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Publication Date
2015

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Coming of Age in Postmodernity:
Narratives of Intertextual Becoming

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Shannon Kathleen Hervey

June 2015

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my special appreciation and thanks to my dissertation chair, Dr. Traise Yamamoto. She has been a tremendous mentor and sculptor, always pushing and pulling and supporting and guiding this project. Without her, this dissertation would still be a formless mass of exceedingly underdeveloped ideas. I would like to thank her for encouraging my research and for allowing me to grow as a scholar by knowing exactly how much space to give me but also when to hunt me down and demand more. I would also like to thank my dissertation advisors, Dr. Steven Axelrod and Dr. Katherine Kinney, for serving as my committee members even when they had so many other advisees who needed their attention. Dr. Katherine Kinney initially inspired me to pursue a PhD, Dr. Steven Axelrod made it an enjoyable quest, and Dr. Traise Yamamoto saw me across the finish line. I thank them all for their time when they had none to give, for their empathy during this arduous and sometimes lonely adventure, and for their always brilliant comments and suggestions. I have so much respect and gratitude for this committee because, they are not only exceptional scholars, they are incredible people.

Several of my colleagues also deserve much more than a word of thanks, but I will start there. Thank you to Rochelle Gold, for keeping me on track, for asking important questions, and for friendship. Thank you to Emily Mattingly, for sharing her amazing work at the intersections of sexuality studies and critical age studies. And thank you to Lauren and Matthew Bond, for having human conversations with me when I was through with academic ones.

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To Isaac: thank you for believing I could do this, and thank you for listening to me talk in circles about everything I didn't quite understand. To Allison: thank you for being one of my soul-mates, for always getting it, and for demanding I be myself. To Ian: thank you for being my brother and my confidant – you will never know how bright you made the darker days. To Maria: thank you for making me laugh, for helping me breathe again, and for your patience, support, and love. I have been buoyed by each of you – held up when I thought I would sink. This dissertation is complete because each of you supported me when I needed it the most. I will forever be grateful.

Finally, thank you to my family. Thank you to my older sister, Megan, who has continuously set the bar incredibly high but who has always helped me over it when it was my turn. Thank you to my brother, Ryan, for illustrating perseverance by always striving and reaching for what he wants and almost always getting it. I thank both my sister and my brother for giving me perfect nieces and nephews who put everything else in perspective. Thank you to my dad; it is because of you that I love books. And lastly but by no means least, thank you to my mom, who never stopped believing I was the absolute best at everything. By your example, you taught us to always try our hardest, to love as fervently possible, and to roll with the punches.

For my nieces and nephews: Owen Patrick, Ella Elizabeth, Luke James, and Gwendolyn Ann. Someday you will grow up, and I hope that in the midst of this growing, you will read earnestly and write honestly.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Coming of Age in Postmodernity:
Narratives of Intertextual Becoming

by

Shannon Kathleen Hervey

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, June 2015
Dr. Traise Yamamoto, Chairperson

This dissertation investigates the act of writing and the role of intertextuality in adolescent subject formation as it is depicted in Young Adult narratives. Focusing on the postmodern elements in contemporary coming-of-age narratives, such as the prevalence of intertextuality, the elaboration on social constructionism, and the complexity of social relativity, I argue that moving into the Lacanian symbolic order necessitates active communication with the realm of the social, only achieved through a reliance on the textual. In my analysis, I focus primarily on texts where self-writing, reference, pastiche, parody, and bricolage simultaneously emphasize but also attempt to assuage the disorienting effects of the current, fragmented, postmodern cultural landscape.

This dissertation accounts for the contention of many developmental theorists who posit that the processes associated with coming-of-age today are more complex than perhaps ever before as a consequence of postmodernism as a social phenomenon.

Because these processes associated with coming into adulthood differ for male and female protagonists in Young Adult literature, chapter one focuses on female protagonists who grapple with and/or resist normative prescriptions of womanhood through self-writing while chapter two analyzes intertextuality in regard to masculine shame and subject formation. Chapter three discusses the pervasive thematic of death in YA literature and the relationship between representations of death and changing notions of selfhood in regard to the body. Lastly, the fourth and final chapter focuses on posthumanism and technofuturism in coming-of-age narratives where technology, by way of social network culture and mass media, complicates notions of selfhood and points toward the necessity for redefining coming into adulthood in our current, networked culture. The texts discussed in chapter four illustrate palpable anxieties pertaining to a loss of agency as a result of being inscribed by mass media. As a result, this dissertation concludes by emphasizing that what it means to come-of-age is drastically changing in the digital age. The anxiety stemming from changing conceptualizations of the self in chapter four speaks to the necessity to reconfigure how we think about the self in our current networked culture.

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Introduction

In 2011, the Association of American Publishers website ranked Young Adult

books as the "fastest growing publishing category, generating $2.78 billion in net revenue"

that year. In this dissertation, I consider the relationship between the ever-growing

category of Young Adult (YA) literature and our current cultural moment. Specifically, I

explore how contemporary YA novels use the conventions of postmodernism both

thematically and formally to address a multitude of complexities pertaining to coming of

age in an increasingly uncertain cultural landscape. These complexities include the

evolving prescriptions of gender normativity, the diminishing distinguishability between

the "real" and the "virtual," and both the liberating and paralyzing potential of occupying

the indeterminate and liminal spaces that inscribe adolescents. In contemporary YA

narratives, intertextuality provides the main means by which protagonists come to

understand and navigate the various discourse communities that inscribe them. In each

contemporary YA narrative discussed in this dissertation, language, writing, and reading

take center stage, highlighting that language is both the system that perpetuates

oppressive ideologies, but it is also the system that can lead to liberating possibilities. The

central questions driving my investigation are these: why is there such a prevalence of

youth narratives since the 1960s that feature protagonists who engage in self-writing and

various other intertextual acts such as interpretation, bricolage, pastiche, and/or

appropriation? And what does the link between postmodernism and emerging adulthood

have to do with this literary phenomenon? In order to answer these questions, this

dissertation is organized around four main thematics in YA literature. The first two

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chapters deal specifically with gender. Chapter one explores what it means to be female growing up in our current cultural moment when ideas of womanhood are constantly evolving, and chapter two discusses what it means to be a non-normative male and therefore not immediately assigned patriarchal power. The last two chapters take a turn toward the indeterminate. Chapter three analyzes the thematic of death in YA literature to consider how contemporary depictions of death are undermined by intertextual elements which allow the dead an alternative textual body to speak. Chapter four investigates YA's growing preoccupation with posthumanism and technofuturism. Where the first three chapters provide examples of adolescent protagonists coming to understand the self through the textual, chapter four begs the question of whether there is or ever was a "self" to uncover.

I agree with Roberta Seelinger Trites' argument in *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* when she conceptualizes the YA novel as a cultural artifact that has "emerged as an aspect of postmodernism" (Trites 52). In Nancy Lesko's important sociology text, *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence,* she writes that "The human being of postmodernism is understood as a text, as a composition, as a bricolage, or as a performance without an essential core. The self becomes 'subjectivity'" (17). I argue that YA literature literalizes Lesko's social theories that the human being of postmodernism is conceptualized as text. In YA narratives, the reliance on the textual in the form of self-writing and intertextuality and the convergence of protagonist with text features human as composition, to be both written by the self and also inscribed within available narratives. My examination of postmodern conventions

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within contemporary YA literature, especially in regard to theories of textuality, focuses on the prevalence of YA novels featuring protagonists who engage in the interpretive act of reading outside narratives while also practicing self authorship (through journaling, letter writing, etc.). I examine the contemporary coming-of-age story, a story made more complex in the postmodern landscape according Christian Smith, Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog, authors of *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (7). A central element of the coming-of-age story is accepting and embracing subjective truth and articulating that truth through language. This is facilitated in many cases by relying on outside texts as models or available narratives to relate to or borrow from. Using postmodern conventions and themes, these novels explore the relationship between official "Truth," commonly steeped in repressive ideologies, and subjective "truth," the celebration of which marks the successful coming-of-age within these narratives.

There is no single, authoritative definition for what "Young Adult Literature" constitutes. As a problematic category, YA literature owes much of its indeterminacy to the liminal space it occupies – suspended somewhere between Children's Literature and Adult Literature. In her essay "Young Adult Literature: Growing Up, In Theory," Karen Coats writes,

> As a body of literature, YA fiction is organized around the same sorts of tensions that preoccupy the physical bodies and emotional lives of its intended audience: tensions between growth and stasis, between an ideal world we can imagine and the one we really inhabit, between earnestness and irony, between ordinary bodies and monstrous ones, and, perhaps most importantly, between an impulsive individualism and a generative ethics of interconnectedness. (316)

Coats' emphasis on the "between-ness" of YA fiction speaks to the liminal nature of the genre. Because of this liminal positioning, YA literature is most commonly understood as a genre for and about youths in transition. But even this definition is dependent on a recognizable reader/audience: what, or rather who does "youth" refer to? Adolescence, or teenagerhood, is a socially constructed idea that fluctuates with the tide of societal expectations and norms. The social construction and evolution of "adolescence" is especially highlighted by the various terms associated with development that have arisen during varied historical moments; some of these terms include "adolescence," "teenagerhood," "extended adolescence," "young adulthood," and, the most recent addition, "emerging adulthood". In *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*, Jeffrey Arnett coins the term "emerging adulthood," claiming that this is a new period in life for people in the United States. He argues that emerging adulthood is something different from both extended adolescence and young adulthood because emerging adulthood is actually quite separate from adolescence (which the former suggests) and yet, at the same time, it is not quite adulthood (which the latter suggests) (4). Arnett claims that since the 1970s, there have been critical changes in the maturation process of transitioning into adulthood. These critical changes create a more complex subject for the contemporary YA novel. Like the continuous (re)naming of the transition into adulthood, what it means to be a young adult or an emerging adult, likewise, is continuously changing. This sense of indeterminacy, impermanence, and precariousness is but one feature that links this time of transition to postmodern sensibilities.

The link between postmodernism and emerging adulthood is perhaps best

articulated in the introduction to *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging*

Adulthood where the authors argue that:

> Simplified versions of Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida [are] now a
> driving influence evidenced on MTV and in high school "world cultures"
> classes. By the time [postmodernism] reached the American hoi polloi, [it]
> had become a simple-minded ideology presupposing the cultural
> construction of everything, individualistic subjectivism, soft ontological
> antirealism, and absolute moral relativism. All of this is very evident in
> emerging adult culture […] dramatically alter[ing] the experiences of
> American life between the ages of 18 and 30. Studies agree that the
> transition to adulthood today is more complex, disjointed, and confusing
> than it was in the past decades. The steps through schooling, a first real job,
> marriage, and parenthood are simply less well organized and coherent
> today than they were in the past. At the same time, these years are marked
> by a historically unparalleled freedom to roam, experiment, learn, move
> on, and try again. What has emerged from this new situation has been
> variously labeled "extended adolescence," "youthhood," "adultolescence,"
> "the twixter years," "young adulthood," the "twenty-somethings," and
> "emerging adulthood. (15)

As the above quote attests to, the emphasis on the cultural construction of individuals and

the ethos of absolute moral relativism permeates American life today, especially for those

between the ages of 18 and 30. The literature aimed at this age group mirrors the complex

and disjointed steps usually associated with becoming an adult. Because the once strict

roadmap for coming of age has become exceedingly ambiguous, adolescents are faced

with a kind of freedom that is both entirely liberating and simultaneously paralyzing.

Perhaps not so coincidentally, it is the era of the 1960s that I argue marks a distinct shift

in YA literature. It was in the 1960s, in fact, that the Young Adult Library Services

Association created the term/category "Young Adult." The liminal or ambiguous

categorization of YA literature owes much of its indeterminacy to both the uncertainty of

what it constitutes but also the uncertainty of who its readership is. This indeterminacy is

exacerbated by postmodernist characteristics of alienation, fragmentation, and

intertextuality that dominate YA literature thematically in the latter half of the twentieth

century, specifically since the 1960s.

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction,* Linda Hutcheon

identifies the 1960s as a time that cultivated the drawing of limits; "limits of language, of

subjectivity, of sexual identity, and we might also add: of systemization and

uniformization" (8). I argue throughout the dissertation that YA literature from this

period on reflects and thematizes the drawing of the aforementioned limits. But it is in the

drawing of limits that also exposes the liberating possibilities of breaking through,

redrawing, and/or navigating those limits. This decade is what I argue demarcates the

youth narratives that come before from the youth narratives that come after. Important

coming-of-age narratives such as S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967), Harper Lee's *To

Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet

the Spy* (1964), Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962), and Maya

Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (1969) were all published in the 1960s.

Perhaps just as important are the works that precipitated the 1960s, such as J.D.

Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954).

Hutcheon further describes the 1960s as a time when the political and aesthetic

merged and resulted in the liberating effects

> of moving from the language of alienation (otherness) to that of
> decentering (difference), because the center used to function as the pivot
> between binary opposites which always privileged one half: white/black,
> male/female, self/other, intellect/body, west/east, objectivity/subjectivity –

the list is now well known. But if the center is seen as a construct, a fiction, not a fixed and unchangeable reality, the "old either-or begins to break down," as Susan Griffin put it and the new and-also of multiplicity and difference opens up new possibilities. (62)

YA literature since the 1960s has at its center this liberating effect of decentering, where protagonists rely on a complex system of textual reference and self-writing in an attempt to articulate their way out of the false binaries that permeate the social realm. In my dissertation, I focus on this complex rendering of textuality within youth narratives since the 1960s. The prevalence of youth narratives featuring protagonists who engage in self-writing or who engage in the interpretation of famous and/or cultural narratives is the impetus for this project. In ceasing to rely on available (normative) narratives in favor of constructing their own narratives through creation, bricolage, and/or appropriation, protagonists explore the "new and-also of multiplicity" that "opens up new possibilities." While appropriating available narratives and/or using bricolage as a constructing mechanism might be construed as limiting, chapters one through three discuss the ways in which it is ultimately liberating because it affords the protagonist the creative agency with which to pick and choose the narratives he/she wants to "try-on," to be applied, discarded, altered, edited, and revised at will. Chapter four, however, takes a contradictory turn. While chapters one through three focus on texts where the act of self-writing and the role of intertextuality is central to discovering and celebrating subjectivity, chapter four focuses on the emergence of posthumanism and technofuturism in YA literature and the inherent anxiety associated with the eradication of the "self."

Precipitating this turn toward embracing multiplicity in chapters one through three and fearing complete social construction in chapter four, is deeply rooted alienation and a

real or imagined threat of fragmentation. Adolescence is understood by many

developmental theorists and psychologists to be a time steeped in alienation (Lawrence B.

Schiamberg, L. Eugence Arnold, Robin Lynn Petterson, Barbara and Philip Newman, to

name some). Hutcheon's description of the 1960s moving from the "language of

alienation (otherness) to that of decentering (difference)" traces a trajectory that is

repeated in the narratives to be discussed in this dissertation; that is, the language of

alienation (otherness) gives way to language(s) that celebrate difference. Gerald Graff

postulates that in the postmodern condition, likewise, "alienation from significant

external reality, from *all* reality, becomes an inescapable condition" (Bertens 55). Jean

Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, provides but one rationale for the alienating

effects of postmodernism, arguing that the only reality is the reality of the social and that

the meaning of all signs and symbols are indeed arbitrarily assigned. I argue that this

estrangement from the real, the disillusionment (and later the possible liberating effects)

associated with the recognition of the prolific randomness of the world, is the main

underlying issue in YA literature since the 1960s.

The formal qualities and thematics of YA literature reflect the complexities of

coming of age in a seemingly fractured, arbitrary world. This takes the form of including

multiple narratives and points of view within a single story. But rather than simply

reflecting a harsh landscape that only emphasizes estrangement from the real, the

weaving of multiple narratives carries with it a message of possible coherence, if only the

protagonist can find the key to interpretation of self and of text. In this way, the various

narratives that comprise a single story within YA literature both reflect a seemingly

fractured world, but also guide the protagonist toward coping with such a landscape. Julia

Kristeva, in "Word, Dialogue, and Novel" writes that the literary word is "an intersection

of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several

writings" (36). She goes on to write, "each word (text) is an intersection of other words

(texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read" (37). Linda Hutcheon's *A*

Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms posits that

> today's theories of intertextuality are structural in focus […] but depend
> upon an implied theory of reading or decoding […] texts do not generate
> anything – until they are perceived and interpreted. For instance, without
> the implied existence of a reader, written texts remain collections of black
> marks on white pages. (23)

Hutcheon's emphasis on an implied or imagined reader/decoder and Kristeva's

description of dialogic textual surfaces inform my understanding of the importance of

intertextuality in YA literature, particularly in reference to the protagonist, always both a

reading and a decoding subject and also a text him or herself. I argue that the varied but

related textual practices (creation, bricolage, appropriation) in YA narratives ultimately

serve as the mechanisms that commence the protagonist's move from a place of

accepting objective Truth to seeking out and embracing subjective truth.

Chapter Overview

Chapter one analyzes the relationship between intertextuality, normative

prescriptions of femaleness, and entering the sphere of the social. In *The Book Thief*,

Harriet the Spy, *Dicey's Song*, and *Walk Two Moons*, the act of writing most often

illustrates the protagonist's active engagement with forming an understanding of herself

within the larger social order. These texts explore the social construction of gender and

what it means to "be a woman." Relying on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, this chapter explores the significance of language in moving through the discreet stages Lacan articulates as having critical importance to coming-of-age.

In the texts under discussion in chapter one, the act of writing is twofold: it is the sign that the protagonist is moving into the social realm, but it is also the thing that helps her negotiate that realm. Coming of age for many young female protagonists, then, is predicated on the ability to articulate the self through writing, narration, and speech. For females, an entrance into sociality is normatively perceived as an entrance into wifehood and motherhood, but many of the texts to be discussed in this chapter, like *Walk Two Moons* and *Dicey's Song*, feature mothers who resist that relegation back to the family. The female protagonist struggles to articulate her relationship to her mother in order to understand her place in the larger social order.

Female protagonists begin in what Lacan refers to as the Imaginary Order (a stage when the subject is both joined to and separate from its actual, corporeal self and its idea of itself), which corresponds to the Mirror Stage, where the subject simultaneously experiences self-recognition and misrecognition (Swales 25). Lacan argues that this is when a subject recognizes itself in the mirror and so conceives of itself as a whole being rather than a fragmented one, but this conception is only an illusion (Swales 26). The female protagonist must come to understand this conception as an illusion so that she can begin to embrace her own, individual subjectivity, apart from her mother. This process is about resisting the prescriptive and often times oppressive roles ascribed to females. Mothers in these texts symbolize prescriptive, normative femininity, having accepted the

role society deems appropriate for women: namely, motherhood. In separating the self from their mothers, female protagonists also separate the self from normative and limiting prescriptions.

In adolescent literature featuring female protagonists engaged in the act of writing, the female generally resists the traditional exhibitionist role ascribed her. In *Harriet the Spy* by Louise Fitzhugh, for instance, Harriet occupies the space of the observer, not the observed. As is indicated by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," normative gender constructions position the female as the object of the gaze. To be an object is to be denied subjectivity. But through the act of writing, female protagonists claim subjectivity by writing from particular points of view. Because writing thematically constitutes subjecthood, the act of writing throughtout these texts provides a way for the female protagonist to move beyond the Mirror Stage and away from misrecognizing themselves in their mothers. Self-writing, as an activity that constitutes subjecthood, takes the place of the mother by becoming the mirror that reflects the protagonist back to herself.

In chapter two, I explore YA narratives with male protagonists. While texts with male protagonists do engage in self-writing, the ideological implications are different than for female protagonists who engage in the same activity. For female characters entering the Symbolic Order, or the Law of the Father as Lacan theorizes, this means a world of difference, a world that is always already dominated by that difference. For male characters entering the Symbolic Order this means entering a world of similarity, a male dominated world. For female protagonists, the desired end or goal is utterance, an

overcoming of silence and of being silenced, and the ability to speak outside of normative structures prescribed for them. Because the Lacanian subject established under and through the entry into the symbolic realm of language is always a masculine subject, the task for female protagonists is to acquire (a) language that does not belong to "The Law of the Father," consequently resisting becoming the "object" or "reified cultural Other" (Smith & Watson 19).

For male protagonists, however, the achievement is something else. Theoretically speaking, male protagonists should be subjects and not objects upon entrance into Language simply because they are male, and the Lacanian subject is always a masculine subject. Youth narratives featuring male protagonists entering into the Symbolic Order, however, have their own set of issues and concerns largely pertaining to issues of class, race, sexuality, and other problematic categories constructed and informed by dominant, repressive ideologies.

The YA texts discussed in chapter two, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *Looking for Alaska, When a Monster Calls*, *Going Bovine, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and *Monster,* feature male subjects from diverse backgrounds struggling with that which differentiates them from the norm. The male subject Lacan theorizes about is a privileged, white, heteronormative male subject; the Law of the Father is a law that leaves little or not subjecthood for those masculine subjects who do not embody the master narratives available to them in the dominant culture. The protagonists in these texts are non-normative and therefore are not assigned the "compensatory promise of dominance in the symbolic realm" (Smith & Watson 19). This differentiation limits or

castrates their access to phallic power and this castration is manifested in the form of shame. The act of writing for male protagonists in YA literature, then, is an exercise in articulating and overcoming the paralyzing and silencing effects of shame. Through the displacement of phallic power, these male protagonists must reconfigure the road toward social power – a road most often found by breaking down the very binaries that leave no place for them. These novels, then, explore the liberating possibilities of the existence of multiple roads, all leading toward different variations and valences of social power.

Chapter three continues to investigate the relationship between YA literature and the thematic of indeterminacy by focusing on the topic of death in YA narratives. In this chapter, I analyze *Love Letters to the Dead, King Dork, Thirteen Reasons Why, and Looking for Alaska.* Each of these narratives illustrates that writing and narratology become the means through which death, meaning an ultimate silence, is circumvented. In these stories, written artifacts from the dead are left behind for the protagonists to interact with. In chapters one and two, we see that writing is capable of constituting self, and so in these narratives, the written object constitutes a new living body and is a form of rebellion against the silencing of death. That is, writing and narratology as a creation of a written body object circumvent death by creating an immortal textual imprint of self. Like Baudrillard's theories of the word standing in for the thing itself, the dead character lives on as an analog/an approximation of the living self through the words s/he leave behind. This chapter explores how (symbolic) identity, memory, and immortality function through writing. In various ways throughout the texts to be discussed in this chapter, writing is used to create a simulacrum of identity that attempts to assuage the

permanence of death. As for the intertextual elements, the living characters that are left behind often rely on a pastiche of various available narratives to cope.

This chapter ties together death and adolescence by noting that both are liminal states, both are indeterminate, and both are socially constructed. The topics of sex, the body, and the written self emerge as main thematics within this framework. By creating alternative modes of embodiment, thematizing the damaging effects of sexually puritanical ideology, and emphasizing the importance of coherence in an otherwise fragmented cultural moment, the novels discussed in this chapter illustrate the liberating effects of embracing subjectivity and rejecting either/or logic.

In the introduction to *Constructing Death: The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement*, Clive Seale argues, "social and cultural life involves turning away from the inevitability of death, which is contained in the fact of our embodiment, and towards life" (1). Most theorists agree that a crucial stage of entering into adulthood is entering into the social sphere, but Seale articulates here that the social is dependent on a collective turn away from death. If death is a disruption of the social bond, and if social and cultural life depend on a turning away from this disruption, then YA's pervasive turn towards death can be understood as a kind of rebellion – a rumination on the very thing social and cultural life asks us to turn away from. Further, these novels challenge that death is a "fact" of our embodiment through characters that construct alternative, textual body objects. The novels discussed in chapter three not only reaffirm the importance of language and reading in understanding the self and coming of age, but they also celebrate

the fact that the self does not need to be embodied in the most traditional sense of the term.

Chapter four continues studying the intersections between language, embodiment, and the self by analyzing contemporary YA literature's turn toward posthumanism and technofuturism. In Brad Miller and McKenzie Wark's multimedia work, *Planet of Noise*, they write, "Generations are not defined by war or depression any more. They are defined by media culture." While previous chapters consider self-writing and intertextuality as an important act toward self-construction and as a productive means toward negotiating the social realm, chapter four explores YA literature that increasingly incorporates the digital as the main setting for protagonists' writing. Protagonists in these texts are preoccupied with social networking, blogging, and internet-based fan-fiction. In the narratives discussed in chapter four, *#16thingsithoughtweretrue*, *The Future of Us, The Unwritten,* and *Feed*, protagonists have extremely complex relationships to the technologies that permeate the social realm. In *How We Became Posthuman*, Katherine Hayles claims, "The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (3). This description of posthumanism is important to this chapter because the YA texts discussed here literalize Hayles' theories that the posthuman is an amalgam, "whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction," and also emphasize how unsettling this realization is, especially for young adults searching for firm foundations in a continuously evolving and fragmented cultural landscape. This skepticism of the existence of the self is a revolutionary turn for Young Adult novels

previously so dedicated to unearthing one's *own* subjective "truth" that ultimately leads to agency.

Though it generally goes uncontested that the genre of YA is saturated with narratives where coming to understand "self" is central, the mere frequency of first person narratives emphasizes this fact. About our current cultural, posthuman moment, Hayles argues, "the presumption that there is an agency, desire, or will belonging to the self and clearly distinguished from the 'wills of others' is undercut in the posthuman, for the posthuman's collective heterogeneous quality implies a distributed cognition located in disparate parts that may be in only tenuous communication with one another" (4). In this way, these novels challenge the normative representation of coming into adulthood traditionally depicted in YA literature where the protagonist ultimately arrives at a sense of self. These narratives, especially *The Unwritten* and *Feed*, challenge the very notion that there is an essential "self" to arrive at.

In Martin Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology*, he "points to the discomfort of being, namely the homelessness of human beings in a modern technological society" (Turner 527). In *#16thingsithgouthweretrue*, *The Future of Us*, *The Unwritten*, and *Feed*, this homelessness is palpable, and the act of writing and the role of intertextuality, instead of functioning as a compass to navigate this tumultuous postmodern landscape, reaffirms this homelessness at every turn. This premise, that there is simultaneously no home and little hope of successfully entering adulthood by acquiring a sense of self, relegates the adolescent to perpetual liminality. This could account for the proliferation of categories attempting to name adolescence: pre-teenagehood,

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teenagehood, adolescence, extended adolescence, emerging adulthood, etc. As the terrain for what it means to enter the social becomes more complex, the attempts at naming this process become equally as complex.

Chapter four provides a holistic conclusion to this dissertation by emphasizing the increasing importance of self-writing and intertextuality in the digital age. YA literature reflects this social change in its saturation of narratives that include the tropes of self-writing and intertextuality. Now, however, this writing is done publically, complicating the relationship between writing and the self that is laid out in chapters one through three. While the protagonists discussed in previous chapters use writing and intertextuality to attain or at least gesture towards some semblance of agency with the end goal of embracing and celebrating subjective truth, the protagonists discussed here waffle between being *writers* and being *written*. In these cases, protagonists encounter writing and intertextuality through the digital landscape – a landscape that presents only the *illusion* of agency and subjectivity.

Chapter One

The Power of Words:

Female Protagonists Resist Objectification Through Writing

Introduction

> Ole Golly held the stage. The other three looked at her in wonder.
> She seized her moment and spoke: " ' "The time has come," the Walrus
> said—' "
> " ' "To talk of many thing—" ' " Harriet knew the words so well
> that without a second's thought she found herself standing at the top of the
> stairs saying them. All heads turned toward her.
> Ole Golly continued: " ' "Of shoes—and ships—and sealing
> wax—" ' "
> " ' "Of cabbages—and kings—" ' " Harriet found herself laughing
> down at Ole Golly's smiling face as they went on, alternating the lines.
> " ' "And why the sea is boiling hot—" ' " Ole Golly had the
> funniest look, halfway between laughter and tears.
> Harriet shouted the last with glee: " ' "And whether pigs have
> wings" '! " She had always loved that line. It was her favorite. (128)

In this excerpt from Lousie Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* (1964), the importance of

textuality in Harriet's and Ole Golly's relationship is emphasized. Here, Ole Golly and

Harriet are connected through textuality, through their alternating rehearsal of the "The

Walrus and the Carpenter" from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. While their

bonding is forged through the textual, their departure is also reliant on this mode. Later in

the novel, Ole Golly writes to Harriet in a letter, "if you're missing me I want you to

know I'm not missing you. Gone is gone. I never miss anything or anyone because it all

becomes a lovely memory. I guard my memories and love them, but I don't get in them

and lie down. You can even make stories from yours, but remember, they don't come

back" (278). Only after receiving this letter does Harriet complete her transition away

from the family and into the sphere of the social. That Ole Golly reaches out to Harriet

through writing indicates the continuity in their textually based relationship. Ole Golly encouraging Harriet to turn her memories into stories is illustrative of a pervasive trope in adolescent literature: the act of writing is not only the signifier of moving into the social, it is also the means through which the social realm is then negotiated. The use of *Through the Looking Glass* in *Harriet the Spy* is but one example of postmodern, self-referential intertextuality; that is, *Harriet the Spy* is a coming-of-age narrative that references another, well known, coming-of-age story.

Many young adult narratives feature female protagonists engaged in the act of writing and the interpretive act of reading. Jo from *Little Women* is determined to be a famous author. Harriet from *Harriet the Spy* compulsively writes in her journal. Laura Ingalls grows up to write about the adventures of her growing up in the *Little House* series. Julie from *Up a Road Slowly* also aspires to be a writer. Dicey from *Dicey's Song* is characterized as a brilliant writer, so much so that her teacher accuses her of plagiarism in front of the whole class. Sal in *Walk Two Moons*, although not a writer in the traditional sense of the term, spends the majority of the novel orating her narrative to her grandparents. And lastly, in *The Book Thief*, the act of writing literally saves Liesel's life, and her obsession with reading informs the way she sees the world around her. This act of writing most often illustrates the protagonist's active engagement with forming an understanding of herself within the larger social order. While foregrounding the act of writing has long been a narrative trope within youth narratives (take, for instance, Jo in *Little Women* from 1868), the increasing number of youth narratives since the 1960s that feature the act of writing as an essential exercise for gaining selfhood can be credited to

the special relationship between Young Adult literature as a distinct genre[1] and

postmodernism as a social phenomenon. Roberta Seelinger Trites' highly regarded and

award-winning text on the subject, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in*

Adolescent Literature, informs this chapter through its conceptualization of adolescent

literature as a construct of postmodernism: "The YA novel, a genre that has emerged as

an aspect of postmodernism, situates the individual as both comprised by institutional

forces and compromised by them" (52).

Being both comprised and compromised by social forces is an especially

appropriate description for females, in particular, attempting to come of age. Simone de

Beauvoir's second chapter in *The Second Sex*, "The Girl," describes what coming-of-age

means for females. She writes,

> the adolescent girl does not consider herself responsible for her future; she
> judges it useless to demand much of herself since her lot in the end will
> not depend on her. Far from destining herself to man because she thinks
> she is inferior to him, it is because she is destined for him that, in
> accepting the idea of her inferiority, she constitutes it. (347)

In other words, not only is it difficult for an adolescent girl to see herself as responsible

for her future, but her inferiority in the sphere of the social has been prearranged so that

in order to come of age, she must enter into the role prescribed her. For females entering

the sphere of the social, the prescriptive mapping of "correct" behaviors and roles can be

especially repressive. In the texts to be discussed throughout this chapter, female

characters attempt to navigate this complex if not convoluted landscape. If coming of age

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[1] Though "Young Adult literature" is a problematic term that assumes a consensus on
what it actually constitutes, within the scope of this dissertation, it refers specifically to
literature about growth and development, particularly the development that takes place
when one enters the sphere of the social.

means achieving a sense of self, but it also means stepping into the roles prescribed, how does one do both at the same time?

As is evident in the above quote, Trites' work focuses primarily on the social forces that constitute the individual by considering the ways in which power is conceptualized. That is, Trites discusses the various institutions (i.e. school, government, religion, identity politics, family, etc.) that constitute adolescents by analyzing how these institutions both enable and repress an adolescent's grasp toward power (x). Building from this, I argue that one of the most pervasive ways in which adolescents manage being both comprised and compromised by institutional forces in YA literature, is through the textual. Interestingly, the female protagonists in the narratives to be discussed here are all characterized as possessing certain qualities normatively associated with masculinity, and this masculinity is tied to their relationship to the textual. Liesel from *The Book Thief* plays soccer with the boys, scrapes her knees, and climbs fences. Harriet from *Harriet the Spy*, similarly, is characterized as a "tom boy." Sal from *Walk Two Moons* wants to be like her father. Likewise, the act of writing is also associated with a kind of maleness; to write means to account for, to observe, to think; to write is to reject a kind of passivity. To write means to embrace subjectivity and to thwart objectification as a female. This works to subvert the culture-agreed-upon practice of objectifying the female. As Simone de Beauvoir writes, "in *Little Women* kindly Jo is only a childhood friend for Laurie; he vows his love to curly-haired and insipid Amy" (348). Though Laurie falls in love with Jo, the voracious reader and ambitious writer, she ultimately cannot be the love interest; rather, the exceedingly sweet and vapid Amy is characterized as excessively feminine.

The reliance on textuality within these novels ultimately has a subversive quality; the act of writing as well as the reliance on outside narratives to discover or cope enable the protagonist to better navigate the social realm so saturated with what Trites refers to as the social forces that constitute the individual. For females, this means taking up the proverbial pen, which is to say, aspiring toward more normative definitions of masculinity in order to write their way out of and around the limiting definitions and prescriptions associated with normative femininity.

Entering into Language: *The Book Thief,* Femaleness, and Words that Save

Central here is the acknowledgement of the self as being constituted by the social. Social constructedness and relativism, thought to be definitive components of postmodernism, represent the downfall of the romantic ideal of the individual. The era of postmodernism, in contrast, emphasizes the social construction of the individual, which accentuates the potential for varied, complex, and sometimes conflicting subject positions. Trites attributes the differences between YA Literature and Children's Literature along these same lines:

> The Young Adult novel as we know it came into being during the 1960s, well into the postmodern era. […] Children's literature evolved during a romantic era when many authors explored individual psychology, but the YA novel, with its questioning of social institutions and how they construct individuals, was not possible until the postmodern era influenced authors to explore what it means if we define people as socially constructed subjects rather than as self-contained individuals bound by their identities. (16)

The act of inscribing oneself – of writing about one's formative experiences, thoughts, feelings, and ideas – works thematically as a means to interrogate one's subject positions. Writing provides the means by which young adults negotiate what Trites refers to as the

"tension between individuals and institutions" often "depicted as residing in discursive constructs" (52). Because of the discursive nature of institutional power and repression, it is fitting that the mastery of language through the act of writing or inscribing oneself in relation to various subject positions is an act that necessitates an entering into what Lacan refers to as the Symbolic Order, which is an entering into language (Lacan 371). The arrival into the Symbolic Order is depicted as a struggle between self and "other" manifested in the writing and the self-interrogation that happens in the scope of that writing. Importantly, many youth narratives share this same trope of highlighting an entering into the Symbolic Order as a tumultuous but necessary stage to arriving at a more complex understanding of oneself in the space of the social.

While young male protagonists do engage in inscription, the ideological implications are different than for young female protagonists who engage in the same activity. For male characters entering the Symbolic Order, or the realm of the Father as Lacan theorizes, this means entering a world of similarity, a male dominated world. For female characters entering the Symbolic Order, this means entering a world of difference, a world that is always already dominated by that difference (Campbell 158). Simone de Beauvoir, in her seminal work "The Second Sex," contends that it is in the representation of man and woman *through language* where these differences are manifested: "man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity" (2). Youth narratives featuring a male protagonist entering into the Symbolic Order have their own set of issues and concerns,

many of which pertain to issues of class, race, sexuality, and other problematic categories

constructed and informed by dominate, repressive ideologies. For female protagonists

engaging in the act of inscription, the act of writing is most often concerned with gender

politics and negotiating a landscape where the social construction of gender, perhaps

more than any other category, is crucial to the construction of the self. Works from

diverse historical and narrative contexts, such as *Little Women*, *Harriet the Spy*, *Dicey's*

Song, *The Book Thief,* and *Walk Two Moons*, exemplify young female protagonists who

write and by doing so, engage in gender politics through the negotiation of their subject

positions. Through the interrogation of the protagonist's subject positions, young adult

texts examine not only the social construction of adolescence but also the social

construction of gender and what it means to "be a woman."

The move from the Imaginary to the Symbolic Order, however, is fraught because

female youth are using the act of writing to articulate a sense of self but the very fact that

they are deploying language, entering into the social, means that they are simultaneously

entering the realm where normative ideologies about womanhood will relegate them back

to the domestic. For females, an entrance into sociality is normatively perceived as an

entrance into wifehood and motherhood, but many of these examples feature mothers

who are completely absent or mothers who resist that relegation back to the family. The

writing works twofold: it is both the sign that the protagonist is moving into this other

realm, but it is also the thing that helps them negotiate that realm. Coming of age for

many young, female protagonists, then, is predicated on the ability to articulate oneself

through writing, narration, and speech, while distancing themselves from normative

girlhood. In order to find the language necessary, many female protagonists rely on books. For instance, in *The Book Thief*, Liesel comes to understand her place in things through the books she steals.

Beginning at the start of World War II, *The Book Thief* chronicles the coming-of-age of a young German girl living with adoptive parents in a small German town during the Holocaust. Liesel and her adoptive parents hide a Jewish man, Max, in their basement for many years during this time, and Liesel develops a most significant friendship with him. Interestingly, Death narrates the entire book, but is only able to do so because he finds Liesel's autobiography in the rubble of her town after bombs leave it decimated. Death writes, "All told, she owned fourteen books, but she saw her story as being made up predominantly of ten of them. […] When she came to write her story, she would wonder exactly when the books and the words started to mean not just something but everything" (30). This is but one example where writing and reading are inextricably linked. Highlighting the importance of textuality in forming an understanding of self, Liesel comes to know her own story through her relationship with a number of books. Important here is that Liesel does not simply rely on one book that she has read in order to inform her own story: she relies on ten! This suggests a complex system of pastiche and bricolage coupled with the ability to relate to and reflect on the literature she encounters. An example of Liesel using textuality in order to understand her current predicament is when the Nazi party forces her adoptive father to join in the war effort as retribution for being kind to Jewish prisoners as they marched through the town on their way to a concentration camp. After he has left, Liesel and her adoptive mother are

devastated. Death notes, "From down the hall, like a metronome for the visions, Rosa snored, and Liesel lay awake surrounded, but also remembering a quote from her most recent book. '***There were people everywhere on the city street, but the stranger could not have been more alone if it were empty***'" (original emphasis, 473). Liesel's understanding not only of the world but of her own experiences are directly and immediately informed by the books she reads; here she is able to understand complex emotions, being simultaneously surrounded but feeling crushingly alone, because she read about that very thing in a book recently.

The setting of *The Book Thief,* WWII Nazi Germany, works well with YA literature's propensity to depict protagonists as simultaneously comprised and compromised by institutional forces. There has been perhaps no other historical moment known quite so well for its gross institutional manipulation and exertion of power. This historical moment also most significantly ties this morbid and absolute control to the power of words and rhetoric. Through Liesel's learning the power of words, the story reiterates the prominent theme of the time: the power of words is often startling and devastating given Hitler's wide reaching and horrifying rhetoric in both his public addresses and his book, *Mien Kampf.* That being said, reading and writing are also depicted as entirely subversive acts to not only undermine and resist the politics of the time, but to thwart feelings of inadequacy and to establish a sense of control. For instance, Liesel *steals* the books that come to be so important to her. Some of these stolen books come from more or less innocuous places – her first stolen book, for instance, is picked up at her brother's graveside burial. Her second stolen book, however, comes from the

town square meeting where the Nazi party oversees the burning of books and other

materials thought to be resistant to Nazi ideology. Liesel looks around while "flames and

burning books [are] cheered like heroes" (113). As books burn all around her, "burning

words […] torn from their sentences," she rescues one of these books, places it under her

shirt and against her bare chest to conceal it, and feels the hot embers burn her skin (112).

Later, when the kind Mayor's wife tries to give Liesel a book, she cannot accept it; Death

explains, "She wouldn't tolerate having it given to her by a lonely, pathetic old woman.

Stealing it, on the other hand, seemed a little more acceptable. Stealing it, in a sick kind

of sense, was like earning it" (287). Liesel's relationship to textuality is always already

subversive because of how she comes by the books she reads – this subversive quality

carries over into the actual content in several ways, the most important of which are when

Max uses the paper from his copy of *Mein Kampf* to write a story for Liesel, and also

when Liesel uses the act of reading and writing in order to escape death, both literally and

figuratively.

Max uses white paint to erase the pages of *Mein Kampf* in order to create blank

paper to write a story that he eventually gives Liesel. Liesel notes, "There were the erased

pages of *Mein Kampf*, gagging, suffocating under the paint as they turned" (237). The

story Max writes on the "suffocated" pages of *Mein Kampf* poetically chronicles his

journey as a young Jewish man in Nazi Germany as well as his experiences with Liesel.

It ultimately serves to encourage Liesel to continue reading and presses upon her the

importance of writing her own story. Later in the novel, Liesel carries out a scene from

Max's story though she understands that the outcome could be devastating, and it is; she

is beaten by Nazis in the street. Max's act of painting over *Mein Kampf*, of all things, in order to create a blank slate for his own writing about his struggles and emotional victory over Hitler and Nazi Germany illustrates how the act of writing is depicted as incredibly powerful. Max gives this book to Liesel's adoptive mother, telling her that when Liesel is "ready," she should have it. Liesel receiving Max's work is depicted as a critical moment in the story – a point at which she is "ready," meaning that she has matured and is on the brink of adulthood, and a point at which she is able to understand the political critique hiding in Max's personal story. It is also the point at which Liesel is encouraged to write her own story, which ultimately saves her life.

The Book Thief also nicely exemplifies the complex relationship between gender and power through the textual. Liesel eventually befriends the Mayor's wife who invites Liesel into the study to read. Liesel has never seen so many books all in the same place and is in awe of the beauty of such a display. When Liesel was first dropped off in this new town, she could not read at all and was humiliated at school. But now, months later and in the Mayor's study, she reads all sorts of books, some of which probably should have been burned in the town square with the other material of "questionable" content. Death notes,

> Once, words had rendered Liesel useless, but now, when she sat on the floor, with the mayor's wife at her husband's desk, she felt an innate sense of power. It happened every time she deciphered a new word or pieced together a sentence.
>> She was a girl.
>> In Nazi Germany.
>> How fitting that she was discovering the power of words. (147)

It is clear here that Liesel's sense of power comes from her ability to read, to "piece" together sentences. Reading is a subversive act here not only because she is reading material that she knows probably should no longer exist, but because she feels powerful in a time and place where power should only have been felt by those in agreement with the Fürer, and definitely not by a mere "girl." Later, Liesel finds out that the large study of books that the Mayor's wife introduced her to actually belonged to the Mayor's wife and not to the Mayor, as she had thought all along: "She didn't know why it was so important, but she enjoyed the fact that the roomful of books belonged to the woman. It was she who introduced her to the library in the first place and gave her the initial, even literal, window of opportunity. This way was better. It all seemed to fit" (451). For Liesel, who has already aligned power with the textual, it's important that the roomful of books belongs to a woman because this confirms for Liesel the potential for women to be powerful.

In the end, it is the act of writing that literally saves Liesel's life. Before the final bombing of Liesel's town, there are numerous times where Liesel gathers together in the fallout shelter with neighbors and friends and is asked to read to them from the various books she has stolen. In these moments, the textual is a symbol of calm, of hope, and of connection. This is also a moment when a previously powerless girl's voice is the only one being requested and listened to. Eventually, when Liesel's town is unexpectedly bombed, Liesel's life is spared only because she is sitting down in her basement, in the middle of the night, attempting to write the story of her life. After this bombing, there are no other survivors; the friends and family Liesel has made are now gone. Death writes,

> Only one person survived.
> She survived because she was sitting in a basement reading
> through the story of her own life, checking for mistakes. […] She was still
> clutching the book.
> She was holding desperately on to the words who had saved her
> life. (498 - 499)

Further highlighting the vast importance and power of the textual, the "words" that had

saved Liesel's life are grammatically referred to here as living things with the pronoun

"who" instead of the conjunction "that." All throughout the text, Liesel uses books and

writing to arrive at a sense of safety, a sense of self. This is reiterated here when she

stands "clutching" the book. This moment also explains the true gravity of all the textual

events leading up to this point in Liesel's life – had she not stolen all those books that

helped her to come to understand herself enough to write her own story, and had Max not

erased the pages of *Mien Kampf* in order to write the story he gave to Liesel, she may not

have been down in the basement this night revising the words that made up her own life

story. As Death looks down on Liesel after she has been pulled from the rubble, he

explains, "Apart from everything else, the book thief wanted desperately to go back to the

basement, to write, or to read through her story one last time. In hindsight, I see it so

obviously on her face. She was dying for it – the safety of it, the home of it – but she

could not move" (13). Textuality in *The Book Thief* is depicted as dangerous and

subversive, but we see here that the act of writing is also aligned with feelings of "safety"

and "home."

The Imaginary Order: A Necessary Break from the Mother

In all of the texts to be discussed in this chapter, the relationship between the

protagonist and her mother is of critical importance; in these texts, mothers tend to be

absent, and in this absence, protagonists use the act of writing as a mechanism to distance

themselves from the absent mother, or sometimes to understand the mother's absence.

This is depicted in *The Book Thief* when Liesel spends days, perhaps even months,

drafting a multitude of letters to her mother that she never sends. On a day her adoptive

mother has sent Liesel to pick up payment for the family business, Liesel uses that money

to send her letters. When she comes home empty-handed, Liesel explains that she mailed

her letters using what little money her adoptive mother sent her out to retrieve. As soon

as she makes this confession, the realization that her mother is gone and that she will

never receive a response to her letters comes to her:

> What came to her then was the dustiness of the floor, the feeling
> that her clothes were more next to her than on her, and the sudden
> realization that this would all be for nothing – that her mother would never
> write back and she would never see her again. The reality of this gave her
> a second *Watschen*. It stung her, and it did not stop for many minutes […]
> The red marks grew larger, in patches on her skin, as she lay there,
> in the dust and the dirt and the dim light. Her breathing calmed, and a
> stray yellow tear trickled down her face. She could feel herself against the
> floor. A forearm, a knee. An elbow. A cheek. A calf muscle. (99)

Here, Liesel experiences a kind of bodily alienation: instead of "her forearm, her knee,"

the description is of "*a* forearm, *a* knee." The realization that her mother will never write

back makes her hyperaware of her own body at the same moment that she accepts being

forever separated from her mother. For Ole Golly and Harriet, writing serves as the

means of bonding and also the means of departure, but for Liesel, the one-sidedness of

this communication only reinforces her separateness. It is the act of writing that facilitates

this realization – in these letters, she attempts to articulate her relationship with her

mother, and it is in the impending silence from her mother that she is able to conceive of

herself as a separate being. Understanding that she is no longer tethered to her mother is depicted as a critical point in Liesel's maturation.

The female protagonist's struggle to articulate her relationship with her mother is evident in texts including *Walk Two Moons*, *Dicey's Song*, and *Harriet the Spy*. In these, as in other YA texts featuring female protagonists, the main character begins in what Lacan refers to as the Imaginary Order. The Imaginary Order (a stage when the subject is both joined to and separate from its actual, corporeal self and its idea of itself) corresponds to the Mirror Stage, where the subject simultaneously experiences self-recognition and misrecognition (Swales 25). Lacan argues that this is when a subject recognizes itself in the mirror and so conceives of itself as a whole being rather than a fragmented one, but this conception is only an illusion (Swales 26). In the aforementioned texts, the mothers (or mother figures) operate as mirrors. In *The Book Thief*, Liesel thinks about her mother's reaction to her brother's death in order to understand the gravity of the situation. In *Dicey's Song*, the second novel in Cynthia Voigt's Tillerman series, Dicey takes over the role of mother for herself and her siblings when their mother has a mental break. In *Walk Two Moons*, Sal literally conceives of herself as mirroring her mother: "When my mother had been there, I was like a mirror. […] For the first few days after she left, I felt numb, non-feeling. I didn't know how to feel. I would find myself looking around for her, to see what I might want to feel" (38). In *Harriet the Spy*, Harriet studies both her own mother and her stand-in mother, Ole Golly, and writes down things that they say and do; it is only after Ole Golly writes a letter to Harriet telling her that she does not miss her that Harriet mirrors that sentiment

and decides to stop missing Ole Golly. The protagonists metaphorically see themselves in their mothers and it is this recognition of oneself as "other" that Lacan describes as misrecognition and thus an entry into the Imaginary Order (Oliver 43).

In "Lacan with Runt Pigs," Karen Coats discusses the symbolic death children experience through the process of separating from their parents or parent figures. I conceptualize this symbolic death as a rupturing of what Lacan calls the "Ideal-I." In Lacan's approximation, the Ideal-I is the illusion of perfection that the child attempts to emulate but to no avail. The Ideal-I provides a template towards which the subject must strive but which is never actually attainable (Oliver 43). The thematic of writing throughout these texts provides a way for the female protagonist to break from the Ideal-I (i.e. conceptions of the perfect mother), to become aware of it as fantasy rather than possibility, and to begin understanding herself within a larger social order; this can only be achieved through experiencing the symbolic death of the Ideal-I. Here, the symbolic death of the Ideal-I means a literal and ideological severance of the mother/daughter relationship. The entrance into language, which Lacan concludes is an entrance into the Symbolic Order, is exemplified in these texts through the act of writing.

In *Walk Two Moons*, Sal's break from the Ideal-I, vis-à-vis her breaking away from unrealistic and damaging expectations of her mother, is achieved through her oration to her grandparents. Although not a traditional representation of "writing," oratory tradition is arguably one of the earliest forms of narrative construction. It also works here because it serves the same purpose that the act of writing does in other adolescent literature: the primary narrative includes the protagonist telling/writing a

secondary narrative. As Barbara Stoodt theorizes in *Children's Literature*, "readers apply intertextuality differently from one individual to the next. Intertextuality is not a linear process; even when reading exactly the same stories, readers identify different links to use in constructing meaning […] Each reader creates a highly personal mosaic of intersecting texts with intertextual relationships" (86). In this scenario, Sal functions as the "reader" Stoodt theorizes about and illustrates the importance of weaving together her own entirely personal mosaic of prior narratives in order to arrive at meaning. Sal's close friend, Phoebe has suffered a similar family disturbance that sets various other events into motion that affect both Phoebe and Sal. When Sal's grandparents decide to take her on a road trip, Sal narrates Phoebe's story to them and confesses that, "beneath Phoebe's story was another one. Mine" (3). Not only does this illustrate Sal's self-aware identification with the protagonist in her own story, but it also communicates one of the recurrent themes throughout YA literature, which is that stories are layered and connected in surprising and sometimes startling ways. This facet of YA literature further aligns the genre to postmodernism for its emphasis on intertextuality.

As Sal begins communicating Phoebe's narrative to her grandparents, she constantly draws out similarities to her own narrative. Sal watches as Phoebe's family attempts to cope with Phoebe's mother's disappearance. She says, "Phoebe was convinced that her mother was kidnapped because it was impossible for Phoebe to imagine that her mother could leave for any other reason" (175). Orating her friend's story that is similar to her own has given Sal a much needed distance to reflect on her own situation. Sal realizes that her mother leaving had little to do with anything she could

have prevented. This is evident when she wishes to tell Phoebe that "maybe her mother had gone looking for something, maybe her mother was unhappy, maybe there was nothing Phoebe could do about it" (176). Almost immediately after having these thoughts, Sal comes to an enlightening conclusion: "we couldn't own our mothers" (176). The change in pronoun, from discussing *Phoebe* to then including herself with "we" illustrates the degree to which Sal identifies with the protagonist of *her* story. This change in pronoun also and more importantly demonstrates the impact and importance of discourse around gender politics; in the statement "we couldn't own our mothers" is manifested a kind of collectivity not only among young women but among mothers, as well. Interestingly, both of the mothers that leave their families in this story are portrayed as extremely sympathetic. Through the retelling of Phoebe's story, Sal encounters gender politics embodied in the problematics of motherhood. Both Sal and Phoebe's mothers battle suffocating expectations and the erasure of identity apart from motherhood. Although this language is not readily available for Sal when her mother leaves, Sal arrives at this discourse through interpreting Phoebe's story.

Douglas Kellner's theories on postmodernism suggest that a key element of postmodern discourse is its emphasis on semiotic systems. For youth narratives, the predominant semiotic system is, indeed, language itself but more specifically, the plethora of often conflicting discourses that inscribe the individual. Kellner writes, "Postmodern theory generally follows poststructuralist theory in the primacy given to discourse theory" (26). He goes on to describe the relationship between semiotic systems and the codes and discourses that shape them. He argues, "Discourse theory sees all

social phenomena as structured semiotically by codes and rules, and therefore amenable to linguistic analysis, utilizing the model of signification and signifying practices. Discourse theorists argue that meaning is not simply given, but is socially constructed across a number of institutional sites and practices" (26). Because meaning is not simply given, the protagonist's task is to arrive at meaning by negotiating the varied discourses that attempt to shape her. This takes place by confronting those discourses through writing by way of entrance into the Symbolic. In articulating Phoebe's story, Sal articulates her own position amidst the politics of family as an institution and also the politics of gender. Social norms tell Sal that she has some kind of ownership over her mother, that her mother is not a person separate from motherhood. What she learns, through the articulation of Phoebe's story, her own story, and her mother's story, is that motherhood is a repressive and idealized category that is potentially harmful to both her own mother and to Phoebe's. She begins to understand her mother as a person separate from motherhood, something Sal recognizes that her mother was desperately trying to achieve; Sal remembers her mother telling her father that she wanted to go find out who she was, "'I mean before I was a wife and a mother. I mean *underneath*, where I am Chanhassen,'" (Chanhassen being the name she went by before she was married) (143). Sal's ability to conceive of her mother as a person separate from motherhood is significant because it illustrates a rupturing of her Ideal-I. In conceptualizing her mother both as a mother but also as a person that is not solely constituted by motherhood, she also inadvertently conceives of herself as a daughter but also as a person that is not solely constituted by daughter-hood. Engaging in this oratory narrativizing, then, helps Sal to

understand that people can be many different things at the same time. This understanding will undoubtedly help Sal avoid her mother's painful circumstance of completely losing touch with who she was before marriage and before being a mother.

The Act of Writing: Grasping Objectivity by Taking up the Role of the Voyeur

Both *Walk Two Moons* and *Harriet the Spy* challenge gender norms in similar ways. In Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," she posits that, "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed […] so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (47). Although Mulvey's argument is explicitly regarding visual media, her observations concerning the representations of women in film carry over to societal expectations of femaleness at large. In adolescent literature featuring female protagonists engaged in the act of writing, the female generally resists the traditional exhibitionist role ascribed her. As is indicated by Mulvey, normative gender construction positions the female as the object of the gaze. To be an object is to be denied subjectivity. But through the act of writing, female protagonists claim subjectivity by writing from particular points of view.

Both Sal and Harriet claim points of view in their writing by occupying the space of the observer in their respective texts rather than the space of the observed. However, the locus of their interest is not entirely directed outward. Occupying the space of the observer, or the voyeur, is only performed to then direct that gaze inward; *in what way do I (the protagonist) identify with this narrative? How does this story attribute to my sense*

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of self and the cohesion of that sense of self? In this sense, there is a more complex

conflation of voyeur and exhibitionist that Linda Haverty Rugg's work, *Picturing*

Ourself: Photography and Autobiography, attests to. In this work, Haverty provides a

useful reading of Freud's thesis in *Three Essays on Human Sexuality*. She writes,

> Freud claims […] that sexual perversions in the widest sense (for
> Freud wants to define "perversions" as extensions of the normal)
> occur in pairs; that is, sadists are also unconsciously masochists,
> and voyeurs also derive unconscious pleasure from exhibitionism.
> The yoking of voyeurism with exhibitionism seems to point to the
> voyeur's hidden agenda: self-identification and self-visualizations.
> If the voyeur unconsciously longs for the return of his or her gaze
> (as Freud's thesis implies), then is not the focal point of the
> voyeurist's look directed ultimately back at the self? (120)

Female protagonists who write generally resist the gender expectation of, to borrow

Mulvey's terminology, "to-be-looked-at-ness," because to write is also to observe. This is

the case in *Walk Two Moons* and it is especially the case in epistolary YA books such as

Harriet the Spy, *Go Ask Alice*, *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl*, *Speak*, *Catherine,*

Called Birdy, and *Angus, Thongs, and Full-Frontal Snogging*. Yet, because the act of

writing inevitably focuses attention back on the writers through self-identification and

interpretation as well as the negotiation of one's subject positions, this complicates the

binary notion of observer/observed. The simultaneous occupation of both the space of the

observer and the observed makes sense taking into account that the arrival into the

Symbolic Order is depicted as a struggle between self (perceived, observer self) and

"other" (written, observed self). In Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's text *Reading*

Autobiography: A guide to interpreting life narratives, they posit that "in life writing […]

[subjects] write simultaneously from externalized and internal points of view, taking

themselves as both subject and object, or thematizing that distinction" (5). Doing so allows a subject a different vantage point, a perceived distance from herself, achieved through the act of constructing a narrative.

Harriet from *Harriet the Spy* most obviously illustrates writing from both an externalized and internal point of view. While she's over at her friend, Sport's, house, she writes in her journal, "SPORT'S HOUSE SMELLS LIKE OLD LAUNDRY, AND IT'S NOISY AND KIND OF POOR-LOOKING. MY HOUSE DOESN'T HAVE THAT SMELL AND IS QUIET LIKE MRS. PLUMBER'S. DOES THAT MEAN WE ARE RICH? WHAT MAKES PEOPLE POOR OR RICH? [..] ARE RICH PEOPLE EVER GOING TO GROW UP TO BE WRITERS?" (52). Most all of Harriet's "spying" notes facilitate her world view and, though they may begin with an externalized other (either a literal "other," as in this example, or herself as "other," where she is writing about her idea of herself, as in other journal entries), they inevitably circle around to focus on herself. Sport's father, like herself, is hoping to be a famous author. This makes her writing reflect anxieties about how different their lifestyles are despite having the same end goal. In sum, Harriet writes about Sport's father in order to consider how this information might affect her own life and her understanding of it. First the gaze is outward but only to then facilitate the inward gaze.

On the eve of the 60s, the decade when YA literature became a distinct genre rife with youth narratives emphasizing social constructedness, Erik Erikson, a prominent psychologist, published his influential work, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (1959). This text defines adolescence as "The final assembly of all the converging identity elements at the

end of childhood (and the abandonment of the divergent ones)" and "a normal phase of increased conflict characterized by a seeming fluctuation in ego strength" (Erikson 125). This definition explains the importance of directing the gaze inward. If adolescence is a time to assemble the various parts of one's identity, then looking inward is necessary. The paradigm shift in the conceptualization of the individual from romanticism to postmodernism coincides with Erikson's approximation of adolescence; although the heightened importance placed on identity might seem to reflect romanticist ideas of the individual, Erikson's definition also stresses the "converging identity elements" which brings to the fore the more postmodern concept of the individual as comprised of various externalized, societal factors. Defining adolescence as a "period of role experimentation leading to final choices after all identifications […] are integrated" (Austrian 142) assumes two things. First, before this point in the life cycle, a subject has various identifications that do not cohere. Second, the only way to achieve adulthood is to find a way to integrate these various identifications, creating a cohesion of self. The act of writing, or self inscription, thematizes this process in youth narratives.

This process of integrating various identifications is especially evident in *Dicey's Song*. As mentioned previously, *Dicey's Song* is the second novel in Cynthia Voigt's Tillerman series. The first novel, *Homecoming*, introduces the four Tillerman children and their mother who abandons them because she is mentally ill. Dicey, the eldest of the four children, takes over the role of mother by assuming responsibility for her siblings' physical wellbeing as well as moral and ethical upbringing. Even when a mother is all but completely absent from the narrative in YA literature, as in *Dicey's Song*, her absence

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still constitutes and drives the main plot lines in the novel; though Dicey's mother disappears early on in the series, both *Homecoming* and *Dicey's Song* are indeed narratives about motherhood. The act of writing is featured early on in *Dicey's Song* as an act that constitutes or embodies. When the children find a Bible in their grandmother's home, they see numerous names inscribed in the beginning of the large book. Dicey thinks, "We should be written down too" (28). Having been adrift after their mother left them by the side of the road, having their names written down alongside others in their family line provides Dicey with a great sense of satisfaction; their names, the symbolic signifier of who they are, have a place now amidst family they didn't know they had until very recently. In this case, writing provides a sense of security through the promise of belonging.

The most important instance of writing, however, takes place when Dicey is given a writing assignment from her English teacher. She goes home and thinks about the assignment: "She'd show them she could write something good. She began thinking of how she would write about Momma, how to say enough for it to tell what had happened […] She had thought of a way to begin that would give her a good ending too" (98). The assignment asks students to write about an influential person in their lives and Dicey chooses to write about her mother. The above quote illustrates the care with which Dicey takes to prepare for writing the assignment. Writing is something that she obviously values because she desires to "show them" that she's a good writer. She also doesn't begin writing until she has figured out a way to end it, illustrating an emphasis on presenting the whole of something. Rather than just sitting herself down and writing,

Dicey takes the time to contemplate "how to say enough for it to tell what had happened." The emphasis on "how," rather than *what* to say, exposes the task as an exercise in the construction of language. Throughout the novel, Dicey underscores the connection between the problem of articulation and understanding the self: she says to her grandmother, "'I have the feeling that I know who I am, only I'm not any more'" (136).

When Dicey's teacher announces that he is going to read her assignment to the class, Dicey panics momentarily and then regains herself.

> Dicey didn't care if nobody liked it but her. She remembered how she had felt, writing it down. It was hard, and she kept scratching out sentences and beginning again. Yet it kind of came out, almost without her thinking of it, almost as if it had been already written inside her head, and she just had to find the door to open to let it out. She'd never felt that way about schoolwork before, and she wondered if she could do it again. (203)

The writing is conceptualized here as having a direct connection to the writer. Although the assignment was written for the class, Dicey realizes that she really wrote it for herself because it does not matter to her what others think of it. What does matter is the feeling she had while writing, which places an importance on the act of writing, not the actual written product.

In addition to writing being rendered as having a special connection to the self in this text, it more importantly illustrates writing and self inscription as thematizing the cohering of various subject positions and identifications. This takes place in the actual written product that Dicey produces for the assignment. In it, Dicey describes the geography of her old home, Cape Cod, from where she and her siblings are displaced. In a short and eloquent essay, she describes having never known her father and spending

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little time with her mother because of the financial hardships of growing up with a single parent in an affluent area. In these descriptions, she locates herself in various ways: a female, the oldest of her siblings, a displaced child, daughter to a mentally disturbed mother, fatherless, and occupied with securing basic needs such as food and shelter for herself and her siblings. What she gleans from the assignment is how each factor fits in to who she has become and what this means for who she will be in the future. Dicey moves from the Imaginary Order, where she compulsively acts as "mother" to her siblings, is confused by her mother's abandonment, and waits for her mother to recover despite all the evidence that suggests she never will, into the Symbolic Order, where she is able to articulate the complexity of these intersections. By articulating her various positions and reconciling those positions, Dicey comes to understand that despite her mother's flaws, her mother loved her and her siblings as best she could. When Dicey accepts herself as occupying these various positions (displaced child, poor, daughter of a mentally disturbed mother, etc.), and also comes to the conclusion that her mother loved her the best that she could, Dicey is able to then let go of seeing herself as the only mother her siblings will ever have and start seeing herself as their sister.

Conclusion

The act of writing within adolescent literature, as argued throughout this chapter, has a twofold purpose: it is both what signifies a protagonist's move into the social and also what allows the protagonist to embrace subjectivity to navigate that realm. Erikson suggests that adolescents stand in a different relationship to the self than do adults and so it makes sense that literature aimed at this age group attempts to reflect the various

landscapes that shape one's sense of self. For females in youth narratives, this process is largely tethered to the protagonist's relationship to the mother. Though the act of writing and the role of intertextuality in youth narratives with male protagonists also focuses on adolescent subject formation in relationship to the various discourses that inscribe the individual, YA narratives with male protagonists specifically emphasize the role that shame plays in this process.

Chapter Two

"I wrote my way out of the labyrinth":

Male Inscription, Intertextuality, and Shame in Young Adult Literature

The Perks of Being a Wallflower[2] is an epistolary novel that features a freshman

in high school learning how to "participate" in life; Charlie, the protagonist, is cautioned

by his English teacher to not let his extensive journaling inhibit his participation or active

engagement with the scenes he records in his journal. Throughout the course of this novel,

many noteworthy texts are referenced, some of which include *Naked Lunch*, *Catcher in*

the Rye, *The Fountainhead*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Hamlet*, *Peter Pan*, and *On The Road*.

This reliance on the intertextual reference in Young Adult literature is also apparent in

Looking for Alaska where the protagonist memorizes the last words of famous authors,

while another important character compulsively hoards books in her dorm room. At the

climax of *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*, Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest* is

quoted, extemporaneously, by a whole audience; "*The pure and simple truth / Is rarely*

pure and never simple. / What's a boy to do / When lies and truth are both sinful?" (291).

This phenomenon of YA narratives that rely on a complex system of texts through

allusion, direct quotation, parody, and simple reference, referred to throughout this

chapter as intertextuality, provides the means through which I investigate the special

relationship between YA literature as a distinct genre and postmodernism as a social

phenomenon. The books discussed here illustrate the ways in which YA literature uses

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[2] *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, though initially marketed as YA, is now marketed as
adult fiction. It appears on the American Library Association's "Top 100 Most
Banned/Challenged Books: 2000 – 2009" (ala.org).

the conventions of postmodernism to thematize the alienating effects of adolescence. The

most salient and recurrent issues throughout these texts are 1) postmodern alienation and

the loss of master narratives (and the possibility for creating alternative narratives), 2) the

embrace of subjective truth and the negotiation of shame stemming from social rejection,

and 3) self-inscription and intertextuality. The books examined here feature male

protagonists engaged in various forms of self-writing and intertextuality as a means to

negotiate shame. Though writing the self is definitely present in the texts to be discussed,

heavy intertextuality, through re-appropriation, interpretation, and bricolage, is a more

uniquely male practice than the self-writing discussed in chapter 1.

Postmodernism and Adolescence

One prominent link between YA novels and postmodernism as social theory is the

palpability of alienation as a response to the disillusionment with the world. Adolescence

is understood by many developmental theorists and psychologists to be a time steeped in

alienation (Lawrence B. Schiamberg, L. Eugence Arnold, Robin Lynn Petterson, Barbara

and Philip Newman, to name some). Gerald Graff postulates that in the postmodern

condition, likewise, "alienation from significant external reality, from *all* reality, becomes

an inescapable condition" (Bertens 55). Adolescence, then, is a kind of postmodern time

in one's life – a time when alienation is part and parcel of how one relates to the world.

Gershen Kaufman, a psychologist and shame theorist, connects the affect of shame with

alienation. In *The Psychology of Shame: Theory and Treatment of Shame-Based*

Syndromes Kaufman writes, "No other affect is more central to identity formation. Our

sense of self, both particular and universal, is deeply embedded in our struggles with the

alienating affect. Answers to the questions, 'Who am I?' and 'Where do I belong?' are forged in the crucible of shame" (5). In *Theorising Social Exclusion*, Ann Taket et al. further draw the connection between alienation and shame through their discussions of the relationship between social exclusion and being silenced. They write, "The experience of being marginalized by dominant or normative social and cultural systems is often accompanied by shame. Shame, much like stigma, is often closely connected to silence and being silenced" (174).

It makes sense, then, that YA novels, essentially books for and about "adolescence," not only reflect this pairing of shame and alienation, but do so in a way that uses the conventions of postmodernism. Nancy Lesko, in *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence,* writes "The human being of postmodernism is understood as a text, as a composition, as a bricolage, or as a performance without an essential core. The self becomes 'subjectivity'" (17). YA literature literalizes Lesko's theories of the human being of postmodernism being conceptualized as text. In YA narratives, the reliance on the textual in the form of self-writing and intertextuality and the convergence of protagonist with text literally features human as composition, to be both written by the self and also inscribed within available narratives. The distinctive relationship between language and books about adolescence is in part owed to the inherently discursive nature of "adolescence" as a social category that did not always exist[3]. Rather, "adolescence" as

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[3] Robert Epstein's work, *The Case Against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen* chronicles the sociopolitical construction of the modern American adolescent. The initial construction, he argues, is in large part due to child labor laws passed in 1924 that prohibited once working young people from having jobs. This arbitrary split between

a life stage is a culturally constructed idea spoken into being by sociologists and psychologists. Kirsten Campbell's valuable reading of Lacan in *Jacques Lacan and Feminist Epistemology* articulates the special relationship Lacan draws between speech and the social realm:

> For Lacan, the linguistic is the condition of the social, and hence also the condition of knowledge. In the classical Lacanian epistemology of *Écrits*, Lacan deploys an Aristotelian understanding of the social being as speaking being, arguing that speech enables the symbolization of relations between subjects (*Éc:* 469). Lacan echoes that concept of the speaking being over a decade later in *Encore*, where he declares that: "in the final analysis, there's nothing but that, the social link. I designate it with the term 'discourse' because there's no other way to designate it once we realize that the social link is instated only by anchoring itself in the way in which language is situated over and etched into what the place is crawling with, namely, speaking beings (*l'être parlant*)." (56)

This explication of language belonging to the realm of the social intersects with this chapter at two different but related points; 1) understanding that "speech enables the symbolization of relations between subjects" highlights the importance of adolescence being a socially constructed category; that is, an "adolescent" is spoken into being. 2) This fundamental connection between language and adolescence as a life stage having always already been defined by the realm of the social, then, is fundamentally enveloped in the realm of language. The relationship between adolescence and language is emphasized through YA novels that feature protagonists enveloped in language through self-writing and intertextuality – that is, the inclusion of familiar narratives, narrative structures, and/or popular culture references help to shape meaning within the text especially in terms of the protagonist's navigation of shame and alienation and eventual

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who was able to work, lawfully, and who was not was one of the first fissures between adult and adolescent.

identity creation. In *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, for instance, Charlie journals about his

life but incessantly refers to canonical works of literature as well as to popular culture

references like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *M.A.S.H.* The inclusion of these

outside texts is enriched by the protagonist's treatment of self as text, enabling a critical

distance with which to discover or cope.

Male Protagonists in Contemporary YA Literature

While both female and male protagonists engage in inscription within YA texts,

the ideological implications are different. This chapter's project is to focus only on YA

novels featuring male protagonists. As is described in chapter one, whereas female

characters entering the Symbolic Order enter a world dominated by difference (Campbell

158), male characters entering the Symbolic Order (the Law of the Father as Lacan

theorizes), enter a world of similarity, a male dominated world. Sidonie Smith and Julia

Watson's Introduction to *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* nicely synthesizes

Lacan and de Beauvoir's foundational theories:

> The Lacanian 'subject,' established under and through the entry into the
> symbolic realm of language (what Lacan called the Law of the Father), is
> a masculine subject. Claiming the phallus as the transcendental signifier,
> Lacan rewrote the Freudian drama of castration by assigning to the phallus
> the compensatory promise of dominance in the symbolic realm […] With
> the entry into language […] the subject takes up a sexed position as either
> male or female. In this process 'woman' becomes a reified cultural Other
> to the phallic masculine Subject – 'the fantasised object (Other) that
> makes it possible for men to exchange and function' (Sellers, 47). Sexual
> difference is foundational, implicated in the entry into language. (19)

For female protagonists engaged in self-inscription, the act of writing is most often

concerned with gender politics and negotiating a landscape where the social construction

of gender, perhaps more than any other category, is crucial to the construction of the self.

Works from diverse historical and narrative contexts, such as *Little Women*, *Harriet the Spy*, *Dicey's Song*, *The Book Thief*, and *Walk Two Moons*, feature young female protagonists who write themselves into being and who also rely on outside texts to aid in the interpretation of their current selves. For female protagonists, the desired end or goal is utterance, an overcoming of silence and of being silenced, and the ability to speak outside of the normative structures prescribed for them. Because "the Lacanian 'subject,' established under and through the entry into the symbolic realm of language [...] is a masculine subject," the task for female protagonists is to acquire (a) Language that does not belong to "The Law of the Father," consequently resisting becoming the "object" or "reified cultural Other" Smith and Watson describe above.

For male protagonists, however, the achievement is something else. Theoretically speaking, male protagonists should be subjects and not objects upon entrance into Language simply because they are male, and the Lacanian subject is always a masculine subject. Youth narratives featuring male protagonists entering into the Symbolic Order, however, have their own set of issues and concerns largely pertaining to issues of class, race, sexuality, and other problematic categories constructed and informed by dominant, repressive ideologies. Because the male subject Lacan theorizes about is a privileged, white, heteronormative male subject, the Law of the Father is a law that leaves little or no subjecthood for those masculine subjects who do not embody the master narratives available to them in the dominant culture. The protagonists in these texts are non-normative and therefore are not assigned the "compensatory promise of dominance in the symbolic realm." The YA texts discussed here at length feature male subjects from

diverse backgrounds struggling with that which differentiates them from the norm. This differentiation limits or castrates their access to phallic power and this castration is manifested in the form of shame. The act of writing for male protagonists in YA literature, then, is an exercise in articulating and overcoming the paralyzing and silencing effects of shame.

One perhaps not so coincidental marker of this shame in YA narratives is the protagonist self-labeling himself as "monster". In *Will Grayson, Will Grayson,* a coming-of-age narrative about a boy who meets someone with his exact same name, commencing both a literal and metaphorical identity crisis, Will says, "how is it even possible to be both attracted and not attracted to someone at the very same moment, and am I a robot incapable of real feelings, and do you think that actually, like, has trying to follow the rules about shutting up and not caring made me into some kind of hideous monster whom no one will ever love or marry?" (86). Will struggles with conceiving of himself as a monster, which separates and alienates him from his peers. Steve Harmon, the protagonist of *Monster*, a YA novel that chronicles a young boy's legal proceedings and temporary incarceration, also illustrates this theme. This is most evident when Steve writes the word "Monster" over and over again on a legal pad during one of the court hearings. Later, referring to an inmate, Steve writes in his journal, "he said when he gets out, he will have the word Monster tattooed on his forehead. I feel like I already have it tattooed on mine" (61). Similarly, Conor from *A Monster Calls* subconsciously erects an enormous monster that visits him in the dead of night who turns out to be his double. The word "monster" turns up in many more YA novels featuring male protagonists, such as

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, The Perks of Being a Wallflower, and *Looking for Alaska*. This glaring similarity points to the prevalence of male protagonists in YA narratives internalizing feelings of wrongness and/or inadequacy, taking responsibility for that inherent and internal wrongness, and then being charged with the task of managing the shame therein. In these narratives, this management of shame takes place through the textual by means of self-writing and intertextuality.

Self-Writing and Intertextuality

The act of writing most often illustrates the protagonist's active engagement with forming an understanding of him/herself within the larger social order. While foregrounding the act of writing has long been a narrative trope within youth narratives (take, for instance, Jo in *Little Women* from 1868), the increasing number of youth narratives since the 1960s that feature the act of writing as an essential exercise for gaining selfhood can be accredited to the special relationship between YA literature as a distinct genre and postmodernism as a social phenomenon.

Julia Kristeva, in "Word, Dialogue, and Novel" writes that the literary word is "an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings" (65). She goes on to write, "each word (text) is an intersection of other words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read" (66). Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* posits that

> today's theories of intertextuality are structural in focus […] but depend upon an implied theory of reading or decoding […] texts do not generate anything – until they are perceived and interpreted. For instance, without the implied existence of a reader, written texts remain collections of black marks on white pages. (23)

Kristeva's description of dialogic textual surfaces and Hutcheon's emphasis on an implied or imagined reader/decoder inform my understanding of the importance of intertextuality in YA literature, particularly in reference to the protagonist, always both a reading and a decoding subject and also a text him or herself. The varied but related textual practices (creation, bricolage, appropriation) in YA narratives ultimately serve as the mechanisms that commence the protagonist's move from a place of seeking an objective Truth to embracing subjective truth. In doing so, protagonists realize their difference from the normative Lacanian subject, articulate that difference, and come to understand/interpret that difference in terms *not* associated with lack, impotence, or castration. Instead, the entrance into Language through the textual constitutes subjecthood, and the celebration of subjectivity assuages the shame associated with being outside of master narratives.

In YA novels, the external texts are not the only narratives that comprise the "intersection of textual surfaces" at play. Contemporary YA literature is abundantly textual in its relationship to the act of writing. Though self-writing and intertextuality are distinct modes, self-writing is inevitably subsumed within intertextuality in these texts; that is, self-writing, also referred to throughout this chapter as self-inscription, transforms the protagonist himself into a text to be placed amongst the other referenced texts throughout the narrative. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (referred to throughout this chapter as *Aristotle and Dante*) is a coming-of-age novel about two boys realizing and coming to terms with their homosexuality and their different versions of what it means to be Mexican American. Aristotle conceptualizes

himself as a written product: "High school was just a prologue to the real novel. Everybody got to write you – but when you graduated, you got to write yourself. At graduation you got to collect your teacher's pens and your parents' pens and you got your own pen. And you could do all the writing" (335). This collision of self and writing is also apparent in *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* through Tiny, the protagonist's best friend. Will says to Tiny, "'well, your life is a musical. literally,'" (242) referring to Tiny's recently debuted autobiographical musical. In these two examples, and others to be discussed in this chapter, the activity of writing is an act of self-inscription. That is, characters in these texts actually write themselves into being. Other contemporary YA texts, such as *A Monster Calls*, *Going Bovine, Looking for Alaska, Monster*, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (referred to throughout this chapter as *The Absolutely True Diary*) all feature young adult males engaged in the act of writing. These textual practices of writing are comprised of bricolage, appropriation, and creation and function as the means through which youth negotiate identity management. The point at which protagonists write themselves into being and place themselves amongst the other textual surfaces in their narrative is the point at which self-inscription through the act of writing is subsumed within the larger notion of intertextuality described above.

The act of self-inscription is not intertextual in and of itself. Intertextuality functions outside of the narrative as a one-way communication between author and reader, while self-inscription functions within the diegetic arc, often a part of plot. In YA narratives, however, intertextuality functions both outside and inside the narrative. This takes place through the protagonist's awareness of and interaction with the intertext. This

foregrounded interaction between protagonist and intertext renders the protagonist as reader and decoder of those outside texts and is often central to the narrative arc of the story. Intertextuality collides with self-inscription along these lines. Because the protagonist writes himself into being, oftentimes conceiving of himself as a text, or locating crucial elements of himself in the textual, the protagonist is himself a textual surface with no fixed meaning (to borrow from Kristeva), placing himself amongst other outside texts to be read and then decoded (to borrow from Hutcheon). It is through the dialogue between outside texts and the protagonist-as-text that the act of writing is subsumed within the larger mechanism of intertextuality. That is, the protagonist as writer becomes a piece of the intertext within YA narratives. In *Aristotle and Dante*, for example, the two main characters' names immediately establish a relationship to the textual – a relationship that Aristotle and Dante acknowledge and discuss the first time they meet. The cultural dialectics around "Dante" and "Aristotle" hold a particular kind of *gravitas;* while the fictional or limited understanding of "Dante" elicits concepts of hell and Catholicism, the fictional or reductive understanding of "Aristotle" evokes images of a wise, old Greek man with a beard. Neither understanding of these two historical figures contributes to the plot of the narrative, but it already positions the two main characters, who have the names of a poet and philosopher, as texts to be read but also as characters who might have a relationship to writing, which both of whom do.

Another example that illustrates this bridge between self-inscription and intertextuality is in *Looking for Alaska* – a novel about coping with feelings of regret, responsibility, and guilt for the somewhat ambiguous death of a close friend. The main

character, Miles, compulsively memorizes the last words of famous authors; "'So this guy,' I said, standing in the doorway of the living room. 'Francois Rabelais. He was this poet. And his last words were, 'I go to seek a Great Perhaps.' That's why I'm going. So I don't have to wait until I die to start seeking a Great Perhaps'" (5). Miles' identity creation hinges on his pastiche of authors' (and other famous personalities') last words. Miles is both a reading and a decoding subject and also a text himself, comprised of these published last words. He writes himself by adopting the words of authors. Over the course of the novel, Miles refers to or directly quotes from John F. Kennedy, Francois Rabelais, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Henrik Ibsen, James Joyce, Humphrey Bogart, Thomas Edison, Che Guevara, and General Sedgwick. The last words of famous authors inform Miles' decisions throughout the text.

Similarly, the protagonist in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (referred to throughout this chapter as *Perks*) also has an inclination towards adopting/applying words of authors to his life situations. *Perks* is an epistolary novel about an adolescent boy, Charlie, who is alienated from his peers and family largely because of his personality eccentricities and his desire to fade into the background, to become a wallflower. He is adopted by an equally eccentric group of friends and exposed to experiences that trigger flashbacks of childhood trauma. For Charlie, reading and writing save him by helping him to understand what happened in his past as well as what his place is in his current world. Charlie develops a special relationship with his English teacher who gives him many canonical novels to read that extend beyond the ninth grade curriculum. Throughout the text, Charlie tends to memorize quotes or situations from

these texts and applies those to his life in real time. At a diner with his friends, for example, Charlie quotes from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*, "'This is not a time for heroes because nobody will let that happen'" (105). Charlie writes in his journal, "the book takes place in the 1920s, which I thought was great because I supposed the same kind of conversation could happen in the Big Boy. It probably already did with our parents and grandparents. It was probably happening with us right now" (105). Literature, in this example, enables Charlie to create connections across time and space. But it is through the journaling, the writing of the event, where Charlie interprets the significance of these connections as forming an understanding of himself; he writes, "it felt good to sit there and talk about our place in things" (150).

Both Charlie and Miles appropriate the language of authors and text in ways that place themselves amongst the texts they adopt. Charlie journals, and the journaling becomes that which holds him together; "I don't know what's wrong with me. It's like all I can do is keep writing this gibberish to keep from breaking apart" (205). Charlie not only uses famous texts to help him interpret and understand where he is in the world, but he conceptualizes himself as text that also can be interpreted. Miles, after his friend's death, goes looking in her room for *The General in His Labyrinth*, a book she often quoted from. The specific quote that operates as the central metaphor through the text is, "'He was shaken by the overwhelming revelation that the headlong race between his misfortunes and his dreams was at that moment reaching the finish line. The rest was darkness. 'Damn it,' he sighed. 'How will I ever get out of this labyrinth!'" (155). In Miles' religious studies class, the teacher assigns a take-home paper and it is through the

writing of this paper that Miles comes to understand his place in things. At the novel's conclusion, Miles declares, "I wrote my way out of the labyrinth" (219). Both Charlie and Miles use the cross referencing of texts as well as the act of writing as a means to cope with exigent circumstances.

In *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art,* Kristeva argues that authors create text by compiling material from pre-existing discourse; that is, a text becomes, "a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text," in which "several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another" (36). Miles and Charlie both illustrate this theory in practice; as authors engaged in the act of writing themselves, they rely on existing texts to do so. Charlie's constant reference to and quotation of famous texts and subsequent journaling and internalization of those texts, and Miles' obsession with last words that ultimately leads him "out of the labyrinth," are both literal examples of Kristeva's theory where "several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another."

Intertextuality, Alienation, and Shame

Intertextuality, both the reliance on outside narratives and the conception of protagonist as narrative, is the means through which YA protagonists who are male articulate and negotiate shame. The relationship between intertextuality, alienation, and shame is especially evident in the works that will be discussed here at length. Sherman Alexi's *The Absolutely True Diary* is an epistolary novel featuring a young male protagonist, Arnold Spirit, who struggles against expectation and makes the decision to attend an all-white school off the reservation (where all of his family and friends reside).

Making the decision to go to school off the reservation has severe social implications; Arnold does not belong in the all-white community where he chooses to go to school, but he is also ostracized and alienated from his family and friends on the reservation. In YA narratives, liminality and alienation are themes that work recursively to underscore the problematic position of being simultaneously between and outside of or without. Arnold's predicament, feeling as though he belongs nowhere, commences his extensive journaling, which inevitably becomes the space where he does belong – the space of his own language.

About one of his first experiences at the all-white school, Arnold journals, "They stared at me, the Indian boy […] Those white kids couldn't believe their eyes. They stared at me like I was Bigfoot or a UFO. What was I doing at Reardan, whose mascot was an Indian, thereby making me the only *other* Indian in town?" (56). Returning to *Theorising Social Exclusion*, Ann Taket et al. theorize that, "The experience of being marginalized by dominant or normative social and cultural systems is often accompanied by shame. Shame, much like stigma, is often closely connected to silence and being silenced" (174). The space of journaling and the act of writing imbues Arnold with a space and a language that is his own to fight against the silencing effects of being marginalized by dominant and normative social and cultural systems. Arnold, othered both by the people he calls family and also by the people in his new surroundings, experiences a great deal of shame. This is evident in how he continuously writes more or less negative things about himself: "weak and poor and scared, I let them call me names while I tried to figure out what to do" (64); "I've always cried too easily. I cry when I'm

happy or sad. I cry when I'm angry. I cry because I'm crying. It's weak. It's the opposite of warrior" (75). In these quotes, Arnold "lets" them call him names and refers to himself as "weak," first taking responsibility for the racism he endures and then conceiving of himself as weak as a result.

The act of writing for Arnold becomes the means by which he circumvents the absolute silencing of being othered. It is also the way he copes with the seemingly insurmountable grief of dealing with the many deaths of people who are close to him: his grandmother, his sister, and Eugene, a close family friend. In a moment of great pain and anguish when he is dealing with Eugene's sudden death, Arnold turns to the textual to help him cope: "I hoped I could find stories that would help me. So I looked up the word 'grief' in the dictionary. I wanted to find out everything I could about grief. I wanted to know why my family had been given so much to grieve about" (172). He then writes in his journal, "grief (greef) n. When you feel so helpless and stupid that you think nothing will ever be right again, and your macaroni and cheese tastes like sawdust, and you can't even jerk off because it seems like too much trouble. © Webster's Dickshunary 4ever" (172). Arnold writes this faux-dictionary entry into his journal using the format he encounters in the real Webster's dictionary. His refusal to copy the actual definition into his journal suggests that the available narratives of grief and death are wholly inadequate. His intervention with or parody of the definition of grief provides an example of what happens when the available narratives fail to provide adequate relatability; that is, the protagonist becomes an author himself and rewrites the inadequate narrative. When Arnold becomes author, he assumes authorial power, thus battling and even minimizing

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feelings of inadequacy. For Arnold, someone who scolds himself for not having power, for being the "opposite of warrior," (re)claiming control is especially important.

Though the dictionary fails him, Arnold still seeks outside texts to interpret alongside the narrative he is writing of himself. Language remains at the center of negotiating deeply rooted feelings of shame. Arnold turns to Euripides, an author he is reading about in school. By writing about and interpreting this available narrative, Arnold is able to make surprising connections, which both alleviate and exacerbate feelings of alienation. He writes that Euripides is "this Greek writer from the fifth century BC. A way-old dude," and he quotes Medea who says, "What greater grief than the loss of one's native land?" In his journal, Arnold interprets the text and reflects on the significance of this quote, "Well, of course, man. We Indians have LOST EVERYTHING. We lost our native land, we lost our languages, we lost our songs and dances. We lost each other. We only know how to lose and be lost" (173). Arnold not only relates to Medea's loss of land, but he extends this connection to include the loss of his cultural heritage. Significantly, he acknowledges the loss of language as part of this devastation, but through the act of writing, Arnold refuses to be silenced. Though Medea seems to highlight feelings of being lost and alone, the interpretation of narrative allows for connection.

Arnold's frustration with losing and being lost, as evidenced in the above quote, is reiterated throughout the text as he finds himself torn between the reservation and his new school off the reservation. His entrance into language, then, by way of journaling and interpreting narratives, is how he stops feeling so utterly lost. Later, Arnold interprets Medea murdering her kids as an act of compassion because she felt that the world was

joyless. In response to this story, he starts making lists: "I kept making list after list of the things that made me feel joy. And I kept drawing cartoons of the things that made me angry. I kept writing and rewriting, drawing and redrawing, and rethinking and revising and reediting. It became my grieving ceremony" (178). In highlighting the "rethinking and revising and reediting" nature of writing, *The Absolutely True Diary* brings to the fore an important aspect of writing; that is, it reassigns power to the author, to rethink (change his mind), to revise (change his course), and to reedit (do it over again) where the author was before stripped of such power by dominant, repressive ideologies.

Arnold's experiences of shame stem largely from the deep guilt for choosing to go to school off the reservation and are compounded by his feelings of powerlessness when so many important people in his life die. Kaufman argues, "powerlessness in any sphere of life, because it is an impediment and therefore thwarts positive affect, can activate shame" (55). Arnold feels powerless at home but also powerless at his new school where he is clearly marked as outsider. Kaufman argues,

> In the early years of life, shame is predominantly a wordless experience irrespective of its duration. Later, shame experiences become transformed by language. Shame increasingly becomes a partially cognitive, self-evaluative experience with the attainment of formal operational thought in the Piagetian sense, but it begins as a largely wordless experience [and eventually] binds speech [while] paralyzing the self. (19)

Male protagonists in YA novels struggling with shame often write their way out of the paralyzing effects of shame. Because shame binds speech, it stands to reason that achieving speech releases the binding affects of shame. This is especially evident in *Aristotle and Dante*.

In *Aristotle and Dante*, Aristotle writes, *"*[I] took out my journal. I'd been avoiding writing in it. I think I was afraid all my anger would spill out on the pages. And I just didn't want to look at all that rage. It was a different kind of pain. A pain I couldn't stand. I tried not to think. I just started writing" (149). Aristotle's initial fear of writing comes from the recognition that what he has inside is anger, rage, and pain. Being bound by this fear, or made speechless, keeps him from writing because writing is the thing that unleashes these carefully bound emotions. However, he conceptualizes writing, perhaps paradoxically so, as the thing that makes his life orderly:

> Order. That was what I needed. So I took out my journal and started writing: […] – *My father held me in his arms when I had a fever and I wanted him to hold me in his arms forever. – The problem is not that I don't love my mother and father. The problem is that I don't know how to love them. – Dante is the first friend I've ever had. That scares me. – I think if Dante really knew me, he wouldn't like me.* (97)

Aristotle not only has great difficulty acknowledging and then accepting his love for Dante, he also conceives of himself as someone who is not deserving of love, not from his parents and not from Dante. This self-hate is a byproduct of the shame he both unconsciously and eventually consciously endures when he realizes that he is in love with Dante. When Dante asks Aristotle what he really loves, Aristotle answers, "'I love the desert. God, I love the desert'," to which Dante replies, "It's so lonely." Aristotle as narrator then says, "Dante didn't understand. I *was* unknowable" (337). Echoing Arnold's feelings of perpetually feeling "lost," Aristotle asserts many times throughout the text that he not only does not know himself but that others cannot know him; Aristotle embraces alienation as a coping mechanism to keep from having to face the very things that make him feel shame: his love for Dante and his complex family history. The novel

reaches its conclusion when his complicated family dynamics, his love for Dante, and a reliance on the textual all collide. First, his mother explains to Aristotle that she "can't stand watching all that loneliness that lives inside" of him. This prompts the following conversation:

>"What am I going to do? I'm so ashamed."
>"Ashamed of what?" my mother said. "Of loving Dante?"
>"I'm a guy. He's a guy. It's not the way things are supposed to be. Mom – "
>"I know," she said. "Ophelia taught me some things, you know? All those letters. I've learned some things."
>"I hate myself."
>"Don't, *amor. Te adoro.* […] You're not alone, Ari. I know it feels that way. But you're not."
>[…]
>"What am I going to do?"
>My father's voice was soft. "Dante didn't run. I keep picturing him taking all those blows. But he didn't run."
>"Okay," I said. For once in my life, I understood my father perfectly.
>And *he* understood *me*. (349)

Aristotle understanding his father, perhaps for the first time, is an indicator of his newfound connection with his family but also with a masculinity that is importantly different from Lacan's white, normative, Law of the Father that promises social dominance. While Lacan's Law of the Father withholds membership from Aristotle, both because of his non-white heritage and also because of his homosexuality, Aristotle's father offers an alternative connection or membership based on language of compassion, understanding, and inclusion. Aristotle's father ultimately encourages him to stand up for the person he loves, communicating to Aristotle that he knows who he is, understands who he is, and not only accepts him but encourages him.

The "Ophelia" that Aristotle's mother speaks of is his late, great aunt - a lesbian

who wrote extensive letters to his mother about her life, including her sexuality. The

importance of those letters to Aristotle's life becomes central because Ophelia's narrative

helps his mother understand what he might be going through. In this narrative, writing

allows Aristotle a place to come to terms with who he is, but it is the writings of his aunt,

her own self-inscription, that enables Aristotle's parents the language of love,

compassion, and understanding that he so desperately needs in order for him to surrender

alienation as a viable means of defense against his feelings of shame.

The "Real" and Embracing Subjective Truth

Aristotle, struggling against a heteronormative culture that responds not just

unkindly but with hostility to sexual difference, is but one example of a male protagonist

in YA literature who grapples with feelings of powerlessness. Arnold Spirit, likewise,

battles his feelings of powerlessness when caught between two institutions. Trites argues,

> All YA novels depict some postmodern tension between individuals and
> institutions. And the tension is often depicted as residing within discursive
> constructs. Once protagonists of the YA novel have learned to discursively
> negotiate their place in the domination-repression chain of power, they are
> usually depicted as having grown. (52)

This quote is especially useful in connection with Kaufman's point discussed earlier

about the capacity for powerlessness to activate shame (55). As is evident in the above

quote, Trites' work focuses primarily on the social forces that constitute the individual by

considering the ways in which power is conceptualized. Building from this, I argue that

one of the most pervasive ways in which adolescents manage being both comprised and

compromised by institutional forces in YA novels, is through writing. *Monster* tells the

story of a sixteen-year-old black male, Steve Harmon, who ends up in jail after a robbery goes bad and a clerk ends up dead. Effectively problematizing the guilty/innocent binary, *Monster* explores themes of racism, prejudice, and the inadequacy of the American judicial system. Arnold, Aristotle, and Steve, in their respective narratives, all must acknowledge and embrace their individual subjectivities in order that they might get out from under the repressive institutions and/or ideologies that instill powerlessness and shame.

One of the most salient features of YA narratives that use postmodern characteristics to explore themes of alienation, shame, and powerlessness is deconstruction, a main tenant of postmodernism according to Jacques Derrida's foundational theories. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida writes, "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte (*there is no such thing as outside-of-the-text*)" (158). Derrida's work involves distinguishing, recognizing, and putting name to the various and sometimes interrelated interpretations of a given text. In the YA narratives discussed here the protagonist is positioned always within text and amongst other texts. These texts are then deconstructed, the various elements are interpreted, and meaning is made/assigned.

In *Monster,* for example, there is literally no such thing as outside-of-the-text (to borrow from Derrida); in his journal, Steve writes, "Sometimes I feel like I have walked into the middle of a movie. It is a strange movie with no plot and no beginning" (3). With no beginning, the protagonist is always already in the middle of a movie script. *Monster* is comprised of two discursive modes: 1) journal entries and 2) a movie script written by the protagonist telling the story of his life in real time, as it unfolds. The writing of the

script allows Steve to write in third person, affording himself a point of view that allows a certain semblance of distance from self. His preoccupation with viewing himself from a removed vantage point is reiterated throughout the journal entries where he ruminates on how others (his father, his mother, the jury, and his lawyer) might see him.

Even at the resolution of the narrative, the protagonist is still inscribed within text; "Nothing is real around me except the panic. The panic and the movies that dance through my mind. I keep editing the movies, making the scenes right. Sharpening the dialog" (271). Paradoxically, Steve locates the "real" in movies which dramatizes what Jean Baudrillard, in *Simulacra and Simulation* theorizes; he argues that the principal of the "real" is distorted by the transposability of signs and symbols in a culture where communication is largely mediated by various forms of technology. In this example, Steve mediates the trauma of being in jail and on trial through journaling and writing a movie script. Though *Monster* is an example of the capacity for the YA novel to be understood as "a genre that has emerged as an aspect of postmodernism" (Trites 52), it also demonstrates the ways that the YA novel does not fit perfectly within the conventions of postmodernism, largely in its reach for connection and its project of meaning making.

Abstraction (or disconnectedness) is an essential element of the postmodern. Though YA narratives do indeed illustrate a sense of detachment and estrangement, the emphasis is always on the attempt to make meaning from the senseless rather than accepting an alienated world. Baudrillard's arguments posit that the mediation of communication by technologies and other systems cause detachment, which in turn

causes subjects to lose the ability to make meaning from events. Though YA narratives illustrate this struggle to make meaning, they ultimately fight against disconnection with varying success at their conclusions. *Monster* ends with one last journal entry; Steve writes, "My mother doesn't understand what I am doing with the films I am making. […] In the movies I talk and tell the camera who I am, what I think I am about […] I want to know who I am. I want to know the road to panic that I took. I want to look at myself a thousand times to look for one true image" (279). Though there is little to no hope that the world of racism and prejudice that Steve has come to know through his experience is fast changing, there is still hope that Steve, through his writing and continued movie making, will know himself.

Knowing himself is made possible through the textual by way of his journal writing and movie script editing. The textual, for Steve, ultimately works to assuage his shame over what he clearly wishes he could undo. This is evident when he "edits" the movie of his life in script form; the Steve who lives in the script is revised by the Steve who is currently on trial. Steve edits what he said to his friends when they asked him to participate in the robbery; he changes his lines from agreeing to do the robbery to, "'I know what is right, what the truth is. I don't do tightropes, moral or otherwise'" (271). Here, the act of writing gives Steve the opportunity for a redo. He knows what the "right thing" is and so he edits his life, changing the outcome. In the process of Steve writing about the events leading up to his incarceration, he comes to know himself more and in knowing himself, he is able to revise the events, making them never happen. The Steve Harmon that lives in the textual, which is the only Steve Harmon that actually exists (by

way of journal writing or movie script) never committed those crimes. As much as Steve edits and revises the events, however, this does not change the fact that the robbery still took place and that a man is still, indeed, dead. What it does afford Steve is the opportunity to articulate who he is as a person, who he wants to be, and the discrepancies therein. While the "*T*ruth" of the situation is that Steve was involved in a robbery that killed a man, the "*t*ruth" of Steve Harmon is something more complex and something that he is still working out.

Steve seeking one "true" image of himself is one example of Steve seeking truth, in general. He conceptualizes "truth" as a possible antidote to the shame ailing him. That is, Steve does not yet fully understand the sociocultural/political inequalities of why he was involved in this robbery, the circumstances that led to this robbery, or his experience in jail as a young, black man. Steve's desire to know himself, to use his journals, movie script, and movie making to seek for one true image of himself, is an acknowledgment that the truth he seeks is different from the Truth the courts are after. Steve's desire to seek the "truth" about himself through writing, is echoed in *Going Bovine, Aristotle and Dante*, *The Absolutely True Diary*, *A Monster Calls,* and *Perks*. The preoccupation with being able to decipher truth from untruth (or the real from the unreal) in YA narratives works to illustrate the false binary between the two. The narrative arc and growth of the protagonist depends on whether or not he comes to accept the possibility of a multiplicity of truths, and more specifically, whether he is able to embrace his subjective truth as the one that matters most. Both *A Monster Calls* and *Going Bovine* present interesting examples of how YA texts manage the dismantlement of the truth/untruth, real/unreal

binary. They are also further dramatizations of how YA texts fit only imperfectly within the conventions of postmodernism.

One narrative that thematizes deconstruction is *A Monster Calls*. Conor from *A Monster Calls* deals with his feelings of guilt and shame surrounding his mother's death through storytelling. Conor's subconscious fears are anthropomorphized into a giant, terrifying monster who visits Conor to tell him stories. The stories the monster tells Conor are used as examples of the indeterminacy of "truth" as a stable, binary concept. Conor's shame from wishing his mother would succumb to cancer makes him feel like a monster (hence the sub-conscious manifestation of the giant monster). The stories the monster tells, through their didactic messages, ultimately assuage Conor's shame and help him to tell his own story, what the text calls Conor's "truth." At the climax of the narrative, when the weight of feeling responsible for his mother's death becomes too heavy and he finally admits to having wished her dead, the monster and Conor have the following conversation:

> *You were merely wishing for the end of pain,* the monster said. *Your **own** pain. An end to how it isolated you. It is the most human wish of all.*
> "I didn't mean it," Conor said.
> *You did*, the monster said, *but you also did not*.
> Conor sniffed and looked up to its face, which was as big as a wall in front of him. "How can both be true?"
> *Because humans are complicated beasts,* the monster said. *How can a queen be both a good witch and a bad witch? How can a prince be a murderer and a savior? How can an apothecary be evil-tempered but right-thinking? How can a parson be wrong-thinking but good-hearted? How can invisible men make themselves more lonely by being seen?.* (191)

The queen, prince, apothecary, parson, and invisible men referenced in the above quote refer back to stories the monster has told Conor throughout the text. The intertext, or the

stories the monster uses as lessons, assure Conor that his emotions and desires make him human, not a monster, while also affirming one of the themes in all of the narratives discussed here; truth is not absolute, static or binary. This is emphasized by the monster when he first explains to Conor what he wants from him:

> *I will tell you three stories. […] Stories are the wildest thing of all*, the monster rumbled. *Stories chase and bite and hunt. […] And when I have finished my three stories,* the monster said, as if Conor hadn't spoken, *you will tell me a fourth. […] You will tell me a fourth,* the monster repeated, *and it will be the truth. […] Not just any truth.* **Your** *truth. […] You know that your truth, the one that you hide, Conor O'Malley, is the thing you are most afraid of.* (36)

The monster is asking Conor to become another story, another text, among the monster's other three tales. In the process of telling his story, Conor will have to articulate his own truth, that which he is "most afraid of." Within this quote, Conor is both a reading and a decoding subject; he listens to the monster's tales, interprets those tales, and eventually decodes them, making them relatable. Conor forced to articulate his own, subjective truth, must acknowledge and come to terms with that which scares him as he does so.

Both *A Monster Calls* and *Going Bovine* feature protagonists stranded in a liminal space. For Conor in *A Monster Calls*, he is waiting for his mother to die. For Cameron, from *Going Bovine*, he is literally between life and death. *Going Bovine*, a self-conscious and conspicuous parody of *Don Quixote* and *Star Fighter,* chronicles the hallucinatory journey of the protagonist, Cameron, as his brain deteriorates due to his contracting a strain of mad-cow disease. Cameron is visited by a female, teenaged, punk-rock angel, named Dulcie, and given instructions about the journey he must go on to find the doctor

who will ultimately cure him (117). Dulcie explains to Cameron that the prions attacking

his brain are the very things that will enable him to see how "everything's connected":

> "Those prions can help you see what everybody else would miss. By not working 'right.' Your brain is actually capable of seeing more than anybody else's, including mine." She taps the side of my head. "what's going on in here right now will help you make sense of the signs and find Dr. X's secret location."
> "Signs?" I repeat, because I've only understood about three words she's said.
> "Yes. Yes! Signs!" She leaps up in excitement and nearly sends my plastic water pitcher to the floor. "Tabloids, billboards, 'coincidences'—things no one else pays attention to. These are the clues for your journey. It's up to you to decipher it, to connect the dots and find meaning." (118)

Like Steve from *Monster,* Miles from *Looking for Alaska,* Charlie from *Perks,* Conor

from *A Monster Calls,* and Arnold from *The Absolutely True Diary*, Cameron's task is to

"connect the dots and find meaning." As Cameron's journey unfolds, the signs that

Baudrillard would argue empty everything of meaning and help contribute to a detached

world (detached from the "real") are the very signs that help shape Cameron's

understanding of himself in relationship to the world (albeit, an imagined world). Dulcie

tells Cameron, "'In a world like this one, only the random makes sense'" (118). Like

many YA narratives, *Going Bovine* consciously constructs a world that is random, a

world that shouldn't make sense, a world that has indeed been emptied out. The project

of the YA novel, then, is to acknowledge this random and emptied out world and then to

reimbue it with subjective truth. This is made possible in the space of the textual.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard writes,

> By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials—worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of

signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even a parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say an operation of deterring every real process via its operation double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have a chance to produce itself—such is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection, that no longer even gives the event of death a chance. (2)

In *Going Bovine*, the "real" literally has no chance to produce itself again because, unbeknownst to the reader (spoiler alert), Cameron is in a coma from which he will never wake. Instead, his brain makes literal what Baudrillard is discussing in the metaphysical; the signs, narratives, symbols, popular culture references, relationships and all other stimuli that Cameron has ever registered in his conscious and/or subconscious are busy creating a narrative adventure that Cameron experiences mentally and emotionally before he is ready to die. None of these experiences actually refer to anything real (there is a talking gnome, for instance, that becomes a main character). That is, Cameron simulates the real and while doing so, he assigns meaning to material signs and symbols (billboards and the like) that inform his adventure. Within the narrative that Cameron's subconscious weaves together, he experiences the stereotypical rights of passage of teenagehood, all of which signify and carry social and cultural meaning (driving, independence, friends, sex, etc.). *Going Bovine*'s emphasis on the random and arbitrary assignment of meaning to signs and symbols is an example of a postmodern quality frequently employed in YA narratives, but it also provides an example of the limits of the postmodern within YA novels; part of Cameron's journey is realizing that it doesn't matter if what he is experiencing is part of the "real," what matters is how he chooses to relate to his

experience, how he interprets that experience, and whether that experience – real or not –

has changed him or led him to greater understanding about himself. For Cameron,

experiencing all the hallmarks of the stereotypical initiation into manhood, regardless of

whether that experience is actual or not, enables him the courage to eventually choose

death.

Though Baudrillard's theories that signs no longer signify anything real is

sustained throughout the text, the argument that this causes subjects to feel detached is

not. On the contrary, Cameron finds that despite nothing being real, he still has the ability

as a feeling, thinking subject to assign meaning where there is none. Further, this

assigned/constructed meaning is no less meaningful, no less "real." This is especially

evident toward the conclusion of the novel when Cameron meets the Wizard of

Reckoning (Cameron's double), who asks Cameron if he's "lived" the past two weeks, to

which Cameron ponders,

> Did I live? I made a best friend. Lost another. Cried. Laughed. Lost my
> virginity. Gained a piece of magic, gave it away. Possibly changed a
> man's destiny. Drank beer. Slept in cheap motels. Got pissed off. Laughed
> some more. Escaped from the police and bounty hunters. Watched the sun
> set over the ocean. Had a soda with my sister. Saw my mom and dad as
> they are. Understood music. Had sex again, and it was pretty mind-
> blowing. Not that I'm keeping score. Okay, I'm keeping score. Played the
> bass. Went to a concert. Wandered around New Orleans. Freed the snow
> globes. Saved the universe.
> "So you're saying none of this is real?" I ask.
> He checks his reflection in the cool steel of his blade. "I'm not
> saying that at all. Reality is what you make of it." (467)

The Wizard of Reckoning is Cameron's nemesis throughout the entire text. Interestingly,

when he finally catches up with him, Cameron comes face to face with himself. The

protagonist, consciously or subconsciously conceiving of himself as "bad guy," is similar

to Conor and Steve conceiving of themselves as monsters in their respective texts (*A Monster Calls* and *Monster*). The sentiment expressed in the above quote, that "reality is what you make of it," is echoed in many of the YA narratives discussed here.

In *A Monster Calls*, for instance, Conor tells his subconscious monster, "'It's only a dream,'" to which the monster replies, "*But what is a dream, Conor O'Malley?* […] *Who is to say that it is not everything **else** that is the dream*?" (30). Many of these texts demonstrate Descartes' dream argument; the protagonists struggle with trusting the realities that their minds are busy creating. The complex emotions that arise from deeply rooted shame frequently take the form of dreams. Charlie in *Perks*, for instance*,* has trouble deciphering if a dream he has about his aunt molesting him is real. In *Aristotle and Dante,* Aristotle has a dream that he runs over Dante with his car because he's busy looking at a girl; this dream haunts him throughout the text. Part of the task for these protagonists is acknowledging their subconscious desires and fears and attempting to understand (through interpretation and deconstruction) what they mean in their waking lives. Frequently, guilt and shame are the impetus for these dreams, as is the case in the above examples as well as for Miles in *Looking for Alaska* when he dreams of his dead friend and feels responsible for her death.

Whether taking place in the dreamscape and subsequent pondering of those dreams, or a direct philosophical conversation, all of the texts discussed here broach the topic of quantum mechanics centered around locating "truth"; coincidentally, or perhaps not so coincidentally, both *Going Bovine* and *Will Grayson, Will Grayson,* for instance, have in-depth conversations about "Schrödinger's cat" and how it queries reality and

interpretation. In *Going Bovine*, Cameron listens to his friends have a friendly debate

about the theory; when one of his friends refuses to accept the possibility that the cat is

both alive and dead at the same time, his other friend responds,

> "You're wrong, dude. The cat's both alive and dead until you open the
> box and take a peek at it. Until then, all possibilities exist. You create the
> result […] The point is probability and reality. And that's where parallel
> universes come in. Reality splits into two possible outcomes—one where
> the cat lives; another where the cat dies. From every choice you make,
> another world is created where a *different* reality happens." (11)

The real in these YA novels is much more cerebral than the real Baudrillard is theorizing

about. Distinctions are certainly made about what is palpably real and not real, and there

are definite preoccupations with "truth" versus untruth, but ultimately it is the arrival at

an individual's truth, a subjective truth that renders the YA novel complete. It is through

the acknowledging and embracing of this subjective truth, and subsequent utterance of

this truth, that shame is exorcised and dispelled. In *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*, for

instance, Will also ponders the problem of Schrödinger's cat, "it seems to me that all the

things we keep in sealed boxes *are* both alive and dead until we open the box, that the

unobserved is both there and not," (197). In both of these novels, Schrödinger's cat works

to literalize the possibility of two opposite things being true at the same time. Reality

becomes dependent on the observer/interpreter's truth (the reader/decoder) and not on

whether the cat is actually alive or dead.

Conclusion

YA novels featuring male protagonists who are not only readers and decoders

themselves but who are also authors of self use the intertextual as the means through

which to negotiate shame and the alienating affects of shame. A central part of this

process is accepting and embracing subjective truth and articulating that truth through language. This is facilitated in many cases by relying on outside texts as models or available narratives to relate to or borrow from. Using postmodern conventions and themes, these novels explore the relationship between shame and the real/unreal, truth/untruth binaries. The quote at the introduction of this chapter aptly illustrates the various parts of this argument working together: At a crucial part of the plot in *Will Grayson, Will Grayson,* Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest* is spontaneously quoted by an entire audience; "*The pure and simple truth / Is rarely pure and never simple. / What's a boy to do / When lies and truth are both sinful?*" (291). Not only does the mere use of this quote within the novel serve as an example of the intertextuality present in YA literature, but it also underscores the thematics discussed throughout this chapter; this quote highlights the fact that "truth" is a complex concept while also speaking to the shame involved with silencing. How does one speak when the thing he needs to speak of is incriminating or shameful? Lastly, all the texts addressed throughout this chapter have at their core a protagonist suffering some deeply rooted alienation. This quote appears at the conclusion of *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*, when an entire audience joins in, most holding hands, to collectively acknowledge this alienation, thus neutralizing its effect.

Perhaps most compelling is the way in which the affect of shame within these narratives creates a possibility for a different terrain within which male subjectivity is constituted. Rather than relying on the mere possession of the phallus as a "transcendental signifier," males coming-of-age outside of normative ideologies become

a "reified cultural Other," the role usually assigned to females. Through the displacement of phallic power, these male protagonists must reconfigure the road toward social power – a road most often found by breaking down the very binaries that leave no place for them. These novels, then, explore the liberating possibility of the existence of multiple roads, all leading toward different variations and valences of social power.

Chapter Three

Death and Intertextuality:

Alternative Embodiments in Young Adult Narratives

Introduction

The main enterprise of contemporary Young Adult novels is the arrival at and

celebration of subjective truth amid a postmodern landscape ravaged with indeterminacy

and fragmentation. Indeed, the very definition of what it means to be a teenager, a young

adult, and/or an emerging adult is forever in flux, not to mention the inherent liminality

of the genre itself, categorized as something more adult than Children's Literature but

less adult than mainstream literature. The underlying ambiguity inherent in the liminality

of the young adult condition is thematized in various ways throughout contemporary

adolescent literature. In the novels to be discussed here, the intertextual communication

between live and dead characters reinforces YA literature's propensity to depict the

troubling but ultimately liberating possibilities of ambiguity; if the answer or definition is

not clear, then this invites interpretation. In these novels, accepting impermanence and

embracing the subjective resolve the inherent ambiguity in the uncertain, postmodern

landscape. While the project of acknowledging and embracing one's *own* subjective truth

is at the heart of the texts discussed thus far, this chapter examines texts that emphasize

the acknowledgment and allowance of *others'* subjectivity. Though contemporary YA

literature is clearly preoccupied with the internal construction of self, the texts discussed

here illustrate the importance of the external other in forming that internal self. In an

attempt to assuage the fragmentation of postmodernity and the alienation therein, protagonists in these novels reach toward and grapple with others' subjectivity.

Within the texts to be discussed throughout this chapter, writing and narratology become the means through which death, meaning an ultimate finality, is circumvented. If writing is capable of constituting self and perception trumps the "real," as is argued in both chapters one and two, then the written object constitutes a new living body and is a form of rebellion against the finality/binary aspects of life/death. That is, writing and narratology as a creation of a written body object circumvent death by creating an immortal textual imprint of self. *Love Letters to the Dead* is an epistolary Young Adult novel where the protagonist, Laurel, writes letters to various dead people: Kurt Cobain, Janis Joplin, John Keats, and Elizabeth Bishop, among others. Mourning her sister's death, Laurel finds solace in these letters as she communicates with Kurt Cobain, Janis Joplin, John Keats, and Elizabeth Bishop through written artifacts (lyrics of songs and poems) that they have left behind. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah, who has committed suicide, leaves Clay a series of cassette tapes, each one recording a different facet of her story, a different piece to a puzzle in which Clay does not yet understand his part. Hannah weaves a tale of thirteen different stories that come together in surprising ways. At the core of all these stories is Hannah's attempt at intervening in a culture rife with misogynist and other troubling attitudes toward females. In *King Dork,* Tom's father has died and Tom finds a series of his father's old books: *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Siddhartha*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, amongst others. In each of these books, Tom studies his father's marginalia, some of which are easy to understand and some of which create even more of

a fissure between who Tom understood his father to be and who his father actually was. This chapter ties together death and adolescence by noting that both are liminal states, both are indeterminate, and both are socially constructed. The topics of sex, the body, and the written self emerge as main thematics within this framework. By creating alternative modes of embodiment, thematizing the damaging effects of sexually puritanical ideology, and emphasizing the importance of coherence in an otherwise fragmented cultural moment, the novels discussed in this chapter illustrate the liberating effects of embracing subjectivity and rejecting either/or logic.

An Intervention

It is no great insight that shelves of YA literature are chock-full of narratives about dying, grieving, various depictions of the afterlife, and, even more increasingly, stories about zombies and vampires. Death is, and has been for quite some time, a common thematic of YA literature. As Kathryn James' text, *Death, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature*, argues, "Given that attention is predominantly focused on personal identity, the individual psyche, subjective development, and social- and self-awareness, [YA literature] is a literature of *becoming,* so representations of death (the end of life) can have especial relevance" (2). Unfortunately, most critics of YA literature often reduce the complexity of these narratives to a singular reading, largely didactic in nature. While many YA critics reduce "death" to a theme that functions solely as a teaching moment where young readers learn how to a) cope with death and/or b) come to terms with themselves as "beings-toward-death," they often fail to acknowledge the vast ways in which death functions outside of this singular, teaching role. In Trites'

chapter titled, "'When I can control the focus'; Death and Narrative Resolution in Adolescent Literature," for example, she argues that death in adolescent literature is an exercise in simultaneously empowering and then disenfranchising readers; first readers are empowered by acquiring knowledge of their impending deaths, but then they are stripped of that power when they must accept their own deaths as an imminent fact (140).

Although I appreciate Trites' argument that death is simultaneously about empowerment but also the curtailment of that power, her discussion chiefly describes the ways in which YA texts *teach* readers about their impending deaths. Gail Radly also reduces YA novels about death to teaching tools in her article "Coping with Death in Young Adult Literature"; she discusses the various ways that YA can provide "helpful models" for coping with death, claiming that "increased realism" in YA has led the genre to more "accurate" portrayals of coping with death (1). Both Trites and Radly represent a much wider and more pervasive reduction of YA literature. Reducing the complexity of Young Adult texts to mere didacticism comes out of a long history of Children's Literature critics who also limit the discussion around Children's Literature to didacticism. As Perry Nodelman writes, "Certainly, most commentaries about children's literature tend to concentrate on how it might or might not help to make its target audience better, more educated people. When adults not professionally involved with children's books talk about children's literature, they almost always focus on what they see as its obvious 'morals' or 'messages'" (157). Given this pattern of reducing books for children and adolescence to teaching tools, it makes sense that books about death are almost always discussed in terms of how they teach readers to cope with or accept the

finality of death. While it is true that death oftentimes works as a symbol of change

and/or powerlessness where the protagonist must come to terms with her or his own

mortality, death functions beyond this simple and reductive teaching operation.

The following excerpt from John Green's *Looking for Alaska* nicely illustrates

YA literature's contemporary treatment of death; rather than being a genre that merely

convinces readers of their mortality, as Trites argues, these texts tend to grapple with

immortality *despite* death. This is another way in which YA literature tends to break

down binary, either/or logic and gesture toward a more complicated understanding of

multiplicity through the thematic of death. Further reinforcing the power of writing

within YA novels, Miles concludes: "I wrote myself out of the labyrinth" (219). In

chapter two, this quote serves to exemplify how Miles comes to understand his place in

things through writing; that is, Miles using a complex system of textual reference as a

means to cope with the loss of his dear friend. It is this quote about finding his way out of

the labyrinth that precedes his rumination on the importance of life and death:

> When adults say, "Teenagers think they are invincible" with that sly,
> stupid smile on their faces, they don't know how right they are. We need
> never be hopeless, because we can never be irreparably broken. We think
> that we are invincible because we *are*. We cannot be born, and we cannot
> die. Like all energy, we can only change shapes and sizes and
> manifestations. They forget that when they get old. They get scared of
> losing and failing. But that part of us greater than the sum of our parts
> cannot begin and cannot end, and so it cannot fail. (220)

The indisputable fact that people die is evidenced in Alaska's death, but Miles maintains

that there is a "part" of everyone that is "greater than the sum" of their parts. Here, Miles'

conceptualization of personhood is not tethered to body, but to this other, more

unknowable "energy," and, as such, the importance of corporeal embodiment is

challenged. Perhaps more importantly, this logic that we cannot fail rationalizes a continuance – "We cannot be born, and we cannot die." Conceptualizing the self as having the capability of perpetual continuance works to exemplify Clive Seale's argument from *Constructing Death: The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement*: he argues, "the threat to basic security about being in the world posed by knowledge of mortality, is transformed in human social activity into an orientation towards continuing, meaningful existence" (1). Miles' assertion of a continued existence illustrates Seale's contention that knowledge of death engenders the need for social interaction toward *sustaining* meaningful existence.

Though the physical body must eventually die, the project of sustaining meaningful existence despite this fact is thematized in YA novels where characters circumvent death through the creation of a written body object. These texts mitigate the "problem" of an eventual bodily death by making the body insignificant and emphasizing the presence of the person extra-bodily. In an effort to resist the meaninglessness that follows death, new bodies comprised of language are made, effectively reimbuing what was once meaningless with meaning. The reason that these bodies are largely textual or otherwise comprised of language is that language is the quintessential socially agreed upon instrument for meaning making.

Social Construction and Indeterminacy

It makes sense to discuss death in mostly symbolic terms because "death" as a category is so saturated in cultural construction and is used so frequently as metaphor to mean transformation, transition, departure, release, and so on. Death, in fact, literally

means "change," "evolution," or "ultimate purifier" in various iconographies (Dollimore 33). In the introduction to *Death and Representation*, Elisabeth Bronfen and Sarah Goodwin write, "Death is necessarily constructed by a culture; it grounds the many ways a culture stabilizes and represents itself, and yet it always does so as a signifier with an incessantly receding, ungraspable signified, always pointing to other signifiers, other means of signifying what finally is just absent" (4). Because the fundamental project of the YA novel is for the protagonist to successfully enter the sphere of the social, death, a defining and grounding cultural construct, frequently takes center stage. Also noteworthy here is the description of death as lacking any "real" signification – this presents a conundrum for the coming-of-age novel. As we see from the quote above, death is a critical identifier/creator of culture, and coming-of-age is completed successfully by both entering into the social/cultural sphere and being able to understand and navigate that sphere. But death, lacking any real, solid signification makes the facilitation of this kind of understanding of the social difficult. Bronfen and Goodwin clarify this problem when they articulate death as "always only represented" (as qtd. in James 9) which makes understanding death, and navigating the cultural and social sphere that is both "represented" and "stabilized" by death, a complex enterprise. James cites the numerous dictionary definitions for "death" as evidence of its indeterminance and lists, ad nauseum, the cultural signifiers for death (i.e. "a coffin; cross; crow; devil; grave; grim reaper; hourglass; journey; river […] " (10)). Her elaboration and inclusiveness both of the ways we define death and the ways we symbolize it underscore our inability to pin down what exactly we mean by "death." Zygmunt Bauman further argues for the unknowability of

death: "It is impossible to define death, as death stands for the final void, for that non-existence which, absurdly, gives existence to all being" (2). Later, he writes that death is "an absolute *nothing* and 'absolute nothing' makes no sense" (15).

As discussed in chapters one and two, "adolescence" as a socially constructed category is also indeterminant. It is this analogous relationship between adolescence and death that makes death such a rich thematic in YA literature. This is because both constructs are reciprocally manufactured: death defines a culture and a culture defines what it means to be an adolescent – adolescents grow up to comprise a society, defining the culture that belongs to that society and influencing that culture's death practices. Because conceptions of "adolescence" and "death" are reciprocally manufactured, they are both concepts that are in constant flux and revision, making them extremely slippery cultural constructs having no definite designing apparatus apart from language. Protagonists in this chapter enter the social by way of language through their interactions with death, interactions largely revolving around language, writing, and/or intertextual exchange. As James notes, "a culture's representations of death may be read collectively as a text to give insights into a wide array of [that culture's] functions, values, social order, and systems of meaning" (James 11). Thus, a protagonist dealing with death is also dealing with the larger social structures of that culture. Also interesting is James' use of the word "text" to describe a culture's representations of death. Using this language, death becomes another textual layer that adolescents must read, then decode and interpret to adequately understand and navigate the social sphere they enter. But as the quote from Bronfen and Goodwin describes above (that death is "always only represented"), death,

although a critical symbol within culture, lacks any real signification. It is this lack of a

solid signification of death that requires the texts to be discussed here to foreground

language, to explore the gaps between sign and signifier, and to ultimately thematize the

distance between life and death through writing – that is, because representations of death

are "always pointing to other signifiers, other means of signifying what finally is just

absent," understanding death is an enterprise entirely entrenched in language (4).

A "Disruption of the Social Bond"

Adolescence is widely understood as a time of entrance into sociality, but Clive

Seale calls death a "disruption of the social bond" (149). In his introduction to

Constructing Death: The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement, he argues, "social and

cultural life involves turning away from the inevitability of death, which is contained in

the fact of our embodiment, and towards life" (1). If death is a disruption of the social

bond, and if social and cultural life depend on a turning away from this disruption, then

YA's pervasive turn towards death can be understood as a kind of rebellion – a

rumination on the very thing social and cultural life asks us to turn away from.

Protagonists in YA narratives about death, then, are also participating in this act of

rebellion – instead of turning away from the inevitability of death, they are captivated by

it. Though acknowledging oneself as a being-towards-death is a crucial step toward

adulthood, according to Trites (124) and others, this process of acknowledgment,

paradoxically, is also a breach or disruption of the social. Seale's conception of death as a

disruption of the social is essential to this chapter because it foregrounds the fundamental

problem in YA texts where death is a central part of plot: if YA texts are supposed to be

about becoming, if youth narratives have at their center an ethos of sociality, how does

the centrality of death within these novels undermine or complicate this program?

Postmodernism, Intertextuality, and Death

In examining intertexual elements such as self-writing, parody, and pastiche

throughout narratives that have death as their central plot point, this chapter argues for a

more complex and nuanced reading of death in contemporary YA literature, one that

takes into account the postmodern moment these texts are being both produced and

consumed in. Hutcheon describes this postmodern time as one when the political and

aesthetic merge and result in the liberating effects

> of moving from the language of alienation (otherness) to that of
> decentering (difference), because the center used to function as the pivot
> between binary opposites which always privileged one half: white/black,
> male/female, self/other, intellect/body, west/east, objectivity/subjectivity –
> the list is now well known. But if the center is seen as a construct, a fiction,
> not a fixed and unchangeable reality, the "old either-or begins to break
> down," as Susan Griffin put it and the new and-also of multiplicity and
> difference opens up new possibilities. (62)

As argued throughout chapters one and two, YA literature since the 1960s has at its core

this liberating effect of decentering, where protagonists rely on a complex system of

textual reference and self-writing in an attempt to articulate their way out of the false

binaries that permeate the social realm. As Hutcheon describes above, exposing the

"center" (the fixed pivot between binary opposites) as a fiction has liberating effects,

opening up new possibilities and ultimately fighting against the alienating effects of

either-or logic. Death might be thought of as the quintessential alienation; there seems to

be nothing else quite as definite or divisive. In *Love Letters to the Dead*, *King Dork,* and

Thirteen Reasons Why, among others, alienation is a palpable force, but exploding the

alive/dead binary that privileges the living defeats this alienation. The complex rendering of textuality within the youth narratives to be discussed here, and the prevalence of these narratives having protagonists who engage in self-writing or in the interpretation of famous and/or cultural narratives is the impetus for this chapter. In ceasing to rely on available (normative) narratives (such as religious practice/sentiment) in favor of constructing their own narratives through creation, bricolage, and/or appropriation, protagonists explore the "new and-also of multiplicity" that "opens up new possibilities." One of the recurrent motifs in YA literature is a resistance to binary thinking and the embrace of pluralism, or dualism at the very least. Embracing subjective truth is the enterprise of YA literature, and this can only happen when notions of objectivity are rendered meaningless and either/or logic gives way to more complex possibilities. The project of the YA novel is to acknowledge this random and emptied out world and then to reimbue it with subjective truth. Death, because it is "impossible to define," and "an absolute *nothing* and 'absolute nothing' makes no sense" (Bauman 2, 15), provides the perfect subject matter for this enterprise. Death forever dwells in the land of mystery and the unknown, and because death is "always only represented," and therefore lacking any solid pretense of objective definition, it is a sign and a subject that lends itself to celebrations of subjective understanding.

Searching for Coherence through Intertextuality

It makes sense that a sign that is "always only represented" becomes quite mysterious. The mysterious nature of death is thematized throughout YA literature dealing with death. It is this mysteriousness that necessitates the project of pulling the

seemingly dissident pieces together in search for coherence. In fact, almost all of the works here feature characters who have died under mysterious circumstances which leave the protagonists grasping after some sort of coherence: In *King Dork,* Tom was never told the actual circumstances around his father's death; in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Clay must listen to many hours of cassette tape recordings before he understands Hannah's death; in *Love Letters to the Dead,* the protagonist can't even articulate what happened to her sister until the very end of the text, and in *Looking for Alaska*, it is never entirely clear whether Alaska killed herself or not, though it is insinuated that she did. In *Love Letters to the Dead*, Laurel writes to the famous dead, most of whom are authors. What many of these famous people have in common is that there is mystery surrounding their deaths: whether Kurt Cobain's death was an intentional overdose is still debated, as is what really happened to Amelia Earhart's plane when it vanished. Though Earhart is not an author, she makes sense among the other famous people Laurel writes to because of the vast amount of cultural narrative revolving around her disappearance. Amelia Earhart serves as the perfect metaphor for the liminality of death that makes it such a rich topic for YA literature. Laurel, dressed up as Amelia Earhart on Halloween, writes the following in a letter to Earhart: "I explained to all of them that I wasn't dead, only somewhere still circling in the air" (99). In a later letter to Earhart, Laurel writes, "You once said that you thought people are too timid about flying their own Atlantics, and I think it's true that all of our lives are full of oceans […] For me, maybe the Atlantic has been learning to talk about stuff, even a little at a time" (293). Laurel examines the deaths as well as the lives of various people throughout the text. She especially focuses on the words that have been

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left behind. Like the quote here attests to, she engages in the activities of interpretation and reflection. In ruminating on Earhart's quote about people being "too timid" to fly their own Atlantics, Laurel deftly manipulates this quote into a metaphor about the challenges everyone faces. More specifically, she rearticulates Earhart's quote to communicate just how hard it has been for her to find her own voice, to learn to "talk about stuff." Likening the ability to talk about "stuff" (i.e. her sister's death) to flying over the Atlantic highlights just how challenging it is to find the language necessary to discuss something so unknowable.

Like Laurel in *Love Letters to the Dead,* Clay in *Thirteen Reasons Why,* and Miles in *Looking for Alaska*, Tom from *King Dork* also relies on the textual body of his deceased father to attempt to find coherence. While Clay finds himself trying to understand the mystery of Hannah's death and Miles characterizes the entirety of existence as a labyrinth, Tom also recognizes life and the circumstances therein to be a puzzle. The following excerpt illustrates Tom's dedication to achieving coherence despite the fact that the various pieces of his puzzle do not appear to have anything to do with one another.

> I know it doesn't make much sense, but somehow the puzzle of my dad's teenage library and the mystery about his death had become connected in my mind. I would decipher part of the cryptic notation in *Catcher*, CEH 1960, or be struck by something in *Brighton Rock*, CEH 1965, and it would somehow feel like I'd gotten somewhere on the "accident" issue, too. At weird moments, like that night, I'd also have this crazy sense that the other puzzles in my life, like Fiona and Sam Hellerman's increasingly odd behavior, were somehow connected to my dad and *The Catcher in the Rye* as well. (112)

Here the protagonist clearly is gesturing toward finding understanding for the puzzling

things in his life by referring back to his dead father's left behind, classic books that

contain his markings. His insistence that all of the puzzling things in his life are all

"somehow connected" is indicative of the strong desire to assuage the alienating effects

of an otherwise fragmented world by searching for coherence. But, as is the case with

Hannah in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, coherence cannot always save you; though she does

finally figure out how all the pieces fit, she still chooses death. In *King Dork,* however, it

is the search for coherence, the *search* for connection rather than the connection itself

that is characterized as the most important act. Through ruminating on these classic

novels and demanding answers for his father's mysterious death, Tom becomes an active

agent who reaches his own conclusions rather than a receptacle that is filled up by the

stories he is told. Through the interpretation of classic novels, marginalia, and old

newspaper clippings, Tom arrives at his own conclusions. Rather than solving the riddle

of his father's death, however, these conclusions reaffirm the unknowability of death

while simultaneously embracing what "actually" matters:

> I was just starting to realize why I was so unsatisfied with the
> Hellermanian theories on this matter: in the end, I didn't want my
> relationship with my dad to be about Mr. Teone, or substitution ciphers, or
> broods of vipers, or pornography, or police corruption, or any of that stuff.
> And in reality, it wasn't about any of those things, though it's easy to
> forget that when you're trying to solve codes and piece together an
> explanation out of scraps of paper and notes in the margins of books. […]
> The only part of it that matters is that I miss my dad and wish he weren't
> dead. (318)

Tom ultimately realizes that, while the marginalia and newspaper clippings have given

him the opportunity to ruminate on his father's life and perhaps get to know him better,

they also have the potential to send him on a wild goose chase. In the end, what actually

matters is what Tom already knew: he misses his dad and wishes he weren't gone.

The set of books that Tom's father has left behind, however inept at providing

cold hard answers to the mystery around his death, still provides Tom with a significant

connection to his dead father. Tom notes

> One thing I did while I was reading was pause every now and then and
> turn back to the inside front cover to look at the "CEH 1965." Then I
> would try to imagine what the circumstances were when my dad had read
> it. Listening to "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," "Mr. Tambourine Man,"
> and "Help Me, Rhonda" on the radio? Riding the streetcar wearing neat
> but rumpled midsixties student-type clothes, with older men in suits with
> skinny ties and women wearing gloves and little hats? In the few photos I
> had seen of him from that time, he looked kind of Beach Boys-collegiate,
> so that was how I pictured him, with a little button-down short-sleeved
> shirt, floods, and Brian Wilson hair, sitting on the curb waiting for the bus,
> *Brighton Rock* open on his knees. It was kind of fun to do that. It was all
> bullshit, too. But in spite of myself, I had this feeling like I was getting to
> know him in a way I never had. (106)

As this quote attests, Tom reads through his father's old books and imagines not only his

father reading these books, but what the social landscape of his father's adolescence

looked like. Despite Tom undercutting this experience by calling his imaginations of his

father's youth "bullshit," he still believes that the reading of his father's books has helped

him get to know his dad in a way he wouldn't have had the opportunity to otherwise.

In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, likewise, the intertextual elements of the novel allow

for a more direct dialogue with the dead, which is necessary for the protagonist, Clay, to

assign meaning to both life and death. Hannah's cassette tapes weave a complex narrative,

showing how everything is connected despite a series of events and the relationship

between a number of people seeming incoherent and disjointed. As she weaves together

various narratives that at first seem incoherent, Hannah also repeatedly emphasizes the

importance of writing in knowing herself. The following excerpt illustrates her dedication

to coherence, as well as an emphasis on the written object to represent self. She speaks

into the tapes:

> *As I tell you these stories, I'm discovering certain things. Things about myself, yes, but also about you. All of you. […]*
> *And the closer we get to the end, the more connections I'm discovering. Deep connections. Some that I've told you about, linking one story to the next. While others, I haven't told you about at all […]*
> *Maybe you've discovered some connections that I haven't. Maybe you're one step ahead of the poet. […]*
> *And when I say my final words … well, probably not my final words, but the last words on these tapes… it's going to be one tight, well-connected, emotional ball of words. In other words, a poem.*
> *Looking back, I stopped writing in my notebook when I stopped wanting to know myself anymore.* (177 – 178)

The "all of you" Hannah addresses here are the thirteen people she implicates in

her death – the thirteen people she leaves the cassette tapes for, accompanied by detailed

instructions on when to pass the tapes on and to whom. Hannah refers to herself as a poet

and clearly understands the act of writing as an activity toward exploring and

understanding self. But unlike some of the narratives discussed in chapters one and two,

the ability to simply know oneself, and the ability to craft coherence out of a seemingly

fragmented world, is not enough. Even after Hannah creates these tapes (which we can

conceptualize as a project in textual self-making given the narrativization of the self),

even after she is able to weave the twisted tale and to figure out how everything is

connected, she still chooses death. This is because death is punishment, not simply a

failure. It's a punishment for herself but also for the thirteen people she asks, perhaps

even forces, to take responsibility for their actions, their microaggressions, their everyday

acts that, all by themselves, don't seem to be that noteworthy. But one of the purposes of these tapes is to illustrate that things don't happen in a vacuum, that circumstances can never be properly looked at by themselves, that context is all. Here, Hannah equates storytelling with discovery, writing with knowing herself, and, though these are powerful tools, they ultimately can't save her life.

The concept of self as text is illustrated nicely in *Love Letters to the Dead*. In Laurel's high school English class, students are asked to write one letter to a deceased person and turn it in. Laurel writes a letter to Kurt Cobain but, finding the writing too personal to turn over, she keeps it. This engenders in Laurel the hobby of writing letters to various other dead people, mostly writers who correspond with Laurel from beyond the grave through their own writing or culturally produced narrative (i.e. when Laurel writes a letter to Amelia Earhart, she is answered not by Earhart's own writing but by the plentitude of news stories/myths surrounding her disappearance). The concept that the written object becomes the written self/written body object is best depicted when Laurel writes a letter to Elizabeth Bishop. During English class, Laurel is given Bishop's poem "The Art of Losing Isn't Hard to Master." Laurel copies the poem into her letter to Bishop and explains what the poem means to her. This presents readers with a kind of dialogue between the living and the dead. Bishop's poem ends " – Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture / I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident / the art of losing's not too hard to master / though it may look like (*Write it!)* like disaster" (12). In Laurel's interpretation of the Bishop poem, she identifies with the immense sense of loss the speaker articulates. After describing to Bishop how the poem "earthquakes" her, Laurel

launches into a close reading of the poem: "I think it's like when you lose something so close to you, it's like losing yourself. That's why at the end, it's hard for her to write even. She can hardly remember how. Because she barely knows what she is anymore" (13). The ability for writing to manifest physically is immediately evident when Laurel explains to Bishop that the poem physically earthquakes her. The connection between writing and sense of self is emphasized here in Laurel's interpretation that the speaker of the poem can no longer write because she no longer knows who she is. For Laurel, writing has the power to constitute self, so not knowing oneself means not having the ability to write. Though Bishop has been dead years before Laurel reads her poem, Laurel responds to "The Art of Losing Isn't Hard to Master" as if responding to the poet herself. The dialogue continues when other Bishop poems find their way to Laurel.

The inability to write/speak being tethered to the inability to know oneself is thematized throughout the narrative in the overarching trajectory of Laurel's character: in the beginning of the narrative, Laurel cannot tell her own story. She is paralyzed by her sister's death and can't communicate to anyone what actually happened. In these moments of silence, she characterizes herself as invisible or lost. On more than occasion, Laurel dresses like May (her deceased sister), putting on her makeup and her clothing to complete the erasure of self while communicating her silent wish to have been the one to die. It is only at the end of the text, when Laurel has had many "conversations" with various dead people that Laurel has a solid sense of self. In the beginning, Laurel can only read and interpret other peoples' stories/songs/poems/etc., but by the end of the text, because she has come to know herself, she is able to write her own story and to feel fully

alive. This relationship between knowing oneself and being able to write is returned to throughout many of the texts to be discussed here. It emphasizes the connection between "self" and text while deemphasizing the importance of body to self. Though these texts deal with literal deaths, it is important to think about death in symbolic terms because literal death within these novels is working symbolically to undermine the finality of death, to explore the paradoxes in entering the social, and to emphasize the posthuman.

Embodiment and Meaninglessness

One of the critical facets of YA novels about death is their interesting relationship to embodiment. It's important that Amelia Earhart's body was never discovered, for instance, because then she still survives in the imagination. As stated earlier, Seale argues that "social and cultural life involves turning away from the inevitability of death, which is contained in the fact of our embodiment, and towards life" (1). Many YA novels where death is a central aspect of the plot challenge the relationship Seale draws between the "fact" of our embodiment and inevitable death. They do this primarily by creating alternative bodies that live on after the physical body has died – these are largely textual bodies in the examples discussed here. A different but related theme that recurs is the punishment of the body in response to deviating from what society deems as acceptable (usually sexual) behavior. Because the process of coming-of-age stipulates both an acknowledgment of death and also, relatedly, an awareness of sex, it makes sense that novels are extremely concerned with both death and sex and how those two categories relate to and define the body.

There is a fairly common assumption that adolescence is a time when the body starts demanding attention. Science rationalizes this preoccupation with one's body to be a normal part of puberty, while other theorists, like Lacan, suggest that this focus on the body equally has something to do with separating from the mother (moving on from the mirror stage) and entering the symbolic order (an entrance into language) (Dor 95). We can also discuss the body in terms of a boundary; the corporeal border between what makes you, *you* and the rest of the world. For Kristeva, the dead body, the corpse, is the "utmost of abjection, the definitive border which 'encroaches upon everything'; it is 'death infecting life'. The corpse threatens to break down the very boundary between subject and object, and thus between meaning and meaninglessness […] and so it does not signify death, but instead all that is 'thrust aside in order to live'" (James 20). For many YA novels, a re-embodiment after death occurs so that this boundary between "meaning and meaninglessness" is never breached. On the contrary, because the embodiment is no longer a *body*, but often a written body object, the corpse works to reassert meaning, to ensure in an overdetermined fashion through language that meaninglessness does not ensue. Because text/narratology constitute self, and in the context of the novels discussed here, body, the actual body becomes null and void and the text, a subjective representation that is interpreted by the protagonist as such, resists both objectivity and meaninglessness.

Seale's assertion discussed previously that social and cultural life depend on turning away from death and towards life is expanded on here:

> Embodiment dictates basic parameters for the construction of culture, the key problem for which is contained in the fact that bodies eventually die.

> On the one hand this threatens to make life meaningless, but on the other it is a basic motivation for social and cultural activity, which involves a continual defense against death. Through a variety of practices, both routine and extraordinary, the threat to basic security about being in the world posed by knowledge of mortality, is transformed in human social activity into an orientation towards continuing, meaningful existence. (1)

Because YA literature is supposed to be about joining the social, it makes sense that YA novels about death are still oriented toward "continuing, meaningful existence." That is, though protagonists within these novels accept death as imminent, they neutralize the threat of meaninglessness by creating alternative bodies that can't die. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, for instance, Hannah (who has committed suicide) begins her tapes with, "*Hello, boys and girls. Hannah Baker here. Live and in Stereo*" (7). These are the first words Hannah speaks into the tapes. Because of her interesting word choice, "live," to describe her current situation, it becomes immediately clear that the fissure between actual death and live presence through the left behind artifact is a palpable tension that will be felt throughout and articulated in various ways.

YA is full of novels where literal death is undermined by symbolic presence; For example, in *Going Bovine*, Cameron's dying body means so much less than his mental/emotional adventure. In *Love Letters to the Dead*, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, and *King Dork,* the literal corpses factor in almost not at all, but the objects that are left behind (the music, the voice recordings, the poetry, the novels) reign supremely important. I do not mean to suggest that the body avoids physical death, but that the literal body ceases to be the sole (soul?) container of self. Katherine Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman* is useful here for her understanding of posthumanism; she writes, "In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between

bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals" (3). These YA texts literalize her theories of the breakdown of this demarcation between body and textual simulation (which Hayles refers to as computer simulation) as characters continue to have meaningful effects on the world that their bodies are no longer a functioning part.

One of the ways that the fissure between actual death and live presence is manifested is through the embodiment of Hannah; Clay, while listening to Hannah's tapes, literally bridges the distance between Hannah's actual body and the tapes he listens to. He thinks, "I look down at my lap, at the Walkman. It's too dark to see the spindles behind the plastic window, pulling the tape from one side to the other, but I need to focus on something, so I try. And concentrating on the spot where the two spindles should be is the closest I get to looking into Hannah's eyes as she tells my story" (215). Here, as Clay listens to Hannah implicate thirteen people in her decision to commit suicide, the artifact she has left behind becomes the body that lives on after her death. This happens literally when Clay conceptualizes the cassette spindles to be her eyes. Importantly, he listens to Hannah tell not only her story but *his* story. It's important for Clay to understand Hannah's interpretation of events, especially in regard to his role in her life, so that he can understand her decision to end her life. His dedication to understanding her point of view is illustrated repeatedly when he acknowledges more than once that while he *could* simply fast forward the tapes to his own story, he chooses to listen to all of the tapes she left behind so as to make the connections necessary to fully understand her decision. Clay's groping for understanding is accentuated further by his choice to physically follow

the map Hannah has left behind that pinpoints several places around town where things happened that impacted her in pivotal ways. In this process, Clay's looking outward – toward understanding Hannah's subjectivity – eventually becomes an inward look. That is, it is in understanding Hannah, in interpreting the cassettes she has left behind that Clay comes to understand the importance of his own actions. By novel's end, we see a change in Clay when he decides to speak to a girl he would normally not have had the courage to speak to before. Here, he reaches out to a seemingly closed off individual in hopes of forming some meaningful connection. And it is this gesture, Clay's reaching out to another person, where Clay turns away from death (away from Hannah because her story is over) and towards life, making new connections.

The tension between here and gone is best illustrated when Hannah speaks into the tapes, "*I know what you're all thinking. Hannah Baker is a slut. / Oops. Did you catch that? I said, 'Hannah Baker is.' Can't say that anymore*" (23). But it turns out that she can say that – though Hannah is dead physically, she still makes a tremendous impact on the community around her through her voice narrative that she blackmailes her peers into listening to. While Clay listens to Hannah through headphones at school after her death, he comes upon the spot where he last saw her alive. He thinks, "Right there, outside his door, is where I last saw Hannah Baker alive. I close my eyes. Who am I going to see today? Besides me, eight people at this school have already listened to these tapes. Eight people, today, are waiting to see what the tapes have done to me. And over the next week or so, as the tapes move on, I'll be doing the same to the rest of them" (286). Although Clay notes the last time he *saw* Hannah alive, this was by no means the

last time he had a conversation with her, nor the last time that others heard from Hannah.

Clearly, Clay's fear of seeing those other twelve people that Hannah implicates on the

tapes speaks to her tremendous ability to impact the living after she has died. Hannah's

tapes challenge the assumption that our bodies contain the most important aspects of self.

Her cassette tapes that aim to set the record straight, do so in the present. And if narrative

is capable of constituting self, which we have seen to be true throughout this dissertation

thus far, then Hannah Baker *is*. Though Hannah stops to correct herself (*is* to *was)*,

Hannah Baker *is*, indeed, influencing and affecting the world around her by rewriting her

story, by constructing the written artifact that survives long after her body dies.

The dual first person narration of *Thirteen Reasons Why* creates a dialogue

between Clay and Hannah. It is in the space of this dialogue where Clay can both come to

understand Hannah's experiences (her life and her choice of death, especially) but also, in

his interpretation of her choices, he can choose to disagree with her. He can attempt to

see ways out that Hannah couldn't have, or didn't. The following two excerpts not only

illustrate this dialogue between the dead Hannah and alive Clay, but they also illustrate

how Hannah possesses a strong influence over her peers even after death. Here, Hannah's

voice appears in italics while Clay's thoughts are represented in standard typeface.

> *You'll do that, right? All of you? You'll fill in the gaps? Because every story I'm telling leaves so many unanswered questions.*
> Unanswered? I would have answered any questions, Hannah. But you never asked.
> *For example, how long were you stalking me, Tyler? How did you know my parents were out of town that week?*
> Instead of asking questions, that night at the party, you started yelling at me. (78)

The story Hannah tells in this particular part of the narrative revolves around Tyler, one

of the thirteen people Hannah sends her tapes to after her death. In this piece of Hannah's

story, Tyler spies into Hannah's bedroom as she undresses, and a rumor is passed around

school that Hannah knowingly let Tyler watch her undress. Clay, listening to the tapes, is

also responding to Hannah's narrative with his own. Hannah even calls out the

importance of such interaction with her question, "You'll fill in the gaps?" The second

excerpt below further illustrates this communication between Clay and Hannah and

emphasizes Hannah's postmortem hailing of her thirteen listeners to think about their

individual roles in her death.

> *But the truth is, I didn't know what to hope for. My parents weren't home. I was alone. I figured ignoring him was my best option. And even though he was outside, I was too afraid of what might happen when he saw me reaching for the phone.*
> *Stupid? Yes. But did it make sense? Yes… at the time.*
> You should've called the cops, Hannah. It might have stopped this snowball from picking up speed. The one you keep talking about.
> The one that ran over all of us.
> *So why was it so easy for Tyler to see into my room to begin with? Is that what you're asking? Do I always sleep with my shades wide open?*
> *Good question, victim-blamers.* (80-81)

Here Hannah calls out her listeners, but she also calls out readers of the text. There are

various moments throughout the text, like this one here, where Hannah asks us to reflect

on our own reactions to the stories she is telling. In this example, Clay's reaction to her

situation is that she should have called the cops, despite Hannah having already explained

why that didn't happen in that moment. To Clay, it's clear that calling the cops could

have solved the "snowball" of problems that ended up having drastic repercussions on

many of the people implicated in Hannah's stories. Like Clay, readers can easily see that

calling the cops would have been the right thing to do. Of course, this knowledge only comes in retrospect and not in the terrifying situation of having to deal with a peeping tom in that moment. To Clay and to readers of the text, Hannah reminds them that this is a form of "victim-blaming" – a way to ask the victim of a crime about what they could have done better instead of asking themselves why Tyler, the peeping tom, has any right to be doing what it is that he's doing. This type of back and forth communication provides prompting self-reflective opportunities such as this one.

Death as Punishment: Sexual Transgression

As Hannah's above situation attests, the relationship between death and sex is prominent in these texts. One simple reason for this is because both death and sex are inextricably linked to the body. In many YA novels, the character who has died has in some way trespassed against normative prescriptions for proper sexual behavior; the body, in effect, did not behave according to traditional stipulations of *correctness*. We can think of death in these novels as kind of punishment for not following social prescription. This is true in *Looking for Alaska*, when the underage Alaska dies after drinking alcohol (and also after numerous rumors surface about her sexual activities). This is also true in *Love Letters to the Dead*: Laurel's sister, who we learn committed suicide, had a reputation of being sexually "wild" with older guys. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah takes her own life after not being able to weather the various rumors surrounding her sex life. In all of these examples, a female character commits suicide after enduring incessant harassment surrounding her actual or imagined sex life. For these characters, death (a disruption of the social) quite literally signals a failure to come of age.

Interestingly, these characters' deaths stemming from their "bad" behavior, which is almost always sexual, are a necessity for other characters, usually the protagonists, to complete the process of coming-of-age. In a sort of twisted and morbid fashion, the dead or dying characters in these texts often facilitate the protagonist's entrance into the social. This is dependent on the protagonist coming to understand the death of the deceased character through an interpretation of that character's written body object.

Trites argues that "death recurs in adolescent literature with the consistency of the two other dominant discourses of the YA novel, the establishment of an identity independent from one's parents and the exploration of sexuality" (122). She goes on to articulate that "sex exists as a biological antidote to death. Species procreate because they are mortal," citing the Judeo-Christian tradition's narrative of sex not existing until Adam and Eve become mortal, having been expelled from the Garden of Eden (122). In this way, death and sex are always already linked – a relationship made extremely visible in YA narratives. In *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe,* for instance, Aristotle, after having some of his first conscious sexual desires for his friend Dante, has a nightmare that he kills someone (171). In *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie has flashbacks of his Aunt's death when he and Sam start to become sexually physical (205). In *Going Bovine*, Cameron is only able to make the full transition of passing on after experiencing sex (468). The examples abound.

Kristeva's psychoanalytic theories stemming from Lacanian epistemologies helps to articulate the connection between coming-of-age, language, sex, and death. She argues that

abjection is first experienced at the point of separation from the mother when the child enters the symbolic order, a realm which marks the threshold of the acquisition of language and 'proper' sociality. During this process of becoming an autonomous being (a stable self) and claiming the body as its own, she contends, the child must disavow or *abject* the 'improper', 'unclean' and thus disorderly aspects of its corporeal existence. Yet the attempt to expel what is improper or unclean is never truly successful, says Kristeva; these 'antisocial' elements always hover at the border of the subject's identity, threatening the apparent unity of the subject with disruption and possible dissolution. (James 19)

In other words, a failure to repudiate improper, corporeal desires threatens the ability to

enter the symbolic realm – in effect, this threatens the ability to exist. If a subject is not

able to identify a society's cultural expectation for corporeal correctness, and then to

make certain she/he abides by the rules governing proper social behavior (especially in

reference to the body), then she/he does not make the transition to the symbolic order

successfully. In effect, the unity of the subject's identity is threatened, and results in

"possible dissolution": death. Novels like *Love Letters to the Dead* literalize this theory's

connections between "unclean" behavior and the ability to exist in the social sphere.

Laurel's sister, participating in what would be considered unsavory sexual practices, is

punished by death. Perhaps more startling, she punishes herself with death through

suicide. We see this self-punishing by suicide also in *Thirteen Reasons Why* with Hannah

and also in *Looking For Alaska* with Alaska. In these three examples, the female

characters are well aware of the expectation for normative behavior (i.e. puritan ideas

about sex before marriage), and because of this awareness, they are also well aware that

there is a gap between what they have done and what society deems as acceptable.

Kristeva's theory is that the inability to disavow "abject" desires leads to antisocial

behaviors. Not being able to cope with the alienation stemming from these departures in

"correct" behavior, these characters choose to not exist at all, to in effect finalize the alienation, to make permanent and literal the "gap" between themselves and the social sphere through death.

Although the dead character succumbs to the myth of right/wrong behavior stipulated by normative ideas paraded as moral absolutes, or objective mandates, the creation of an alternative body, a text body that speaks, is an attempt at or a grasping toward regaining lost agency. It is also an act that creates an alternative body – a written body that does not come under the same scrutiny as the living body. Rather than society having a say about this body, this written body is not a receptacle to be filled up with oppressive ideologies; instead, this body is already filled up with language, with a subjective point of view of events and ideas that the protagonist must then interpret, routinely holding what they are reading up to the social standard and weighing the difference. In the reading of the dead's new body, the protagonist must come to understand normative stipulations of right/wrong behavior as merely cultural constructions and not objective truths. He/She accomplishes this task by interpreting the text(s) left behind by the deceased.

In *Love Letters to the Dead*, Laurel's sister is routinely depicted as having been wild and worldly. Here, an old classmate of May's describes to Laurel what her sister was like when she was alive:

> She was pretty much the life of any room she walked into. And she was the only girl in our grade who was always at all of the parties with upperclassmen […] She was usually drunk. She'd tell me about your family, and your parents getting divorced, and she talked about you, too. But she was always hooking up with these seniors. She got a reputation for being, um, wild, I guess. Maybe she needed the attention […] By

sophomore year, it's like she was somewhere else entirely. She'd sit in the back of the class, and she'd do her work, and she'd hardly talk to anyone. (230-231)

This depiction of May as worldy and simultaneously estranged from her peers (sitting in the back of the class) is returned to throughout the text, and it also illustrates Kristeva's ideas that pair deviance with alienation. May, having engaged in behavior deemed inappropriate, began to have no place to fit in: her family didn't know her and she kept her peers at arm's length, not talking to anyone or participating in high school activities. When May commits suicide in front of Laurel, Laurel cannot bring herself to speak of the event to anyone. She doesn't even write about it to the various famous dead people she routinely communicates with.

Although May herself does not leave behind a "written body object," the various authors and musicians that Laurel communicates with have a strong relationship to May that Laurel understands as a direct link to who her sister was. In this way, Laurel depends on the written body objects not of her sister, May, but of countless famous people, mostly authors, who contribute to her understanding of her sister's death and the sociocultural parameters around her sister's death. The famous people Laurel "communicates" with are not chosen at random – these are the authors that May loved best; Laurel describes it as "the world she'd disappeared into was here," referring to the songs they listened to together, all playing at once (25). But Laurel would not have communicated with these authors if not for her sister's death. May's self-loathing stemming from her sexual encounters with older men that eventually ended up having tragic implications for Laurel resulted in her suicide.

Laurel's journal writing to these dead writers and their answer back through

poetry and music that they wrote before their deaths helps Laurel to eventually

understand her own place in her sister's death. Like Miles who eventually writes that "we

need never be hopeless," Laurel's reading and interpretation of Elizabeth Bishop's poem,

"The Armadillo" helps her to come to the same conclusion. After reading and

transcribing "The Armadillo" into a letter to Elizabeth Bishop, Laurel writes, "I think

maybe we all carry both the fire balloons and the soft animal creatures who could be hurt

by them inside of us. And it's easy to feel like the bunny rabbit frozen in terror. And it's

easy to feel like one of the fire balloons, at the whim of the wind, either rising up out of

sight or burning down. Blown one direction or another" (300). Here, Laurel concedes that

life is full of challenges, and she identifies with the various metaphors in Bishop's poem

that articulate the harsh reality of the difficulties of being a thinking, feeling human being.

But then Laurel goes on to say that, besides being a fire balloon or a bunny rabbit, there is

an alternative: "But there is a third thing in the poem – your voice. […] Maybe when we

can tell the stories, however bad they are, we don't belong to them anymore. They

become ours. And maybe growing up really means knowing that you don't have to just

be a character, going whichever way the story says. It's knowing that you could be the

author instead" (301).

Laurel's assertion that being able to tell the story, that becoming the author

instead of the character, is what "growing up really means" is the argument at the center

of this dissertation. Here, it specifically relates to Laurel's realization that her sister's

inability to grow up stemmed from the fact that she never learned to have her own voice.

Instead, she listened to what social normativity told her about herself. She was a victim. And she died a victim. Laurel's interpretation of works by various authors and her writing to these authors in response, specifically here with Elizabeth Bishop, ultimately facilitates her understanding of the importance of speaking, of being the author, of embracing her own subjectivity rather than relying on what others say about her. It is in the embracing of this subjectivity that "we aren't so helpless" (301) against death, against the wind that blows our fire balloons this way and that, against the things that terrify us so much that we are frozen in place. Laurel eventually understands May's suicide to be a byproduct of socially ascribed shame that she couldn't author her way out of. Laurel, learning from her sister's mistake and from the authors she has interacted with throughout the text, finally is able to tell the story of the night her sister committed suicide because she understands that speaking/writing about this event will free her from its control.

In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah is repeatedly harassed by her peers for a multitude of reasons, most of which revolve around sexuality. Her sexual reputation, created mostly by baseless gossip, functions as the main antagonist in the story, following her around and creating problems for her wherever she turns. This novel illustrates again the result of not becoming your own author, of succumbing to the stories other people are telling about you. But rather than depicting Hannah as a weak individual who had many chances to right her situation but failed to take control of her own life, this novel deftly articulates the incredibly difficult social parameters that many young women are up against. Exploring the sexual double-standard between males and females, *Thirteen*

Reasons Why aptly illustrates the unfairness inherent in the sexually experienced female being conceptualized as slutty while the sexually experienced male is celebrated for his prowess. This novel also depicts the social allowance, expectation and justification for male predatory behavior. Throughout the cassette tapes that chronicle Hannah's experience with thirteen individuals that contribute to her decision to commit suicide, Hannah makes it clear that no single reason was enough on its own for her to take such drastic measures, but rather it is the collection of such insensitive and cruel behavior on the part of her peers that makes her lose complete faith in humanity. Though Hannah recounts her own sexual assault throughout the course of the thirteen cassette tapes, the episode that Hannah cites as having a decisive impact on her decision to end it all was when she witnessed the rape of another girl. For this, she holds a tertiary character, Justin, partially responsible for guarding the door at a party and letting it happen. She says, "*Justin, baby, I'm not blaming you entirely. We're in this one together. We both could have stopped it. Either one of us. We could have saved her. And I'm admitting this to you. To all of you. That girl had two chances. And both of us let her down*" (229). Like May in *Love Letters to the Dead*, not only has Hannah been violated sexually, she has also had to weather public conversation about her body and sexual life. In addition to having to endure constant criticism from peers about her own sexuality, Hannah also feels responsible for the sexual assault of another girl from her school. Feeling unable to intervene in a society that has clearly designated her to be a sexual deviant, and feeling like there is no adult to help (her school guidance counselor and English teacher both ignore cries for help), Hannah carries out what some characterize as the most passive

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aggressive act one can muster: suicide. But before she does so, she shrewdly creates a blackmail system that will ensure that she is heard, at least by people who perpetuate such harmful social norms. After creating a new narrative body, she can release her corporeal body, putting to rest the oversexualized and traumatized body that wrought so much pain and confusion and leaving in its place this new, assertive, textual body where she is her own author.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, the intersections between postmodernity, death, sexuality, writing, and subjectivity/objectivity have been examined. Though death is not new to YA literature, how it is being deployed has become more complex; rather than a multitude of novels that focus on teaching readers about their deaths, the novels discussed here portray the intricacy and importance of understanding one's relationship to the dead. Rather than conceptualizing death as a final act, these novels resist the finality of death through human social activity (writing) in order to transform death "into an orientation towards continuing, meaningful existence" (Seale 1). By doing so, the dead resist being objectified and maintain their subjectivity. The entirety of this kind of project pushes against the alienating effects of death and the alienating effects of a postmodern culture.

But YA authors are having an increasingly difficult time depicting celebrations of subjectivity. As YA novels increasingly reflect the technological advancements of our current cultural moment, the theme of *writing oneself* that has been central to this study thus far becomes more complicated. Because writing becomes such a public activity within Internet culture, constructing self through writing is a different enterprise

altogether in the current cultural moment. We can begin to see this shift in some of the works discussed throughout this chapter. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah's public reputation informed who she understood herself to be despite knowing that the rumors were false: "I knew what people said about me. I heard all the rumors and lies that will always be a part of me" (211). The impact of public narrative is also a main feature in *Love Letters to the Dead* where Laurel's sister suffers from the critical remarks and the proliferation of rumors surrounding her sexual life. Apart from her sister, Laurel also discusses the various public narratives around the famous people she writes to. In one such letter to Amy Winehouse, Laurel writes, "Amy, you were all over the covers of the tabloids and stuff, doing what you did. And how the world is now, how we follow everyone and try to see everything, it changes the story. It makes your life into someone else's version of you. And that's not fair. Because your life didn't belong to us. What you gave us was your music. And I am grateful for it" (224). The influence of public narrative on individual constructions of selfhood referenced here bleeds into chapter four. Though the discussion has largely revolved around the act of writing and the role of intertextuality in adolescent subject formation, the next chapter considers how technological advancements, especially pertaining to increased public writing in the space of the Internet, complicate the relationships previously drawn between text and self. The question becomes, in a world made so public by technologies, who is in charge of self-construction. What happens when you aren't the one writing *you*?

Chapter Four

Information Disembodiment Take-Over:

Anxieties of Technological Determinism in Contemporary Coming-of-Age Narratives

Introduction: Tensions between materiality and immateriality

Navigating the tumultuous waters of growing up amidst a postmodern landscape

is a tricky endeavor. This complicated if not convoluted enterprise is made more complex

by the pervasiveness of the Internet and social network culture. Specifically, young adults

today are growing up immersed in social media, and this immersion creates an entirely

new set of anxieties and concerns that add to and sometimes exacerbate the age-old

difficulties of growing up. Many of these anxieties pivot around self-representation and

social projection of self. In this chapter, I conceptualize social media as the main canvas

of current self-writing. While *Jo* in *Little Women* wrote privately in her journal,

characters in contemporary coming-of-age stories frequently write publicly for blogs,

Facebook posts, Twitter, fan fiction sites, and other Internet-based writing spaces. In

many contemporary YA texts, the relationship between writing and coming-of-age is

problematized by the public nature of writing. If writing is conceptualized as an act that

garners agency and control, then publicly writing the self through available technologies

seems to signal the loss of that control and the precariousness of that agency. As we have

seen so far, writing is capable of constituting the self, but there seems to be something

dangerous about public writing. This chapter examines what, specifically, that something

dangerous is. While the texts in chapters one through three use writing as a process

toward celebrating subjectivity, the texts discussed in this chapter have the opposite

effect; rather than celebrating subjectivity, texts that rely heavily on the Internet for plot development and theme tend to have a more melancholy understanding of the Internet as a powerful system that reaffirms objectification through commodification.

The anxieties of publicly constructing the self are made manifest in YA narratives where writing on the Internet has harrowing results. In *#16thingsithoughtweretrue* by Janet Gurtler, for instance, the main character uses Internet writing as a way to hide from her actual life. By doing so, she purposefully puts off coming-of-age, delays the entrance into adulthood, and shuts herself off from meaningful human connection. The main character, Morgan, repeatedly checks her Twitter account and her numbers of "followers" or "friends." The tension of whether these virtual friends can be counted as actual friends unfolds when Morgan's mother encourages her to put her Twitter account aside and go and make "real" friends, to which Morgan responds, "My online friends are real. No matter what she thinks" (33). In *The Future of Us* by Jay Asher and Carolyn Mackler, the anxiety over whether the Internet creates the individual (or vice-versa) is presented thematically when two teenagers turn on their computers in 1990 and find their Facebook pages, fifteen years in the future.

Perhaps most unsettling is the YA novel *Feed* by M.T. Anderson where concerns about the Internet being an insidious obstacle to self-actualization are terrifyingly clear; this futuristic, science fiction, YA novel is set some hundred years in the future when our very brains and central nervous systems have an internet "feed" installed at birth. In this world, language and the ability to write have completely deteriorated, and humans have the ability and ease to "chat" telepathically with whomever we please. Technological

advancements attached to advertising and product placement are such that we no longer

have to decide what we want because a computer does it for us. In this novel, the main

tension is whether achieving a sense of self is even possible when being connected, both

biologically and virtually, to so many outside stimuli means being constantly influenced

and often having our choices decided for us. Mike Carey (author) and Peter Gross'

(artist) *The Unwritten*, an intertextual comic book series, illustrates the slippery divide

between the virtual, the imagined, and the material. In a world where writing has the

power to create a collective unconscious, the Internet, with its wide reaching capabilities,

can and does encourage a tyranny of the masses.

The first group of narratives discussed here, *#16things* and *The Future of Us*,

narratively reflect the anxieties often associated with young people using the Internet:

asocial behavior, inappropriate exposure, and inability to control the flow of information.

The second group of narratives discussed, *Feed* and *The Unwritten*, are both more self-

aware cultural commentaries largely pivoting around informatics; I consider both *Feed*

and *The Unwritten* to be examples of what Katherine Hayles refers to as "information

narratives":

> The characteristics of information narratives include, then, an emphasis on
> mutation and transformation as a central thematic for bodies within the
> text as well as for the bodies of texts. Subjectivity, already joined with
> information technologies through cybernetic circuits, is further integrated
> into the circuit by novelistic techniques that combine it with data. Access
> vies with possession as a structuring element, and data are narrativized to
> accommodate their integration with subjectivity. In general, materiality
> and immateriality are joined in a complex tension that is a source of
> exultation and strong anxiety. (43)

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Though I would not classify the first set of texts I discuss as information narratives, they too illustrate this complex tension between materiality and immateriality. Taken together, each narrative discussed throughout this chapter expounds upon the "strong anxiety" associated with shifts in subjectivity owed to our particular cultural moment, steeped in technological advancement and virtuality.

A Turn Toward the Posthuman

The texts examined here are a small sample that are indicative of the larger turn that both Young Adult and popular culture narratives are taking toward reflecting posthuman themes and anxieties. Specifically, ideas of "self" and "agency" are drastically changing to exemplify the anxieties around acknowledging self as a cultural composite, largely informed by the pervasive technologies that inscribe the self. Katherine Hayles' influential work, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics,* begins by explaining the relationship between C.B. Macpherson's analysis of possessive individualism and "state of nature" arguments from Hobbes and Locke. Hayles' understanding of Macpherson's analysis is that the possessive quality of the liberal humanist comes from the belief that one is the sole proprietor over one's own person; this freedom is freedom from the influence and will of others. This understanding echoes philosophies by Hobbes and Locke: a self that is free from societal ideas and influences is possible. Though ownership of oneself is generally believed to have been possible only before market relations, Macpherson argues that essential freedom of being the sole proprietor over one's self did not predate market relations but instead was a "retrospective creation of a market society" (3).

In other words, only after acknowledging that market relations critically affect "self" did theorists formulate the philosophy that, market relations aside, an autonomous "self" might be possible. Hayles goes on to claim, "This paradox (as Macpherson calls it) is resolved in the posthuman by doing away with the 'natural' self. The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (3).

This description of posthumanism is important to this chapter because the YA texts discussed here literalize Hayles' theories that the posthuman is an amalgam, "whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction," and also emphasize how unsettling this realization is, especially for young adults searching for firm foundations in a continuously evolving and fragmented cultural landscape. This is a revolutionary turn for Young Adult novels previously so dedicated to unearthing one's *own* subjective "truth" that ultimately leads to agency. Though it generally goes uncontested that the genre of YA is saturated with narratives where coming to understand "self" is central, the mere frequency of first person narratives emphasizes this fact. About our current cultural, posthuman moment, Hayles argues, "the presumption that there is an agency, desire, or will belonging to the self and clearly distinguished from the 'wills of others' is undercut in the posthuman, for the posthuman's collective heterogeneous quality implies a distributed cognition located in disparate parts that may be in only tenuous communication with one another" (4).

In this way, these novels challenge the normative representation of coming into

adulthood traditionally depicted in YA literature where the protagonist ultimately arrives

at a sense of self. Victoria Flanagan's important text, *Technology and Identity in Young*

Adult Fiction: The Posthuman Subject, argues that there has been a distinct change in

how YA texts depict the relationship between technology and human beings. According

to Flanagan, more recent YA texts are less interested in characterizing technology as

disempowering. Instead, argues Flanagan, recent YA texts illustrate the more positive and

empowering repercussions of technological advancement. She states, "Rather than

suggesting that agency is only illusory, as postmodernism does, posthumanism posits a

rethinking of agency. It suggests that agency needs to be reformulated – through

redistribution, for example, so that it is conceptualized as collective and networked,

instead of being based purely on individualism" (5). While I concede that there are some

YA texts that illustrate the more positive aspects of posthumanism that Flanagan

articulates (*The Adoration of Jenna Fox* by Mary Pearson and *Skinned* by Robin

Wasserman, to name two), there are still many YA narratives that clearly approach

technology with a grave sense of anxiety. The texts surveyed here are in this latter

category. That being said, *The Unwritten*, as a comic book series that remains ongoing,

has the potential to eventually illustrate what Flanagan argues in the quote above;

because the protagonist must learn to work within the "collective and networked" system

that comprises his very existence, *The Unwritten* might be a text that simultaneously

illustrates my own argument about posthumanism in YA texts: that it complicates notions

of selfhood in disorienting and detrimental ways, as well as Flanagan's argument about

posthumanism in YA texts – that it opens up new and different opportunities for conceiving of a sense of self and agency.

Regardless of the differences in argument between Flanagan and myself, I definitely agree that current YA narratives, "reflect social attitudes towards technology, ethics and adolescence itself, the extent to which they engage with posthumanism as a critical discourse, and the strategic ways in which they seek to intervene in young adults' perceptions of themselves and the world by legitimising particular forms of identity and social relations" (38). In most contemporary YA novels that feature identity formation taking place in the space of the virtual, we see dramatic changes in plot development owing to the somewhat dismal postmodern notion that we are created by/inscribed within the consumer and media driven world of which we are a part.

Self-Commodification

Not all critics see current and developing technologies in relation to social media as undermining notions of selfhood; in fact, David Buckingham's article, "Is There a Digital Generation?" argues that the Internet provides a useful place for young people to explore aspects of self. He writes, "The internet provides opportunities for experimentation and play with identity, and for the adoption or construction of multiple selves. By offering communication with different aspects of the self, it enables young people to relate to the world and to others in more powerful ways" (8). But rather than the more positive outlook that Buckingham provides, many of these YA texts reveal anxieties around the relationship between self-construction and writing in the space of the digital. These anxieties pivot around self-representation, indelibility, control, and

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ownership. Though Buckingham is certainly not alone in his outlook that the Internet provides an intrinsically positive experience for users, his argument seems to leave out the more insidious and problematic aspects of the relationship between social networks and users. His thesis that the Internet offers opportunities for communication with different aspects of self is not completely inaccurate, but it misses the point: the fact that the Internet offers *opportunities* for such explorative measures does not preclude the Internet, and social networking sites in particular, from simultaneously disenfranchising its users. Though the opportunity for exploration and experimentation is there, I tend to agree with Diane P. Michelfelder that social networking and participating in online communities depends on a process of self-commodification (205). I argue that for the contemporary bildungsroman, this process of self-commodification is depicted skeptically at best and, more often than not, disturbingly.

In the texts to be discussed here, the danger in self-writing within the public sphere of the Internet seems to be tethered to self-commodification as well as to the confusion or slippage between virtuality and materiality. Becoming inextricably linked to the World Wide Web (indeed, *within* the World Wide Web) complicates the transition from childhood to adulthood: rather than turning inward for introspection and reflection, these novels attempt to depict the posthuman condition where "human identity is essentially an informational pattern rather than an embodied enaction" (Hayles xii). Because human identity is less of an "embodied enaction," constructions of identity are also moving away from being tethered to the body. Being so inextricably linked with the media and Internet spaces that inscribe the self exemplifies this external process of self-

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making. It is in this turn outward, toward self-representation in the public sphere, that the Internet works as a tool that commodifies.

Of course, part of the issue here is that internal and external no longer hold the same significance as before, but this in and of itself is anxiety-producing, as is exemplified in the narratives discussed here. As stated earlier, chapters one through three discuss texts where the thematic of writing is employed toward the end result of celebrating subjectivity, but the texts discussed in this chapter, which all have central thematics pivoting around the Internet, tend to depict networked connection and the Internet in general as a system that reaffirms objectification. In this reaffirmation of objectification, contemporary young adult novels are becoming increasingly vigorous in their illustrations of the damaging and anxiety-producing effects of the postmodern condition. In this way, we can think of Young Adult literature as taking a not surprising turn toward dystopian themes that aren't nearly as hopeful as traditional YA narratives. In the texts to be discussed here, even the mere existence of an individual, subjective self is called into question in various degrees and to various ends. The idea of "self" in these novels is replaced by an amalgam created by both the virtual spaces themselves and also by the social interaction, in the form of writing, that these virtual spaces facilitate.

In *Social Psychology and Theories of Consumer Culture: A Political Economy Perspective,* Matthew McDonald and Stephen Wearing clarify the ways in which common social networking sites encourage (perhaps even demand) self-commodification:

> The development of information communication technologies such as the internet has turned out to be particularly well suited to the commodification of self-identity […] For users of Facebook, one's status is determined by the number of 'friends' one has, so that quantity carries

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greater value than quality, providing evidence of one's popularity. In many ways Facebook provides a stage for its users to perform like actors in front of an audience of 500 million other registered users […] We see how self-identity and social interactions and relations in consumer culture are subsumed under the process of commodification and its corresponding system of impression management. (48)

Many YA narratives are wary of the relationship between consumer culture, self-commodification, and the Internet that McDonald and Wearing point out here. This distrust is illustrated through the protagonist's relationship to language and the textual. Specifically, in the narratives discussed here, what protagonists choose to write or to not write in public spaces and the repercussions thereof illustrate this distrust. Relatedly, in "Web 2.0: Community as Commodity," Diane P. Michelfelder discusses the ways in which a "virtual self shares in the attributes of a commodity" (205). A virtual self, she argues, is a self that is always "readily available to others" but, like a commodity, can be taken off the market at any time, "with no loss to one's actual self." She goes on to articulate that it is the slippery boundary between public and private spaces that facilitates this self-commodification: "In willingly and knowingly abandoning their privacy, understood as control over personal data, individual members of online communities and social networking sites act in ways that make a significant contribution to the commodification of the self" (205).

Though Michelfelder's claims are useful for their pairing of self-commodification, social networking, and the disappearing boundary between public and private, her assertion that the "self" can be taken off the market (read, "Internet") with no "loss to one's actual self" is intensely challenged by each of the Young Adult narratives to be discussed here. In contrast, these novels each illustrate the ways in which the virtual is

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just as affecting in the physical world as the "real." In fact, because the Internet has replaced many other forms of socialization, it isn't very useful to think about whether or not one's *virtual* self affects one's *actual* self. Thinking about the virtual and actual as distinct opposites misses the point. In these novels, the anxiety is about the complexity of the interconnectedness of the virtual and the actual. Implicit in this interconnectedness is the understanding that one's virtual self is very much tethered to one's actual self – or perhaps equally conceivable, that there is no "actual," material self that is distinguishable from the technologies that inscribe us.

Specifically, *The Future of Us* and *#16thingsithoughtweretrue* are two young adult novels that illustrate an extreme distrust of social networking; in fact, it is social networking that is at the center of the protagonists' crises. *The Unwritten* and *Feed* are two examples of the contemporary bildungsroman that clearly and forcefully allegorize the very real danger of the Internet acting as a system of erasure. Though all of the texts mentioned above challenge the idea of a singular "self", *The Unwritten* and *Feed* most obviously illustrate grave anxieties about the information age. Both depict information and the hybridizing of people with technology as the road to our demise. In this way, they reflect what Hayles refers to as the cultural anxiety/fantasy of information disembodiment take-over (22). Each of these texts thematizes a disappearing divide between the virtual and the material. While the act of writing and the reliance on intertextuality are both more present and powerful than ever, neither the act of writing nor the reliance on intertextuality facilitate the protagonist's arrival at and celebration of subjectivity. In *Feed*, for instance, the "I" literally disappears; Violet succumbs to death

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when she attempts to biologically survive apart from the "feed" that is hardwired into her central nervous system, and Tom from *The Unwritten* learns that his very existence is dependent on a collective unconscious informed by Internet technologies. In these narratives, both writing and intertextuality are routinely used as mechanisms that reaffirm the individual as a cultural artifact, as a manifestation of society's prescriptions. In both texts, basic survival is dependent on the protagonist's capitulation to the norms articulated by and maintained through technologies and social networking.

#16thingsithoughtweretrue and *The Future of Us*

If we agree that commodification is the transformation of goods and/or services into commodities that can then be bought and sold, then what is the currency within social networking? In novels like *#16thingsithoughtweretrue* and *The Future of Us,* the payout for the protagonists engaged in public writing comes in the form of "followers" and "friends"; the more "followers" or "friends" one has on social networking and blog sites, the more successful they are, not just socially but entirely.

#16thingsithoughtweretrue (*#16things*) is a novel about a Twitter-obsessed teenage girl with a dying mother and a father she has never met. On her mother's deathbed, Morgan learns her father's address and decides to go and meet him, and two new and unlikely friends accompany her on her roadtrip. Throughout the story, Morgan continues to be obsessed with reaching five thousand Twitter followers. As Morgan in *#16things* says, "If I can reach five thousand followers this summer, things will turn around for me in my senior year" (86). Morgan understands the number of followers her twitter account garners as being not just closely related to her social power, but absolutely tethered to her

future success. She sends out the following tweet: "Likeability can be measured by how many followers you have online" (71), and she operates under the basic assumption that "5000 Twitter followers are all the friends I need" (290). If how likeable you are is dependent on your followers, and how many followers you have decides your future, then how you portray yourself online is of the utmost importance. *#16things* makes this most evident when Morgan is feeling low: "I scroll down, but my heart isn't in any of the things my friends are tweeting. I can't concentrate, and I'm close to typing a tweet to express my distress, something I vowed never to do. My online image is peppy. I don't want to drag people down" (67). We can see here that *#16things* illustrates McDonald and Wearing's analysis of social networking, which is that "self-identity and social interactions and relations in consumer culture are subsumed under the process of commodification and its corresponding system of impression management" (48). Rather than project a more authentic message expressing her distress, Morgan opts to give readers what she assumes they want: the peppy image. Her practices of impression management emphasize the parallels between social networking and the consumer-centered nature of supply and demand. Here is an illustration that writing done publicly is not done to uncover, explore, or challenge the self but to very carefully manage the self into a product that will then be supported by friends and followers, who are in actuality usually strangers, a faceless mass of readers and voices from out of the ether.

Apart from the troubling relationship the Internet has to commodification, self-writing in the public sphere of the Internet is also presented as dangerous within these novels because of the uncontrollability of social media. As we see above, one's success in

the material/actual is understood as largely dependent on one's success in the space of the virtual. For Morgan who clearly understands her success as being inextricably linked to the Internet, it is especially troubling to see the degree to which she understands her lack of control over that sphere; if Morgan's success is defined by the Internet, and if Morgan maintains that she has no real control over what happens in that sphere, then she has no real agency or control over her very life. Morgan's awareness of this disenfranchisement is most notable through one of the main plot points of the text: unbeknownst to Morgan, a "friend" of hers posts a risqué video of Morgan to Youtube where she is dancing in her underwear. The comments section for this video is a textual surface that not only adds to the humiliation Morgan weathers, but the posts here also become a dark reflecting pool that she then must wade through; she asks herself which of these comments is the "truth" and must defend herself out in the physical world for that which is being said about her in the virtual one. She says, "This is my life now, and deep down I wonder if maybe, just maybe they're right. Maybe I really am an attention whore who deserves to serve time in social purgatory for appearing in my underwear online" (2). She later explains to a new friend about how the video picked up speed, going "out of control," amassing over three million views in a short period of time (126). Commenting on how indelible the Internet is, Morgan tweets, "Removing something from online is like trying to take pee out of a pool" (125). Perhaps most unsettling about this narrative is that despite Morgan's acknowledgement that the Internet is a somewhat perilous place where things go "out of control" and where she can't be honest with her feelings, she also notes repeatedly how attached she is to the Internet: "It makes me kind of twitchy. I'm edgy without Wi-Fi"

(111), "the thought of [being without the internet] makes me hyperventilate a little" (107),

"For a fleeting moment, I wonder if I could give up the Internet if I had to. But that

thought makes my head and stomach hurt" (92).

For Morgan, then, the Internet is an addiction that she is more or less *physically*

bound to, where millions of viewers have looked at her near-naked body without her

permission and countless others have commented with extremely critical remarks, some

of which Morgan has come to believe herself. Rather than the Internet being a space

where Morgan has the opportunity to project herself, the very opposite takes place – that

is, the Internet tells Morgan who she is. And instead of speaking back, perhaps by using

her own Twitter account to be honest about her feelings and thoughts, Morgan self-

censors, thinking about how she wants her followers to perceive her – in short, thinking

about her consumers' needs and perhaps not her own. Interestingly, though the "inaugural

moment of the computer age" is closely linked to the performance of "the erasure of

embodiment" (Hayles xi), *#16things* complicates this relationship in various ways. First,

the narrative emphasizes the significance of the body through Morgan's nearly-nude

YouTube video. The narrative also opens up possibilities for understanding notions of

shifting subjectivity revolving around the idea of informational hybrid bodies through

Morgan's emphasis of her bodily connection to the Internet. Unfortunately, the novel

never pursues this line of inquiry. The resolution to the narrative does not answer the

question of whether her Twitter friends are her real friends, nor does it provide insight as

to how to more productively manage self-representation in digital spaces. Instead, the

novel seems to suggest that by acquiring meaningful connections that do not rely on

digital spaces, the reliance on and interest in those digital spaces will cease to be important. Morgan, after establishing close friendships with both her road trip companions, all of a sudden is not so addicted to the Internet.

The Future of Us also emphasizes how social networking, instead of being reflective of the "actual," is often depicted as a space that is prescriptive of the material. Like Morgan, the protagonists in *The Future of Us* grapple with the virtual defining the material, rather than the material defining the virtual. *The Future of Us* is set in 1996 and has two main characters, Emma and Josh, who barely know how to use their personal computers. Remarkably, what they find once they power on their computers are their Facebook pages, fifteen years in the future. Rather than first constructing their identities and then projecting them out into the world, the Internet tells them who they will be in the future. We can think of these future Facebook pages as distinct characters – that is, each Facebook page is an informational "self," disembodied in both time and space. Both Emma and Josh try to figure out what sorts of life choices they make throughout the next fifteen years that would result in such Facebook profiles. But, like all time-travel fiction, the important question that arises is whether these two characters would have ever made those kinds of decisions had they not accidentally stumbled upon this unexplained glimpse into their futures. At one point, Josh begins to drastically change his self-presentation at school as a result of who he reads himself to be on the future Facebook page; Emma comments, "The discovery of his future is changing him now" (191). Josh himself acknowledges the impact the future Facebook page is having on him when he notes, "Everything changed the moment Emma discovered Facebook. If I didn't know

Sydney and I would eventually get married, I may not have defended her in Peer Issues. And she wouldn't have asked for my number" (151).

The Future of Us nicely illustrates Hayle's definition of "reflexivity." Hayles writes, "reflexivity is the movement whereby that which has been used to generate a system is made, through changed perspective, to become part of the system it generates" (8). In further explanation, Hayles gives the following example: "When M.C. Escher drew two hands drawing each other, he took that which is presumed to generate the picture – the sketching hand – and made it part of the picture it draws" (8). For *The Future of Us*, it is presumed that Facebook is created by its users, but this narrative makes clear that the technologies (depicted as mysterious in this novel) also and simultaneously create the users. As Hayles argues, "reflexivity has subversive effects because it confuses and entangles the boundaries we impose on the world in order to make sense of that world" (9). The common assumption about YA narratives is that they are all about making sense of the world. Karen Coats, in her pivotal work *Looking Glasses and Neverlands: Lacan, Desire, and Subjectivity in Children's Literature,* specifically links this "making sense of the world" directly with language: "for the child, that 'prodigiously open' creature who is using the textual Other to organize his inner as well as his outer world, everything the text tells him about the world is at some level true, because it is what generates the conditions for truth" (162). Though Coats is more concerned than I am with the readers of Children's Literature, her work is in conversation with mine because the "reader" she refers to here also occupies a very similar position as the protagonist in texts where textuality is central. In previous chapters, I have argued that

the quintessential plot resolution of YA novels takes place when the protagonist has come to know his or her place in society, which means making sense of the world. Contemporary YA texts that use information technology as central plot devices depict worlds where boundaries are indeed "confused" and "entangled."

In fact, *The Future of Us* does so good a job confusing the boundaries that the only thing that makes sense in the end is an inexplicable decision on the part of future Facebook Emma to delete the Facebook account. This is an unsatisfactory conclusion because it does not begin to resolve the central issue of Emma feeling disempowered by the technologies that will eventually shape her life. It also comes as a surprise, with no clear reason as to what informed future Emma's decision to delete her Facebook account. While some might argue that deleting the account solves the problem of present-day Emma feeling always already inscribed within the digital future, the resolution to simply do away with that technology is impractical. Regardless of whether or not Emma has a Facebook in the future, the technology still exists, and failing to learn to cope with this technology or to explore the potentially positive aspects of collective, networked projections of the self signals a missed opportunity at the very least and/or a failure to enter the social, which means joining a changing and plugged in technological world.

Like Morgan from *#16things*, Josh and Emma conflate their social networking lives with their actual lives and don't feel like they have much control because of this conflation. For Morgan as well as Emma and Josh, this loss of control points to the anxiety associated with becoming informational hybrid bodies. Emma, extremely concerned about the unhappiness and unsuccessfulness of her future Facebook self,

thinks, "Yes, it feels great to plan your life when you believe everything can turn out fine. But what about when you're shown, again and again, how little control you have over anything? No matter what I do to try to fix my future, it doesn't work" (253). Like Morgan, there seem to be feelings of desperation in relation to having any kind of traction or agency over one's own life. While the circumstances are different, both narratives include protagonists who feel completely disempowered by the writing that takes place on the Internet. In both cases, the Internet and the writing therein stands as a type of official social record, but not a record of what has been but a record of what will be.

This idea that social networking serves as a kind of social record is perhaps most evident in the beginning of *The Future of Us*. When Emma and Josh are trying to understand what it is they have stumbled upon, it's as if they are from a different world trying to decipher the strange social practices of a society completely foreign to them. Because of this interesting vantage point of not understanding the cultural moment of Facebook's arrival (or other social networking), this text also provides cultural commentary about the superfluous extent to which society utilizes social networking in order to transcribe our otherwise mundane, day-to-day tasks. The following conversation illustrates this last point nicely:

> "don't you get it? At some point in the future, *we* created it. I don't know exactly what it is, but it looks like interconnected websites where people show their photos and write about everything going on in their lives, like whether they found a parking spot or what they ate for breakfast."
> "But why?" Josh asks. (43)

This question of "why" concludes a section and remains answered. Because it remains unanswered, it interrogates the reader's own use of social networking; why *do* people

record such mundane, day-to-day activities? Why *is* it important to tell the world so publicly what it is that you do privately? In *The Future of Us,* not only do the aforementioned questions emphasize our lack of understanding of the role of the virtual in our day to day, but the very premise of the novel also thematizes the degree to which we do not understand the teleology of our reliance on technology. Because Facebook inexplicably finds its way into the lives of Josh and Emma, they have no hope of understanding the social and cultural parameters that created such a technology. This lack of understanding partly explains Josh and Emma's anxiety and difficulty with processing their experiences with their future selves. To return to Hayles' explanation of reflexivity, Facebook in *The Future of Us* stands in as a metaphor for cultural and societal systems that inscribe the individual, leaving little or no room for the individual to "write" themselves; instead, the individual is told who they are by the prevailing systems and technologies around her/him.

The Unwritten **and** *Feed*

More than the novels discussed thus far, *The Unwritten* and *Feed* provide much more acute social commentary revolving around the intersections of popular culture and informatics. As mentioned earlier, Hayles' description of information narratives is entirely applicable to both of these narratives as both place "an emphasis on mutation and transformation as a central thematic for bodies within the text as well as for the bodies of texts" (Hayles 43). Central to both works is how information and technology have changed the means by which we understand the self. Elaine Ostry's article, "'Is He Still Human? Are You?': Young Adult Science Fiction in the Posthuman Age," discusses the

relationship between estrangement and posthumanism. She argues, "The young adults in [YA] books feel estranged not just from their parents and from society that would likely shun them, but from themselves. The question that all adolescence ask – "Who am I?" – becomes quite complicated" (225). Importantly, bodies within these narratives are conceptualized in complex ways so as to reflect a growing anxiety around our posthuman cultural moment. In both *The Unwritten* and *Feed*, our posthuman condition is not just tethered to technology but to developments in Internet communication that allow and encourage the emergence of a collective voice that oftentimes works as a system that silences.

In *The Unwritten*, the meaningful interaction between audience and text in the space of the virtual is powerfully articulated. This coming-of-age comic book series begins with the following quote: "In life the creatures had been half-ghost, half-devil, but Tommy's spell had made them entirely solid, had dragged them flailing and screaming into the physical world, and the trauma of that crossing had utterly destroyed them" (Volume 1). The main character of *The Unwritten*, Tom Taylor, has spent his entire life trying to prove to people that his famous literary father's fictional character, Tommy Taylor, is not based on himself. The above quote that opens *The Unwritten* is from one of these Tommy Taylor novels and immediately brings to the fore the slippery boundary between the virtual and the material; the "creatures" that were at one time not of this world are "dragged" into the physical world "flailing and screaming." Not only does this opening immediately make possible the crossing over from the non-physical to the physical, but it also makes clear the frightening and perhaps even violent processes of

actualization. In *The Unwritten*, this process of actualization – that is, the process by which ideas/things from the virtual become material – is completely dependent on readership. That is, in this world, the collective voice of an audience wields incredible power. Tom Taylor must learn to manipulate readers through writing in order to survive. The entire series works as a metaphor for the power of mass media, and popular culture in particular, to effect reality through its users.

In the beginning of *The Unwritten,* Wilson Taylor, Tom's father, disappears and leaves thirteen Tommy Taylor novels in his wake. This series of novels has an immense fan base, depicted as both bigger and more ardently devoted than any Harry Potter following. With Wilson's disappearance, Tom is left to sign books at media conventions as an easy way to make money off of his father's fandom. It is here at these conventions that Tom corrects fans again and again that Wilson's Tommy Taylor is not based on himself. In fact, Tom has had the burden of differentiating himself from Wilson's character for as far back as he can remember. At one specific convention, a graduate student writing her dissertation on Wilson Taylor and the Tommy Taylor novels, confronts Tom, in front of media cameras and a large audience, with evidence that he is not, in fact, Wilson Taylor's biological son. This launches a series of incredible events where Tom slowly becomes aware, though he isn't sure how it's possible, that he actually *is* made up of the collective unconsciousness of his father's fandom.

One of the most interesting features of this narrative is its experimental structure. Rather than the traditional structure of most comic book series, where panels move from right to left and top to bottom in a linear and chronological fashion, *The Unwritten* jumps

back and forth between the principal narrative (the Tom Taylor bildungsroman), interior

narratives (excerpts from Tommy Taylor novels), a vast array of faux Internet pages

(Google searches, blog posts, message boards, and still shots of newscasts/YouTube

videos), as well as "Choose Your Own Adventure" pages (from Volume 3). This

structure places an emphasis on mutation and transformation pointing to the posthuman

condition where subjectivity is "joined with information technologies through cybernetic

circuits" (Hayles 43). This narrative is an intertextual pastiche, illustrating through

structure a hybrid body of its own – a composite of actual history, alternative history,

references to actual pieces of literature (*Frankenstein* and *Our Mutual Friend)* and

fictional works of literature (the Tommy Taylor novels), all influenced by the

technologies of our current cultural moment.

One of the aforementioned blog post pages makes clear how this structure, apart

from simply mirroring the chaos associated with postmodernism, emphasizes the great

impact of audience members as informational hybrid bodies in our current cultural

moment. Psychologist Dr. Swann's blog post interrupts the primary Tom Taylor narrative.

She writes, "Karl Jung suggested that there's a collective human unconscious. An under-

mind that feeds all our myths, all our deepest instincts. That's always been true. But in an

age of mass culture, we can actually write to the under-mind. Our virally spreading

fictions embed themselves in the collective unconscious of humanity and change it"

(Volume 2). For *The Unwritten*, the various interjections of media coverage (news

broadcasting) together with the vast arrangement of online writing, emerges as the

character voice of this collective unconscious. Important here is Swann's interpretation

and word choice in describing Jungian theory: "we can actually *write* to the under-mind"

(my emphasis). This ability to create and speak to the collective unconscious is

completely dependent on, according to the fictional Dr. Swann, the "age of mass culture."

This point is reaffirmed throughout the series when images of discussion boards, blog

postings, and Google searches all collectively contribute to a predominant voice. In *The*

Unwritten, social networking and other forms of writing disseminated widely contribute

to a collective voice. This collective voice is conceptualized as an informational hybrid

body that is extremely influential in forming individuals' subjectivity. In this world,

"subjectivity" is transformed into an amalgam or cultural composite, and the idea of a

singular "self" is thrown out.

In an interview, the artist of the series, Peter Gross, said the following of *The*

Unwritten: "The original title of the series was 'Faction,' and it was the idea of the

intersection between fact and fiction. So from the beginning, we wanted to talk about

where the mix falls and that fiction has real consequences in our life" (Hoffer). Carey and

Gross accomplish this by interweaving real world historical events and people, like

Joseph Goebbels and his role in Nazi Germany, with characters like Lizzie Hexam, taken

straight out of the Charles Dickens novel, *Our Mutual Friend* and transplanted as a key

figure in *The Unwritten*. But Carey and Gross actually accomplish a great deal more than

simply illustrating that fiction has real consequences in our lives; he shows that our

"realities" are often fictions themselves and that they become reality through a somewhat

mysterious process connected to the collective unconscious that is dependent on mass

media where we have the ability to write to the "under-mind." Because stories have such

incredible, and oftentimes terrifying power, understanding how they work and why audiences gravitate toward certain stories is key; as Lizzie Hexam says to Tom, "I learn about how stories work for the same reason that soldiers learn how to strip a rifle. You should, too" (Volume 1).

Tom, who grew up believing (like most of us) that reality has a strong foundation based in the physical, is understandably confounded at the evidence unfolding around him which points to the real possibility that his very biology is literally composed of words. He is further confused as he finds out that other things/people/truths he assumed to be based in something real also originated in the land of writing and fiction. When Tom meets a monster of a man, who has striking resemblances to the monster from *Frankenstein*, Tom tries to shake himself from what he believes to be a bad dream. He says to the monster, "You're a character in a book. A really old book that nobody reads. You standing there – talking – it's like a bad joke. If you're real, then Br'er Rabbit is real. And Dracula. And the tooth fairy." And the Monster replies, "And – Christ, perhaps. I understand your dilemma. It is frightening to think of the world as having no firm foundations. Frightening to meet one's maker" (Volume 2). Apart from overtly emphasizing the narrative's reflection of a postmodern society that, indeed, may have no "firm foundations," this interaction highlights that even truths that some hold as sacred, like the story of Christ, are also based in fiction.

The anxiety that there are no firm foundations permeate contemporary coming-of-age stories. But rather than lose hope altogether, these narratives feature protagonists who struggle against the anxiety of either/or logic: virtual *or* material, past *or* present, online

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persona *or* "real" person. Tom's character arc consists of coming to understand himself

as an informational hybrid body, written by others, made up of information, but also still

a flesh and bone human being. He is both. Further emphasizing the significance of

dualistic thinking, the monster simultaneously infers that Christ is a fiction, but that we

do have "makers." This speaks to the theme of the series, which is that everyone

participates in the construction of what we come to know as "reality." Essentially, we are

our own makers. While the theory that we make our own realities suggests that we have

some sort of control or agency over these realities, this is undermined by the series'

emphasis on the power of the collective unconscious. We are created by but also

contribute to the collective unconscious. This is another example of Hayles' theory of

reflexivity previous discussed "whereby that which has been used to generate a system is

made, through changed perspective, to become part of the system it generates" (8).

Reflexivity is not only tethered to understandings of "self" in *The Unwritten* but is

reflected heavily in the excessive intertextuality throughout.

The conversation between the Monster and Tom emphasizes the relationship

between the collective unconscious and the world having no "real," firm foundations. In

addition to this, the conversation also provides one of the recurring literary allusions

throughout *The Unwritten*. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is about how knowledge can be

extremely dangerous, especially in the hands of untethered ambition. It is about a monster

who is rejected by society. *Frankenstein*'s very structure is made up of letters, notes,

journals, inscriptions, and allusions. Each of these elements is echoed in *The Unwritten*;

Tom quickly finds out that the more he knows, the more danger he is in. Gaining

knowledge of the mysterious workings of the world is dangerous because it challenges

everything he has ever known. Tom also learns that it was his father's relentless ambition

to effect change in the world that eventuates his death, much like the monster's father's

ambition which also brings about his end. Similar to the depiction of society in

Frankenstein, where fear of the unknown and a death grip on normativity means rejecting

the monster, so too the society in *The Unwritten* rejects Tom.

The monster from *Frankenstein* is a kind of spirit guide for Tom as Tom comes to

terms with the world unraveling around him. Rather than mere allusion, this use of Mary

Shelley's monster as an actual character in *The Unwritten* is an act of bricolage where

textual layering facilitates the development of plot and theme throughout. The inclusion

of *Frankenstein* in *The Unwritten* is perfect because it creates a kind of meta-

intertextuality. That is, *The Unwritten* uses *Frankenstein* in an act of intertextuality, and

Frankenstein also possesses many intertextual qualities itself. In chapter 15 of

Frankenstein, for example, while the monster is talking to Victor in the cave, the monster

alludes to *Paradise Lost* and explains how he relates to the text because he was also

created and then rejected by his creator. The monster says to Victor, "*Paradise Lost*

excited different and far deeper emotions. I read it, as I had read the other volumes which

had fallen into my hands, as a true history. It moved every feeling of wonder and awe that

the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting"

(Shelley 122). Throughout the monster's adventures, he comes across many texts

(*Plutarch's Lives*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Sorrows of a Young Werther),* and reads all of

them as real histories of humanity. Now the monster has come to explain to Tom the

interconnections between fiction and reality. In doing so, the parallels in theme between the two narratives, and the multitude of narratives each of those principal texts alludes to, all contribute to the multilayered intertextual landscape of *The Unwritten*. For Tom, understanding the complexity of this textual layering is important to his understanding of who he is as a person created by such stories. In this way, the monster facilitates Tom's entrance into adulthood – no longer does Tom believe in the sophomoric ideas of "real" and "unreal." Now he understands that everything is created.

All throughout the series, there are reminders that what we have come to know as truth is but a construction. When Tom demands to know the story of his life, his father responds, "Ignore history. It's only what these people have allowed to be written. […] Their domain is stories. They manipulate them in complex and significant ways" (Volume 3). The "they" Wilson speaks of here is the "cabal" – a group of authors who have exploited their knowledge that stories and reality are intricately intertwined. Allegorically, the cabal symbolizes the powerful structures that systematically enforce normative behaviors and reject those that don't embody this normativity.

One particular example from *The Unwritten* that highlights the insidious possibilities of stories and their immense, terrifying power is when Tom and Lizzie Hexam are transported back in time to WWII era Germany. It is here that they encounter a huge, swirling vortex, outside of time and space, made up of words and images related to the Holocaust. The vortex appears to be getting bigger and bigger, swallowing space and time as it does so. In reference to this vortex about to swallow them all, Lizzie explains to Tom, "Wilson calls it a canker. It happens when a story gets corrupted or

complicated too much. When the energy inside it gets poisoned." The story she is

referencing, that became corrupted and complicated, is *Jud Süss*, Wilhelm Hauff's 1827

novella, which Joseph Goebbels made into a Nazi propoganda film. Lizzie says,

"Goebbels turned it inside out. Turned it into its own opposite […] It was a novel written

by a Jew from a Jewish perspective. It became the most successful anti-semitic movie of

all time." Tom asks, "So this is because Goebbels? Because of the movie?" To which

Lizzie responds, "It's because of the contradictions. In the novel, Süß sins, but finds

salvation through his religion. In the movie, he's just a monster. When enough people

had seen the movie – there was a crisis. An imbalance" (Volume 2). Goebbels' unfaithful

adaptation debased the original story and, because this antisemitic film was so widely

seen and embraced as "truth," the collective unconcious was persuaded of its message. In

"Palimpsests and Intertexts: *The Unwritten,*" scholar David Large explains the canker:

"The realm of ideas itself is portrayed as a desaturated void outside of time, space, and

the constraints of panel borders. Any lingering images or phrases from the novella are

disfigured by swirling images from the film […] Later in the series, Carey is more

explicit about the power of an idea: we are made aware that 'For-real-true is only true

now. Story-true is true forever'." This real, historical example is one of the most

persuasive moments in *The Unwritten*. The central argument of the series, that we

collectively make our own realities and that these realities are informed by powerful

storytelling, is appallingly apparent in this example where readers can imagine what

might have happened, or perhaps what might *not* have happened, had Goebbels not

reinterpreted and dispersed widely Wilhelm Hauff's novela, *Jud Süss*. Though the series

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does not go so far as to say that Goebbels caused the Holocaust, readers can clearly see

that such storytelling, combined with other powerful storytelling, changed reality in

devestating ways.

The Unwritten has not yet concluded and is continuing to do new and interesting

things with the ideas previously discussed that revolve around created realities and the

power of stories and writing within those realities. Though the series thus far

predominantly emphasizes Tom's distress and disillusionment with the realization that he

is literally a composite of what his father has written and what Tommy Taylor fans write

about on the Internet, the series has also begun to illustrate the ways in which Tom is

learning to live within this world. Flanagan's previously discussed argument, that

posthumanism opens up new and different opportunities for conceiving of a sense of self

and agency, are hinted at in *The Unwritten* when Tom decides to take matters into his

own hands and create a website about Tommy Taylor. As more people read his "fan

fiction" and the collective unconscious shifts, Tom begins to change in real life,

becoming more powerful, and reflecting and embodying the public's new understanding

of the fictional Tommy Taylor (Volume 4). Even though both the postmodern and

posthuman aspects of the series complicate notions of selfhood in disorienting and

detrimental ways, Tom does seem to be learning to work within the "collective and

networked" system that comprises his very existence, which points to potential agency

and hope. Like *The Future of Us* and *#16things,* this series reveals anxieties around the

vanishing boundary between the print and media world and the physical one. For *The

Unwritten*, language is conceptualized as the main technology constituting and

composing self. In *Feed*, anxieties pertaining to transhumanism, a concept related to posthumanism, are made evident as bodies become literally hybrid when machinery is attached to the central nervous system.

Flanagan describes transhumanism as "the propensity for the human body to become radically transformed by technology" (15). She argues that both posthumanism and transhumanism "focus on the impact of technology on human subjectivity and social relationships," and she goes on to explain, "the technological modification of the human body is a recurring motif in sci-fi narratives for adolescents" (16). *Feed* is a young adult science fiction novel that exemplifies Flanagan's description of the technofuturistic YA novel: "Young adult narratives that are set in technofuturistic worlds are typically concerned with exploring how technologically modified bodies might extend or challenge normative definitions of what it means to be a human being" (16). These novels ruminate on what it means to be a human being by asking questions about "the importance of human 'authenticity' or originality (in the case of cloned characters), the role of memory in the production of human subjectivity (particularly since memories can be mechanically inserted or retained in genetically engineered bodies), and the relationship between embodiment and cognition" (Flanagan 16).

Feed, focusing on issues such as data mining, information technology, and commodification, takes place in the future when environmental decay is in full effect and technological advancement has produced oxygen factories, filet mignon orchards, and feeds that are hardwired into our central nervous systems. Through the thematic of language, *Feed* actively asks questions about the relationship between embodiment and

cognition, and through its critique of capitalism, *Feed* explores the possibility or

impossibility of "authenticity" or originality. The feeds that are installed at birth connect

humans to an always "on" Internet network. The novel begins with a group of teenagers

who are taking their "spring break" on the moon. While at a nightclub, a radical protestor

against feed technology infects the nightclub visitors with a virus that shuts their feeds

down. For the protagonist, Titus, this is the first time he can remember experiencing

consciousness without the feed. Titus describes the general reaction to the feeds being

shut down: "we were frightened, and kept touching our heads. Suddenly, our heads felt

real empty" (46). This quote illustrates the degree to which society has come to rely on

technology and the Internet; without the feeds working properly to connect Titus and his

friends directly to the Internet, something as seemingly automatic as basic thought

becomes difficult. The grammar mistake "real" instead of "really" is but one example of

many that litter the text pointing to a deterioration of language. Simultaneously, using

"real" instead of "really" metaphorically refers to the actual emptiness of their heads.

Violet's father, an eccentric academic, speaks only with "difficult words." In her

explanation of her father's odd behavior, Violet says, "'He says the language is dying. He

thinks words are being debased. So he tries to speak entirely in weird words and irony, so

no one can simplify anything he says,'" (137). Throughout the text, the deterioration of

language is exaggerated, but Violet's father's obsession with the preservation of words

highlights further just how much people have forgotten how to use language. This

corrosion of the ability to speak is linked directly with the inability to think throughout

the text, and the inability to think is linked directly with the overreliance on Internet

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technology; When Titus first meets Violet, he is instantly attracted to her and tries to describe why: "Her spine. Maybe it was her spine. Maybe it wasn't her face. Her spine was, I didn't know the word. Her spine was like … ? / The feed suggested 'supple'" (14). Here Titus attempts to find language that adequately describes his fascination with Violet, but when he fails, the feed immediately intervenes and provides a possible match to his thoughts. Though the narrative emphasizes the inseparability of human and machine, it undercuts this cohesion by emphasizing the ways in which the machine is diminishing human cognition, or the ability to critically think. Another example of this relationship between the loss of language and the overreliance on technology is when Titus is trying to tell Violet stories: "I tried to just talk to her. I tried not to listen to the noise on the feed, the girls in wet shirts offering me shampoo. I told her stories. They were only a sentence long, each one of them. That's all I knew how to find. So I told her broken stories. The little pieces of broken stories I could find. I told her what I could" (296). Here Titus can only manage single sentence stories – importantly, even these stories are not stories he is actively thinking of, instead they are stories he is "finding," the way we might sort through and select files on a computer. This quote also illustrates how consumerism is implicated in the loss of language when part of Titus' difficulty in finding stories is his being bombarded by advertisements on the feed that he must then attempt to ignore.

The inability to ignore feed advertisements is returned to throughout the text and is perhaps first highlighted near the beginning of the narrative when Titus lands on the moon for spring break. Immediately upon arrival, Titus explains, "I was trying to talk to Link, but I couldn't because I was getting bannered so hard, and I kept blinking and

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trying to walk forward with my carry-on. I can't hardly remember any of it. I just

remember that everything in the banners looked goldy and sparkling" (8). This is the first

example in the narrative where the feed, in effect, ends up paralyzing Titus – he keeps

attempting to walk forward but is being "bannered so hard" that not only is he unable to

walk forward, but he is also unable to talk to Link. Though this scene is described as an

everyday occurrence and therefore not something Titus responds to beyond the quote

above, it is particularly alarming because the barrage of feed information essentially

leaves Titus physically impaired, verbally debilitated, and unable to record or perhaps

access memories of those several minutes. Though this physical, verbal, and mental

interruption is brief, this occurrence signals the nefarious nature of technology to come

throughout the narrative.

In the days following Titus and his friends contracting the virus that results in the

temporary feed shutdown, Titus suffers the incredibly uncomfortable experience of being

alone in his head. It is in this time where he attempts to explain life before the feed: "I

don't know when they first had feeds. Like maybe, fifty or a hundred years ago. Before

that, they had to use their hands and their eyes. Computers were all outside the body.

They carried them around outside of them, in their hands, like if you carried your lungs in

a briefcase and opened it to breathe" (47). In this world, it is hard to imagine a body that

is separate from technology. The protagonist goes on to describe that

> the braggest thing about the feed, the thing that made it really big, is that it
> knows everything you want and hope for, sometimes before you even
> know what those things are. It can tell you how to get them, and help you
> make buying decisions that are hard. Everything we think and feel is taken
> in by the corporations, mainly by data ones like Feedlink and OnFeed and
> American Feedware, and they make a special profile, one that's keyed just

> to you, and then they give it to their branch companies, or other companies
> buy them, and they can get to know what it is we need, so all you have to
> do is want something and there's a chance it will be yours. (48)

The Internet knowing what Titus wants even before Titus knows what he wants (and

therefore dictating and mitigating that want, which connects back to being written by

mass consensus rather than writing the self) makes explicit the anxieties associated with

the Internet defining who we are and not the other way around. In this world, the

technologies that have literally fused with human bodies are defining who those humans

are by way of large corporations that make thinking for oneself unnecessary and perhaps

even impossible. This is exemplified above when Titus can't think of words to use to

describe basic feelings. A more startling example of this failure to think for oneself is

when Titus tries so hard to comfort Violet with stories, but he can think of none, partially

due to the rapant advertising that he can't seem to slow down. In *Feed*, not only are

bodies inextricably linked with hardware technologies, but these hardware technologies

allow and even necessitate an online presence that inscribes the individual using data

mining and other illusive measures never fully articulated or understood by the characters

in the book. *Feed* is perhaps a perfect example of a bleak future inspired by grave

anxieties of technofuturism. Hayles writes, "the posthuman implies not only a coupling

with intelligent machines but a coupling so intense and multifaceted that it is no longer

possible to distinguish meaningfully between the biological organism and the

informational circuits in which the organism is enmeshed" (35). This definition of

posthumanism and the anxiety it engenders is most acutely illustrated through the

character of Violet.

Violet comes from a family that didn't have the money to equip her with a feed at birth. Her father, realizing in Violet's early childhood that she had no chance of success or normalcy without the feed, had one installed even though doctors explained that installing one later in life might lead to complications. Because of this, the virus has more effect on Violet than it does her peers, and her feed begins to deteriorate, making her more aware of problematic aspects of the technology and more inspired to reject them. During one particular tirade when she is attempting to convince Titus of the feed's ruinous qualities, she rants:

> "They're also waiting to make you want things. Everything we've grown up with—the stories on the feed, the games, all of that—it's all streamlining our personalities so we're easier to sell to. I mean, they do these demographic studies that divide everyone up into a few personality types, and then you get ads based on what you're supposedly like. They try to figure out who you are, and to make you conform to one of their types for easy marketing. It's like a spiral: They keep making everything more basic so it will appeal to everyone. And gradually, everyone gets used to everything being basic, so we get less and less varied as people, more simple. So the corps make everything even simpler. And it goes on and on." (97)

If the relationship between consumerism, technology, and the diminishing ability to construct self was not made apparent before this point, Violet makes it startlingly clear: the feed works to streamline personalities by keeping track of what people do and, in particular, what people buy, so that big corporations can create products and advertisements that are more basic, which in turn makes people more basic, simpler, less varied.

Because the confluence of technology, personhood, and consumerism in *Feed* works to reobjectify, there is little hope for subjectivity, and thus little hope for attaining

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selfhood outside of the prescriptive and commodity driven culture of which the characters

are a part. Indeed, *Feed* makes literal the impossibility of living outside the confines of

commodified culture when Violet's attempts at resisting the marketing ploys of the

internet, now hardwired into her physical person, result in her death. As Violet's

machinery malfunctions and she becomes less and less able to function mentally and

physically, she reaches out to medical professionals and "investors" (read: medical

insurance companies). This is their ghastly reply:

> *"We're sorry, Violet Durn. Unfortunately, FeedTech and other investors reviewed your purchasing history, and we don't feel that you would be a reliable investment at this time. No one could get what we call a "handle" on your shopping habits, like for example you asking for information about all those wow and brag products and then never buying anything. We have to inform you that our corporate investors were like, 'What's doing with this?' Sorry—I'm afraid you'll just have to work with your feed the way it is [...] Maybe, Violet, if we check out some of the great bargains available to you through the feednet over the next six months, we might be able to create a consumer portrait of you that would interest our investment team. How 'bout it, Violet Durn? Just us, you and me—girls together! Shop till you stop and drop!"* (247)

Of course, Violet doesn't have six months – the machinery attached to her spinal chord is

deteriorating and causing a multitude of unpleasant and life threatening medical

conditions. The cavalier attitude of the Feedtech employee reinforces the cruel

callousness of a world so dependent on machines and consumerism that humanness is left

behind. Importantly, it is Violet's resistance to letting the feed create a

purchasing/personality portfolio of her that is her ultimate demise: Feedtech does not

want to invest money in helping someone they cannot get a "handle" on. Rather than

opening up more liberating possibilities, the space of the digital in *Feed* is responsible for

the deterioration of language, the inability to critically think, and the erasure of individuality.

Conclusion

In Martin Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology*, he "points to the discomfort of being, namely the homelessness of human beings in a modern technological society" (Turner 527). The texts discussed in this chapter all speak to this homelessness. In *#16things*, Morgan is literally displaced because her mother is dying and she does not know her father. For Morgan, technology by way of the Internet offers her a space to gesture toward "home" – a place she can know and understand intimately – but it ultimately leaves her feeling untethered because she cannot be honest in that space, and she also feels violated by it. For Emma in *The Future of Us*, the Internet is a complete mystery outside of cultural context and the confines of time and space. In *The Unwritten*, blogs and other Internet paraphernalia drop into the narrative haphazardly while Tom attempts to find traction in an extremely slippery reality, malleable by an unstable collective unconscious informed by mass media. In *Feed*, no characters are home in their own minds as software and corporations inform most every thought. These YA narratives thematize the relationship between homelessness and technology. If YA narratives are about entering the social, more contemporary coming-of-age narratives necessitate this entrance into the social by emphasizing that there is no actual "home." Simultaneously, however, contemporary YA narratives also underscore just how tenuous and difficult entering the social is. This premise, that there is simultaneously no home but little hope of successfully entering adulthood by acquiring a sense of self, relegates the

adolescent to perpetual liminality. This could account for the proliferation of categories

attempting to name adolescence: pre-teenagehood, teenagehood, adolescence, extended

adolescence, emerging adulthood, etc. As the terrain for what it means to enter the social

becomes more complex, the attempts at naming this process become equally as complex.

Chapter four provides a holistic conclusion to this dissertation by emphasizing the

increasing importance of self-writing and intertextuality in the digital age. YA literature

reflects this social change in its saturation of narratives that include the tropes of self-

writing and intertextuality. Now, however, this writing is done publically, complicating

the relationship between writing and the self that is laid out in chapters one through three.

While the protagonists discussed in previous chapters use writing and intertextuality to

attain or at least gesture towards some semblance of agency with the end goal of

embracing and celebrating subjective truth, the protagonists discussed here waffle

between being *writers* and being *written*. In these cases, protagonists encounter writing

and intertextuality through the digital landscape – a landscape that presents only the

illusion of agency and subjectivity. As Tom Taylor finds out, it is the collective

consciousness (altered by print media), that ultimately grants him power, not his own

ability to create. Hayles provides a useful and succinct summary of Marshall McLuhan's

ideas on the transformation of media on human beings. She writes

> By the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan was speculating about the
> transformation that media, understood as technological prostheses, were
> effecting on human beings. He argues that humans react to stress in their
> environments by withdrawing the locus of selfhood inward, in a numbing
> withdrawal from the world he called (following Hans Selye an Adolphe
> Jonas) "autoamputation." This withdrawal in turn facilitates and requires
> compensating technological extensions that project the body-as-prosthesis
> back out into the world. […] McLuhan clearly sees that electronic media

are capable of bringing about a reconfiguration so extensive as to change the nature of "man." (34)

In *#16things*, Morgan's asocial behavior in the actual world and her withdrawal "inward" is countered by her Internet presence/persona. In *The Future of Us*, we might understand the future Facebook pages as preemptive "compensating technological extensions" of self, but extensions that only negatively complicate the present. In both *The Unwritten* and *Feed*, there is essentially no "locus of selfhood" in which to withdraw but only technological prosthesis. The texts discussed here do not assign many, if any, positive attributes to technological extensions/conflations of self. Instead, they rigorously reinforce the posthuman depiction of the self as an amalgam, a collection of various society-influenced aspects whose definitions are in a constant state of revision. Rather than focusing on the potentially subversive and positive attributes of such indeterminance, as Flanagan suggests, these texts and other YA narratives focusing on advanced technologies and the Internet in specific, instead blanch at the cultural anxiety/fantasy of information disembodiment take-over. In each of these texts, the disappearing divide between the virtual and the material creates a deeply troubling indeterminacy. At the root of this upset is that there is no "actual," material self that is distinguishable from the technologies that inscribe us.

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