four."[93] Tris is able to learn the bravery and athleticism required by Dauntless, but she struggles to leave behind her upbringing in terms of associations with romance. Roth hints at the complexities of Tris's sexuality through her complicated psychological associations with family, intimacy, and violence.

Despite the hesitancy that Tris feels to engage in intimacy with Four, she is clearly physically attracted to him. She differs from Katniss in this way, openly describing sexual feelings for Four even if she may have trouble acting on them. Beyond finding him physically attractive, Tris is sexually drawn to Four, frequently expressing moments of lust such as, “I stare at him. I feel my heartbeat everywhere, even in my toes. I feel like doing something bold… I reach out and take his hand. His fingers slide between mine. I can’t breathe.”[94] Her fear towards Four manifests in a unique, graphic kind of sexual attraction. She is as explicit about this attraction as she is about her fear of sex, though.[95] Roth presents sex as something to be feared, establishing Four’s power over Tris as early on as their first kiss by highlighting his *strong* fingers and *firm* kiss.[96] Tris frequently makes references to his body, his appearance, and his embodiment of power that she finds so attractive. Their relationship is grounded in mutual sexual attraction, but the undertones of Four’s power speak to his ability to help Tris survive.

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[91] Roth, *Divergent*, 32.
[92] Roth, *Divergent*, 82.
[93] Day, "Docile Bodies," 87.

Once Tris commits to Four, her performance and rankings as a Dauntless recruit sky rocket. This is surely no coincidence though, as her proximity to Four offers Tris distinct advantages over the other recruits. He is able to keep an eye out for her, supporting Tris and offering a sense of refuge from other cruel Dauntless leaders. Tris finishes training in first place and immediately is congratulated with a kiss from Four, describing this victory as the best moment of her life.[97] Her ability to finish first is inextricably tied to her relationship with Four, for had she not chosen him, she likely would have experienced a different fate. In this sense, Tris’s heteronormative performance saves her life, for without Four on her side, she ran the risk of living factionless. Though it is grounded in genuine physical attraction, Tris’s straightness is tactical and circumstantial. It manifests in a relationship with a powerful Dauntless leader, guaranteeing her a place in the faction. By subscribing to straightness, Tris is able to survive in a world in which every odd is against her as a Divergent woman.

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[94] Roth, *Divergent*, 275.

[95] Roth, *Divergent*, 393.

[96] Roth, *Divergent*, 338; This speaks to a greater pattern in YA literature in which sex is not celebrated, but is rather depicted as something to be feared. In this way, expressions of sexuality in YA are limited to language, as physical attraction is rarely acted on with physical sexual acts; Kander, “Reading queer subtexts,” 31-32.

[97] Roth, *Divergent*, 415; This victory is two-fold, with respect to training and performing heteronormativity.

Discussion

The Hunger Games and *Divergent* contribute to the popular association of heroism with whiteness and straightness. While Collins and Roth did somewhat challenge the gender binary by creating athletic, tough, and independent heroines, Katniss and Tris are only slightly deviant. They set exclusive and unrealistic standards for the acceptable contemporary literary heroine, teaching readers that women must delicately balance femininity with masculinity in order to be seen as attractive and successful. Aside from the masculine traits they possess, Katniss and Tris occupy dominant identity categories when it comes to race and sexuality. Collins and Roth failed to create representation for readers of color and queer readers, perpetuating the perception of whiteness and straightness as superior. In a world in which so many of the pop culture icons we are taught to look up to are white and straight, Katniss and Tris are just two other names to add to the list.

Just as sexuality is not an explicit focal point of these texts, race is almost never addressed. Collins and Roth do not distinctly racialize their protagonists, instead implying their whiteness like they do their straightness. Collins describes the origins of District Twelve as Appalachian, inherently referring to its contemporary demographic.[98] She refers to Gale's "olive skin" to compare his appearance to Katniss's: "He could be my brother."[99] Never explicitly racializing Katniss, Collins proceeds to refer to the race of other characters with signifiers such as "porcelain white skin," "pasty-faced," and "pale skin."[100] She only distinguishes two characters of color who hail from District 11, including Rue, who becomes Katniss's close friend and ally. Collins describes Rue's "dark brown skin and eyes," yet literary scholar Mary J. Couzelis complicates this by attributing Rue's early death to a symbol of white sacrifice.[101] She criticizes Rue's death as being "a vehicle for Katniss's maturation," noting that "in film and literature, African American characters appear briefly to assist in the development of a white protagonist and then either disappear after or are sacrificed as part of the white character's transformation."[102] It is worth examining how the only character of color significant to the book's plot dies early on. There is an interesting parallel in *Divergent* with Christina, Tris's friend who Roth indirectly racializes by describing her mother as "dark-skinned."[103] Christina is very much adjacent to Tris's character growth. The use of people as color as supporting characters speaks to a prioritization of white narratives in these texts.

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[98] Mary J. Couzelis, "The Future is Pale: Race in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopian Novels," in *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults*: *Brave New Teenagers*, ed. Balaka Basu et al. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 138.

[99] Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 8.

[100] Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 77, 78, 95.

Similarly to *The Hunger Games*, race is almost invisible in *Divergent*. Roth speaks to how the book's faction system is partially responsible for this in an interview for Amazon:

> Members of their society don't focus on certain things: race, religion, sexual orientation, political affiliation, etc… When I think about it more, I realize they're doing the exact same thing we do, but with different criteria by which to distinguish ourselves from others. Instead of your skin color, it's the color of your shirt that people assess, or the results of your aptitude test. Same problem, different system.[104]

Roth takes a somewhat ambiguous stance on the lack of racialization in her text-- perhaps the categorization of people according to values is a metaphor for racial segregation, or perhaps the dearth of explicit references to race is simply an oversight.[105] Either way, the book reads as problematically whitewashed. Couzelis describes the implications of literary whitewashing,

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[101] Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 45.

[102] Couzelis, "The Future is Pale," 140.

[103] Roth, *Divergent*, 178.

[104] "A Q&A with Veronica Roth," Amazon, accessed September 22, 2019, https://www.amazon.com/Divergent-Veronica-Roth/dp/0062024027.

[105] For more information on race and segregation in *Divergent*, see: Suzanne Rosak, "Coming of Age in a Divided City: Cultural Hybridity and Ethnic Injustice in Sandra Cisneros and Veronica Roth," *Children's Literature* 44 (2016): 61-77.

"Novels that ignore race or present a monochromatic future imply that other ethnicities do not survive in the future or that their participation in the future is not important. Even narratives where authors pretend racial tensions have been eliminated in the future risk trivializing contemporary encounters teens have with prejudice."[106] Specifically in the context of a dystopia, a lack of representation of people of color is especially dangerous. It implies the superiority of the white race and the real probability of a world in which only white people exist. *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* tell nearly exclusively white stories, excluding people of color from futuristic worlds.

Katniss and Tris operate in their dystopian worlds hand in hand with their boyfriends. This subscription to heteronormative scripts implies that they are incomplete without men.[107] Furthermore, these case studies teach girls that women cannot survive without men. How does the romantic element of these books detract from the feminist power and independence of their heroines? Can we really call Katniss and Tris feminist icons if they cannot function without a man by their side? Katherine R. Broad criticizes the dominance of romance in *The Hunger Games*, "For all its attention to Katniss's rebellion, *The Hunger Games* trilogy is, significantly, a love story… The courtship narrative therefore says a great deal about Katniss's revolutionary potential and, in turn, raises significant questions about her revered status as a feminist icon for readers of all ages."[108] Collins disempowers Katniss by shifting the book's focus from her self-sufficiency to her role as a girlfriend. Similarly, in *Divergent*, Tris comes to associate survival so closely with Four that she loses all independence and agency over her own experiences. Collins and Roth undermine the power of their protagonists with the characters of Peeta and Four. These romances reduce Katniss and Tris to objects of sexual and romantic desire rather than feminist role models.

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[106] Couzelis, "The Future is Pale," 131.

[107] Younger, *Learning Curves*, 91.

[108] Katherine R. Broad, "The Dandelion in the Spring," in *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers*, ed. Balaka Basu et al. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 118.

In addition to disempowering Katniss and Tris as independent women, romance in *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* functions to further perpetuate the perceived superiority of straightness. These heroines can only survive in relationships, but more specifically heterosexual relationships, responding to and contributing to straightness as a norm. Sara K. Day criticizes their subscription to heteronormativity as a missed opportunity for normalizing queerness in these texts:

> Because these novels also illustrate (or perpetuate) questions of control and embodiment through their insistence upon straight romance and desire, assumptions about heteronormativity also problematize their messages of empowerment through sexual awakening… For young audiences who might be expected to experience and explore sexuality for the first time, however, this parade of straight girls who fall in love with straight boys functions similarly to the implicit insistence on whiteness, inasmuch as other possibilities seem to be ignored or marginalized instead of explored as logical options and extensions of contemporary life… The sexual awakenings and resultant social resistance embodied by these female protagonists, then, reinforces contemporary cultural expectations of young women's coming of age rather than offering a potential divergence from such gendered limitations.[109]

These texts ignore the possibility of any sexual orientation beyond the binary, reinforcing straightness as expected and accepted. They contribute to queer erasure. Since both the readers and protagonists are of an age associated with adolescent growth, the theme of sexual awakening is timely. Rather than creating honest and fluid depictions of female sexuality, these texts set the standard for straightness. This is especially troubling because it speaks to the expectations of YA readers-- "One major way that heteronormativity is maintained is through the suppression of LGBTQI presence within novels. That the majority of protagonists are heterosexual and passionately driven in their actions by fulfillment of male-female romantic relationships represents assumptions about what readers of YA want."[110] It is important to consider how YA authors respond to the demands of their audiences while simultaneously contributing to the construction of straightness as standard. As readers and consumers, we too are accountable for this standard-- it reflects our comfort zone. The heternormative performances in these texts speak to a bigger industry (and societal) trend of oppressing queer voices, teaching readers that female sexuality is defined by men.

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[109] Sara K. Day (Ed.), "Docile Bodies, Dangerous Bodies," in *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014), 90.

Interestingly, in the words of young readers, reactions to these heroines are overwhelmingly positive. In the case of *The Hunger Games*, kid reviews on Common Sense Media seem to express little concern with the romantic subplot.[111] One eleven year old reader writes, "There's not much romance, occasionally Katniss and Peeta will kiss. Katniss is brave and overall she's a good role model for younger girls!"[112] Downplaying the romance and focusing instead on Katniss as a role model, a twelve year old reader expresses a similar sentiment, "This book is great for females because the main character Katniss is a strong role model for young girls and women."[113] This reviewer rhetoric depicts Katniss as a feminist character, for multiple readers comment on both her strength *and* her gender. It reveals a pattern that speaks to the lack of representation of strong women in the media. The review that speaks most exclusively to Katniss as a girlfriend reads, "The main character has recently discussed different possible angles to win supporters. She says that the girl must have decided for her angle to be ‘sexy.’ There is also some kissing, but it’s staged.”[114] This eleven year old reader astutely comments on the performative romance in the text, acknowledging that any physical intimacy shared between Katniss and Peeta is disingenuine. *The Hunger Games* readers do not seem to view romance as detracting from Katniss’s respectability, instead putting her on a pedestal as a role model specifically for girls.

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[110] Garcia, *Critical Foundations*, 87.

[111] Common Sense Media is a website made for parents to write book reviews for other parents and kids to write book reviews for other kids. Books are categorized by age group based on how appropriate the content is, with filters including positive messages, positive role models, educational value, violence & scariness, sexy stuff, language, and drinking, drugs, and smoking; The reviews included are not indicative of the opinions of all readers, as they vary in age and gender based on the information available.

[112] Kid, 11 years old, "Kid reviews for The Hunger Games, Book 1," Common Sense Media, accessed November 17, 2019, https://www.commonsensemedia.org/book-reviews/the-hunger-games-book-1/user-reviews/child.

[113] Kid, 12 years old.

Unlike those reviewers of *The Hunger Games*, young readers of *Divergent* do seem to be wary of Tris’s relationship with Four. Tris is overall seen as a positive role model, “Tris, the main character, is relatable in the sense that she struggles with fitting in and knowing where she belongs, much like kids today.”[115] This speaks to the infusion of coming-of-age themes in YA, for even in a world as dark as Tris’s, the experience of finding oneself grounds readers in reality. Reviewers do not seem to lose respect for Tris based on her relationship with Four, but they do express concern. Multiple reviews include the word “iffy” and cite the final fear simulation scene as particularly troubling:

> A bit iffy on the relationship. The biggest problem with this book is with Tris and her fear of Four in the last simulator.[116]

> Really iffy for 11 and under. Well, there were some sexual scenes around the middle and end of the book. The main character, Tris, had to face her fears in a simulation. One of her fears was intimacy, therefore the 18 year old she liked pressured her into having sex. They never actually have it, there’s just a lot of kissing.[117]

Other notable reviews mention abuse and Four as the “scary boyfriend,” revealing a trend of skepticism regarding consent and safety in Tris and Four’s relationship. It is worth considering that even tween and teen readers can see the problematic power relations that underlie this romance. Discomfort with the amount of graphic physical intimacy in the book dominates these reviews, while a smaller percent of readers comment on Tris's likeability or respectability. This data speaks to the lack of authenticity in Katniss and Tris's performances of heteronormativity.

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[114] Kid, 11 years old.

[115] Kid, 14 years old.

[116] Kid, 15 years old; Fear simulations are a part of Dauntless training in which faction leaders use a serum to see the recruit’s psyche. Four’s sexual desire was one of Tris’s main fears tested by the simulation.

[117] Kid, 11 years old.

By failing to explicitly explore the possibility that their protagonists could be queer, Collins and Roth feed the cycle of straight superiority. Despite this, young readers do not seem to share these same criticisms, instead associating Katniss and Tris with feminism, independence, and positive influences. This reveals how Katniss and Tris embody the acceptable contemporary literary heroine, demonstrating that readers are disinterested in going out of their comfort zones to imagine a hero that looks nothing like them. Katniss and Tris only express deviance in terms of gender performance-- to an extent. These representations of self-sufficient, athletic women are not nearly enough in the name of normalizing gender deviance. Katniss and Tris teach us that certain kinds of deviance are acceptable only if balanced by other subscriptions to societal norms-- Katniss and Tris are able to recuperate their gender deviance with straightness in order to survive. *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* depict exclusive representations of femininity and female sexuality, limiting the diversification of the acceptable contemporary literary heroine.

Progress regarding queerness in YA literature would look something like this: books featuring protagonists *and* supporting characters who actively struggle with their queerness, whether through coming out or remaining closeted. Queerness itself would not be the protagonist. Characters with fluid sexualities would be accepted without readers questioning exactly what their sexuality is. This gray area would be celebrated, or at least made visible. Representations of homosexual relationships would not enforce gender binaries with one character presenting feminine and the other presenting masculine.[118] Depictions of gender deviance would challenge the post-feminist trope of embracing sexism in the name of earned equality.[119] These heroines would "subvert heteronormative assumptions" and exist beyond binaries.[120] Rather than simply representing masculine women or feminine men, non-binary folks would have room on the page in addition to queer folks of color. Subsequent scholarship on sexuality in YA would normalize female desire and queerness. Scholars would read for queer subtexts to investigate implicit references to sexuality as deeply as explicit ones. They would focus not only on how queerness operates in texts but also on how this representation serves readers. Looking beyond the text, scholars would survey young readers to better understand the gaps in YA according to the readership itself. This would promote a dialogue rather than the image of the publishing industry as a distant, untouchable force. Queerness in future YA books will be unapologetic.

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[118] Kander, "Reading queer subtexts," 29.

[119] Douglas, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism.*

[120] Kander, "Reading queer subtexts," 12.

Conclusion

In June, Suzanne Collins announced the 2020 release of *The Hunger Games* prequel. The legacy of this trilogy very much lives on. In September, as I was scrambling to scale down my thesis topic, I was inspired by *The Handmaid's Tale,* both in print and on TV. I furiously scribbled notes about female rebellion, female leadership, and female oppression in fantastical worlds, all while firmly believing that Gilead isn't as fantastical as some viewers like to think. That week, Margaret Atwood released *The Testaments*, the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Dystopian content was not a fad of the early 2000s. It permeates American popular culture and will continue to do so as long as there is political and social turmoil to write about. Often referred to as a "hellscape," the nation's current political state resembles one of a dystopia. Contemporary dystopian imagery has started to feel less other-worldly and more like a slight exaggeration of current political and social unrest. These texts are calls to action. Fiction represents a powerful outlet for processing anxieties and imagining new worlds. More than that, fiction provides an opportunity for readers to escape to those worlds. For young readers in the midst of the chaos that is growing up, this escapism is all the more important.

For better or for worse, I didn't give much conscious thought to my sexuality being anything but straight until college. I was lucky enough to have other environmental factors in my childhood that normalized queerness whether I was thinking about it or not-- most notably a queer best friend and a queer sister. However, this is not the case for most queer youth. For those kids who grow up without queer role models, representations of queerness in the media are essential for promoting queerness as a real possibility. YA helps adolescent readers immerse themselves in fiction grounded in relatable youth experiences. "Relatable" is subjective in this sense, though. Many readers envision themselves in fictional worlds, but only a small group of readers have the privilege of seeing themselves in literary characters. When the field of YA literature is dominated by white, heteronormative narratives, young people of color and queer readers exclusively consume books not made for them. While queer readers can turn to books distinctly categorized as queer fiction, there is an eerie silence in YA regarding queerness in its literal form, or individuals who do not identify as either gay or straight. Not seeing oneself represented on the page has detrimental effects on readers of minority groups. For the not yet fully formed adolescent brain, this lack of representation is especially stunting. Literary representation should not be a privilege, but rather a right.

YA literature aims to be a welcoming, inviting subsection of fiction with the goal of making kids excited about reading. It is through this goal that the inclusion of coming-of-age themes functions as a tactic to draw in readers. However, if this coming-of-age content is only applicable to kids of certain races, genders, social classes, and sexual orientations, how relatable is it really? Is there room for young people of color and readers who do not subscribe to dimorphism when it comes to gender and/or sexuality in stories like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*? How welcoming can YA literature possibly be if it continuously and systematically excludes minority voices from its narratives? We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) tackles these very real questions. A nonprofit and grassroots organization founded by female YA authors, WNDB works to promote diverse and multicultural literature so that “all children can see themselves in the pages of a book.” Through grants, events, and partnerships with major publishing companies, WNDB strives to diversify literary representations of race, gender, queerness, disability, ethnicity, and religion.[121] Putting this kind of pressure on the giant that is the publishing industry is essential for enacting significant change. It is imperative for all children to have the experience of reading a story they feel welcome in, connected to, and moved by.

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[121] “About WNDB,” We Need Diverse Books, accessed November 21, 2019, https://diversebooks.org/about-wndb/.

Readers should be skeptics and skeptics should be readers. Books should be read critically, carefully, and felt deeply. I urge readers that see themselves represented in their favorite books to sit with that privilege. Nauseatingly normative, exclusive feminine standards run rampant through American culture, and the publishing industry plays a large role in this. The issue of literary representation goes far beyond these case studies into a world in which I can easily imagine women wearing red capes.[122] The need for redefined and diversified pop culture imagery of female heroism is long overdue. This paper is a step in this fight, arguing for the representation of young girls who exist outside of or somewhere in between the binaries that restrict gender and sexuality. Acknowledging the gray area that is queerness is imperative in making progress on the faces we associate with contemporary heroism. It is time for all young girls to have heroes that resemble them. Future heroines have a lot of work to do.

[122] This is a reference to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale,* (1985) a dystopian novel in which all fertile women wear red uniforms and serve as sex slaves to increase the country's dwindling population.

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